

ALTERNATIVE NETWORKS:  
RECORDING AND BROADCASTING AMERICAN POETRY AFTER 1945

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**Abstract**

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Lisa Hollenbach

Under the supervision of Professor Lynn Keller at the University of Wisconsin – Madison

“Alternative Networks: Recording and Broadcasting American Poetry after 1945” develops archival and interdisciplinary methods for studying the sounds and sounding of American poetry after World War II by attending to aural networks. Aural networks describe historically linked sites of relation among poets, musicians, sound producers, audiences, media technologies, and discourses that shape what and how we hear. Mapping these relations amplifies the ways literary texts contribute to cultures of sound and genealogies of listening. This dissertation examines the cultural history of poetry recording and broadcasting from 1945 to 1965 by focusing on the aural networks that cluster around the relationship between Langston Hughes and Folkways Records, and between the San Francisco Renaissance and the Pacifica Radio network.

During the early years of the Cold War, poets and producers of sound in the United States experimented with new sound technologies to respond to a crisis in listening stemming from anti-communist blacklisting, mass culture, and systemic racism. By amplifying the sound of poetry in the public sphere, poets like Langston Hughes and Allen Ginsberg, independent record labels like Folkways Records, and public radio stations like Pacifica Radio’s KPFA-FM in Berkeley invented new practices of listening attuned to discord. In doing so, they sustained publics formed around shared practices and experiences of listening, giving rise to the

independent media movement and aural counterculture of the sixties. In four paired chapters, this dissertation analyzes how Langston Hughes, William Everson, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, and Kenneth Rexroth—and sound producers Moses Asch of Folkways Records and Lewis Hill of Pacifica Radio—represented and responded to this Cold War crisis in listening as it manifested in their local soundscapes, through new media technologies, and in the context of literary community. From Hughes’s vocal interference with the folk sound of Folkways Records, to Pacifica Radio’s broadcasting of Ginsberg’s “Howl,” the aural networks of postwar poetry turn our attention to the mediated histories that shape our diverse perceptual experiences of a sonic world.

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Foundation Records at the University of Maryland Special Collections in Mass Media and Culture; the Pacifica Foundation Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives; the Poetry Center American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University; the Kenneth Rexroth Papers at the UCLA Library Special Collections; and several collections at the Bancroft Library, including the Jack Spicer Papers, the San Francisco State College Poetry Center Records, and the Untide Press Records. Though not cited in this dissertation, the Grace Cavalieri Papers at George Washington University's Special Collections Research Center also informed my broader perspective and are deserving of mention. Finally, several digital online collections of audio recordings made this project possible. I am especially grateful to the staff of *PennSound* for making so many unique recordings available to the public.

I presented some early findings from my research at the 2014 Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College; the feedback I received from Eric Lott and the members of my seminar shaped the direction of chapters 3 and 4. I also presented work from my first chapter at the 2015 MLA Convention, and a version of that chapter appeared in *American Literature* 87.2 (June 2015). I am grateful to the anonymous readers at *American Literature* whose generous comments informed not only that article but the project as a whole.

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Finally, I owe everything to Lewis, who taught me to listen.

## Introduction

### Aural Networks

On a sunny, summery Saturday afternoon on May 14, 1977, in Berkeley, California, a crowd gathered at the open-air Greek Theater on the University of California campus for a poetry festival. The event, sponsored by a student group and Berkeley radio station KPFA 94.1 FM, was billed as a fundraiser for the local listener-sponsored station. As the audience filed into the amphitheater, Allen Ginsberg took the stage with Peter Orlovsky and Robert Bly to lead a collective chant of the mantra *ah*—to purify speech, Ginsberg explained—and a group meditation exercise. “Sitting in the Greek Theater, microphones in sunlight,” Ginsberg intoned, “Doing nothing is a sober way of using calm time, youth to age, consuming very little energy creating crises. Side effect of doing nothing: perspective to observe crises creating themselves in the mind. Cycles of thought forms rise transparent in open space” (“KPFA Poetry Festival”). With the audience’s bodies, minds, voices, and senses collectively attuned, KPFA station manager Jo Anne Wallace and master of ceremonies Fred Cody, owner of independent bookstore Cody’s Books, introduced a lineup of poets representing a diverse, politically engaged, and performance-oriented San Francisco Bay Area poetry scene. In addition to Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Bly, performers included Alta, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Ed Dorn, Jessica Hagedorn, Jana Harris, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, David Henderson, Joanne Kyger, Lewis MacAdams, Michael McClure, Simon Ortiz, Ishmael Reed, and Alan Soldofsky.

KPFA, the flagship station of the Pacifica Radio network, recorded the performances for a series they broadcast later that summer. KPFA, as a station program guide accurately explained, had “long been an important medium for the presentation of the work of

contemporary poets” (*KPFA Folio* July 1977). The station had also long been in a cycle of perpetual crisis, in part due to its financial dependence on regular subscriptions from listeners, and in part due to bitter internecine conflicts that spilled onto the air. The KPFA Poetry Festival sought to intervene in the most current iteration of crisis on several fronts: as a fundraiser for the cash-strapped station, as a community-building event, and as a representation and celebration of the diversity of Bay Area poetry. KPFA proclaimed that it would be “the biggest poetry reading staged in the Bay Area since the Vietnam era, and perhaps the biggest ever”—a hyperbolic claim to be sure, but one that recalled for listeners the community of dissent formed around anti-Vietnam War protest and expressive, performance-oriented poetry in the sixties (*KPFA Folio* July 1977). The event did attract hundreds of attendees, though, and potentially many more radio listeners. It was also the subject of a documentary, *Festival of Bards* (1977), filmed and directed by independent filmmaker Richard Gaikowski, who captured the dynamic performances and the large audience of young people lounging on the stone benches, on each other, and in the sun-soaked grass.

Through hours of performances, the KPFA Poetry Festival affirmed a romantic belief that poetry is best experienced off the page and through the embodied, self-expressive voice of the present poet and the equally present ears of a receptive audience, “intensely tuned in to the individual voice,” and listening together, sharing “a ceremonial, ritualistic experience” (*KPFA Folio* July 1977). Ginsberg, whose “long awaited return . . . to Berkeley” headlined KPFA publicity for the event, presided as the event’s queer father figure in a snow-white suit, his appearance positing a historical continuity with the San Francisco Renaissance of the fifties and sixties and a unity to the otherwise disparate poetics, politics, and social relations of the day’s performers (*KPFA Folio* May 1977). Many of the poets sang and incorporated music into their

performances of poetry and protest, including Ginsberg, who sang William Blake songs and original poems accompanied by harmonium and mandolin. Jessica Hagedorn appeared with the West Coast Gangster Choir, performing poems like “Solea” that testified to the violence of racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and rape; Max Schwartz, host of the KPFA prison poetry program *State of Emergency*, improvised with jazz musicians. Poets who did not include a musical dimension still brought dramatic elements of performance to a politicized first-person lyric. Alta, founder of Shameless Hussy Press, and Jana Harris each read feminist erotic and satirical poems like Harris’s “Glitter Box” and “Fix Me a Salami Sandwich, He Said,” to the enthusiastic applause and cheers of women in the audience. David Henderson introduced his poem “Egyptian Book of the Dead” as a response to South African apartheid. Robert Bly, in a performance that reflected his involvement with the mythopoetic men’s movement, donned masks and played archetypal male characters while reciting translations of Sufi poetry and original poems and mingling with the crowd. The massive stone amphitheater appropriately suffused the event with a classical air of oral poetry, political oratory, and *communitas*—even as it also proved challenging to manage acoustically.

The audio and film recordings of the KPFA Poetry Festival thus document a familiar American countercultural confluence of oral poetry and leftist politics: a relationship among spoken (or sung) lyric poetry, testimonies of self-liberation, public protest, and the rhetoric of communal attachment. Now primarily associated with spoken word and slam poetry (though with a reach far beyond these performance genres), this confluence appears throughout the twentieth century, from the vernacular, populist, and politicized ballads of the Popular Front era to the large group poetry readings common in the Bay Area since at least the mid-1950s. At the KPFA Poetry Festival, from Ginsberg’s introductory meditation on, the poets advocated for a

poetics of presence that would be more authentically expressive of self and community than the distancing mediation of print or the sanitized consumption of mass culture. In doing so, they worked within a poetic tradition that emphasizes performance, presence, orality, and aurality.<sup>1</sup> But what do we make of the radio station at the center of this event? How does radio—that paradigm of mass media in the twentieth century—enter this scene of poetic presence?

On the one hand, there is an apparent logic to an aural medium capturing and publicizing an aural form. Broadcasting Hagedorn's performance of "Solea" with the West Coast Gangster Choir gave listeners access to significant dimensions of meaning not available in the poem's print version(s), musically enriching, for example, the text's allusions to Thelonious Monk (Hagedorn 330). It is clear that for Hagedorn, as for many of the day's performers, performance is not secondary to an "original" or authoritative written poem; on the contrary, the poet's vocalization of the work authenticates it while imbuing it with the political significance of bringing into public those voices, experiences, and forms of expression excluded from and silenced in the public sphere. As Michael Davidson writes of the importance of magnetic audiotape recording for post-World War II American poetry, recordings of poetry performance offer "a significant oral history of a phonocentric era" in which "one can 'hear' as well as 'see' the profound challenge posed . . . to the authority of ocularcentrism in Western modernism" (*Ghostlier* 198). Station KPFA's recordings and radio broadcasts, like the film documentary, similarly provided its listeners, and the contemporary researcher, a kind of "oral history of a phonocentric era," albeit in the post-hoc, technologically mediated, and aura-diminished form of a broadcast of an edited recording of a live event.

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<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on performance poetry and identity politics at the 1977 KPFA Poetry Festival may explain the notable absence of any local writers associated with the emerging avant-garde of Language poetry as performers. However, the radio program *In the American Tree*, first hosted by Lyn Hejinian and Kit Robinson, would soon bring some of these poets to KPFA.

On the other hand, KPFA did more than capture the live event for future broadcast; it can also be said to have made the event and even its public possible. I mean this in a more mundane sense than Philip Auslander's apt observation that "the live is actually an effect of mediatization" that has meaning only in relation to the possibility of technological reproduction (51). KPFA, as a co-organizer of the festival and its stated beneficiary—and, more importantly, as a major outlet for local music and poetry in the Bay Area since 1949—played a signal role in creating the nexus of performance poetry, identity politics, youth counterculture, and independent FM radio on display at the festival. While radio's reputation as the exemplary mass commercial medium had been solidified during the "golden age" of network radio during the 1930s and 1940s, Pacifica Radio belonged to the television era of broadcasting and to new models of public, community, and alternative radio that briefly flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and in opposition to new standardizing commercial models such as Top 40 and format radio. Radio as a cultural medium thus meant something different to the poets at the festival than it had to earlier twentieth-century writers like Archibald MacLeish or theorists like Theodor W. Adorno.<sup>2</sup> Local community-supported stations like KPFA operated—and still operate—more like independent and small press publishers than major commercial broadcasting networks or media conglomerates. This link between community radio and small press publishing was apparent at the KPFA Poetry Festival. All of the poets who performed had previously appeared on KPFA; a few had even produced programming for the station or hosted their own radio shows, sometimes as an

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<sup>2</sup> Archibald MacLeish, who stands in here for the many writers active in the "golden age" of radio, composed two verse plays for the *Columbia Workshop* series on CBS, *The Fall of the City* (1937), which starred Orson Welles, and *Air Raid* (1938); he also produced wartime propaganda for the networks in his role as Assistant Director of the Office of War Information. For an extensive analysis of *The Fall of the City* in relation to radio history and aesthetics, see Verma. Adorno's critique of radio and radio listening is well known; see especially *Current of Music* for recently published manuscripts from his work with Paul Lazarsfeld's Princeton Radio Research Project (1938–1941), and Jenemann for a revisionist analysis and history of that period of Adorno's work.

extension of their work as small press or little magazine editors.<sup>3</sup> The audiences present at the Greek Theater and tuned in via radio thus represented overlapping micro-publics for poetry, alternative radio, and new left politics, as well as the networks of social relations between artists, activists, and local communities. KPFA's nearly thirty years of broadcasting poetry alongside folk, jazz, and classical music, grassroots news reporting, and commentary representing minority perspectives and community voices had helped to develop a context for Bay Area poetry that was neither narrowly literary nor public in a mass or general sense. It had also helped to create a culture of listening in the Bay Area attuned to certain genres and forms of poetry, music, and media for the construction of countercultural identities and attachments.

This dissertation is about the radio station underwriting and underwritten by this staging of aural poetry and its listening public. By this I mean it is both about Pacifica Radio station KPFA in particular—the subject of chapters 3 and 4—and, more generally, about the independent record labels and FM radio stations that contributed to the sounding of American poetry after 1945 within an emerging alternative media context and an emerging counterculture oriented toward new left politics, ideologies, and movements. A central premise of my study is that this public came to be, or came to imagine itself as a public, in part through shared experiences and practices of listening to speech and sound as well as music. These auditory experiences and practices were perceived by those who embraced them to be more authentic, democratic, and potentially radical than mass consumer publics mediated by televisual and even print culture, especially when they took place “in public” at protests, sit-ins, political assemblies,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Ishmael Reed co-hosted *The Yard Bird Hour* with Al Young and Toby Lawson on KPFA in the mid-1970s, an extension of Reed's and Young's editorial work on the journals the *Yardbird Reader* (1972–1976) and *Y'Bird* (1977–1978). Max Schwartz hosted a program of poetry written by San Quentin prisoners. David Henderson produced the interview series *Black Poets*, an audio documentary on Bob Kaufman, and an original radio drama, among other programs for KPFA.

concerts, and festivals. As Raphael Allison writes in his recent study of “the sixties poetry reading”—a cultural moment that the poets at the 1977 KPFA Poetry Festival were variously engaged in remembering, reviving, and critiquing—“the period itself was deeply invested in . . . the authenticity that a live voice produced,” called up in the iconic figures of “a radical protestor declaiming a university administration, a civil rights leader addressing massive crowds, a lone singer with a guitar” (11–12).

The affective and political power attributed to the authenticity of the live public voice also carried over to more obviously technologically mediated experiences of listening to recorded and broadcast sound in the “sixties” era. Robert Cantwell, in his history of the folk revival, *When We Were Good*, writes that while the revival came of age with television, “its real milieu was extra- or subtelevisual, one of records, concerts, and clubs” (201) that projected a rich “aural imagination” (200) against the “spectocracy” of the fifties (201). For Cantwell, independent label Folkways Records and inveterate record collector Harry Smith, who assembled the influential Folkways *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), epitomize the association of aurality with the post–World War II counterculture. That the complexity of media consumption in the U.S. at midcentury renders this association between certain ways of representing and consuming sound and certain countercultural identifications neither essential nor accurately representative does not mean that it loses any power as a cultural imaginary. Indeed, this cultural imaginary has significant force today. The familiar soundtrack of folk, rock, and jazz music, impassioned public speeches, and spoken Beat poetry is central to nostalgic representations of “the sixties” that circulate everywhere in our contemporary multimedia landscape. I am especially fascinated by how prevalent the sound of poetry is to popular

imaginings of the period, by how often Allen Ginsberg appears in this soundtrack, for example, or Langston Hughes among the replayed voices of the civil rights movement.<sup>4</sup>

How can we understand the evident relationship between oral and vernacular poetry and sound media technologies in the twentieth century in ways that are contextually rich and historically specific? How can we better imagine the public or publics for poetry without falling into either age-old laments about the death of poetry or hyperbolic claims about the genre's broad cultural significance? What can literature in all of its multimedia forms contribute to the study of cultures and histories of sound and of listening? In response to these motivating questions, this dissertation examines what I term *aural networks*, or linked sites that reveal embedded relationships between poets, texts, readers, and listeners, and technologies, institutions, and cultures of sound. The terms in the phrase *aural network* may require further explication. I use *aural* as opposed to related adjectives like *sonic*, *audio*, *acoustic*, or *auditory* because I want to emphasize reception over sound. *Aural* refers to “the organ of hearing,” i.e. the mediation of sound by the human ear, nervous system, and brain; *and* what is “received or perceived by the ear,” i.e. the sound and the interpretation of that sound (“Aural”). It thus evokes the interface between bodily sensations, cultural practices, and technologies that determine what is heard. I also find the homonym between *aural* and *oral* useful given my particular interest in

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<sup>4</sup> There has been something of a resurgence in interest in Beat lore recently, and in Ginsberg in particular, in popular movies, from portrayals of Ginsberg David Cross in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (2007); James Franco in *Howl* (2010); and Daniel Radcliffe in *Kill Your Darlings* (2013), to the adaptation of *On the Road* (2012). Literature and poetry are also found among the sixties' cultural fetishes curated by the popular AMC television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015), including allusions to Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. While representations of Langston Hughes are less present in our current pop cultural landscape, Hughes's poetry has been frequently evoked in the Black Lives Matter movement and in protests in response to the murders of African Americans by police that have occurred around the country since 2014. Lines from *Montage of a Dream Deferred* appear especially frequently in speeches, on protest signage, in social media, and in news journalism about the movement. Drawing the connection between Hughes, the civil rights movement, and the contemporary black protest movement, President Barack Obama quoted from Hughes's famous 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” at a speech in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 2015, memorializing the fifty-year anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march on Selma.

the spoken word and vernacular and oral poetry, even if aural lacks the etymological “connotations of oral tradition” that accompanied the older *auricular* (Sterne, *Audible Past* 11). The second term, *network*, points to recent philosophical and interdisciplinary approaches that attend to mediated systems of relations between heterogeneous but connected beings, objects, discourses, events, and organizations of power.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, like *communication* in the 1950s and 1960s, the concept of the *network* represents a dominant epistemology in our moment for understanding—indeed for networking—everything from organic beings to computing to social relations to economics. Since *network* also resonates as a key term in twentieth-century broadcasting that in the decades before television was closely associated with aural media, it proves a multivalent concept for this study.

My concept of aural networks is meant to describe a methodology that is relational, contextual, and historical. I’m interested in mapping the links and breakages between poets and other cultural workers, between literary reception and sonic reception, and between aesthetic, political, and consumer publics. By focusing in particular on the relationship between poetry and sound media technologies and industries after 1945, I situate my project within the interdisciplinary field known as sound studies, which attends to “the cultural contexts out of which sound media emerged and which they in turn work to create” (Hilmes, “Is There a Field” 249).<sup>6</sup> Like Jonathan Sterne, I believe that “[t]o study technologies in any meaningful sense

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<sup>5</sup> Prominent examples include Latour; Timothy Morton (who prefers “mesh” to network); Deleuze and Guattari; and Foucault, as well as much recent scholarship that defines itself as sound studies.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005, Michele Hilmes observed that “the study of sound, hailed as an ‘emerging field’ for the last hundred years, exhibits a strong tendency to remain that way, always emerging, never emerged” (“Is There a Field” 249). A decade later, the interdisciplinary and international field of sound studies appears finally to have moved into the arena of institutional recognition, evident in the significant number of recent publications in the field, including reference and teaching guides (see Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader*; Pinch and Bijstervel; and Novak and Sakakeeny); conferences devoted to sound; special issues on sound in journals such as *American Quarterly*, *Social Text*, *Social Studies of Science*, *differences*, and *Modernism/modernity*; sound studies interest groups at academic institutions and professional organizations like the American Studies Association, the Modern Language

requires a rich sense of their connection with human practice, habitat, and habit” and “attention to the fields of combined cultural, social, and physical activity . . . from which technologies emerge and of which they are a part” (*Audible Past* 8). Literature, too, is part of this “field” and as a literary scholar, my map puts into particular relief those nodes that stand for poets and poems because I argue that doing so offers new insights into the role of literature in imagining publics and in shaping experiences, practices, and histories of sound and listening.

The aural networks I examine in this dissertation cluster around two sites of relation between sound media and poetry after World War II: 1) the independent label Folkways Records and the vernacular poetry of Langston Hughes, and 2) Pacifica Radio and the oral poetics of the San Francisco Renaissance. Folkways Records, founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in New York in 1948, and the Pacifica Foundation, founded in 1946 by Lewis Hill and a group of San Francisco Bay Area pacifists and poets, are well known as countercultural, alternative media institutions that contributed to the sounds and sounding of the social and political movements of the 1950s through the 1970s. But both also made poetry central to their cultural production and thus to contested redefinitions of poetic, public, and mass media speech. At the same time, many of the poets they recorded and broadcast were experimenting with new lyric forms and multimedia contexts for representing and communicating voice, vernacular speech and music, and sonic environments. These experiments in sound and poetry took place within and responded to a historical context of profound social, political, and technological change in the U.S. Attending to these larger contexts helps to expand the limited reach, relative to dominant pop cultural forms, of the creations of a few poets, independent record producers, and public radio broadcasters by allowing us to tell stories about how ideas of the local, the niche, the minor, the

alternative, the experimental, and the countercultural or counterpublic inform the cultural imaginary of the nation.

I begin my study in the late 1940s and largely confine my focus to the period between 1945 and 1965, when rapid changes in the American media industry, coinciding with large-scale shifts in U.S. society, economics, politics, foreign policy, culture, and technology, transformed the means and meaning of communication. Yet while “the sixties” remain highly audible to contemporary ears as *the* decade of protest and youth counterculture, “the fifties” are much harder to hear. From the silencing of political dissent to high-profile acts of state censorship; from the peaceful quiet of the suburbs and the placid veneer of mass conformity to the performative silence of the closet; from eavesdropping spies and the whispered secrets of Cold War espionage to the eerie quiet of environmental and atomic destruction; from the supposed death of radio to the hegemonic rise of visual culture through print advertising and television; from the coming-of-age of “the silent generation” to the New Critics’ enshrinement of poetic decorum and impersonality: “the fifties” is a decade of and obsessed with silence. Many of the most profound silences of the Cold War era, however, are etched in multimedia documents that also made political repression into major broadcast events. Langston Hughes’s suppression of his earlier radical work during the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, culminated in his 1953 appearance in front of Senator McCarthy’s Senate Subcommittee, and the national circulation of his testimony in print and broadcast media. Hughes, who had been hounded by the conservative press for years, hoped that the publicity around his testimony would at least silence these critics; it did not. The whole affair thus offers several layers of contradiction around speech and silence, repression and publicity, that characterize the period as a whole. Attending to sound culture in this historical moment helps us to hear in such contradictory events what Michel Foucault

describes in *The History of Sexuality* as the productive nature of power, in which alongside the repressive apparatuses of censorship and the “policing of statements” one finds an “incitement to discourse” as “an exercise of power itself” (18). Everywhere evident is the “institutional incitement to speak about” a set of supposedly repressed topics—sexuality, racism, political dissent—and “a determination of the part of agencies of power to hear [them] spoken about” (18).<sup>7</sup> In the 1950s, perhaps more than any other moment in the twentieth century, the United States is “a society . . . which speaks verbosely of its own silence” (8).

Perhaps as a result of these still-dominant narratives, sound studies and related fields in media history, cultural studies, and literary studies have been surprisingly quiet about sound, outside the context of music, in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> This is surprising given that in the first decade after World War II, a flood of innovation significantly altered the ways sound was produced, consumed, and received within the culture industries. This included magnetic tape, which became commercially available for the first time in 1948, followed soon after by the portable tape recorder and multitrack recording; the long-playing 33 1/3 rpm vinyl record, which Columbia Records introduced in 1948; the portable transistor radio, released in the early 1950s; and more sophisticated, affordable, and widespread stereophonic recording and playback technologies. The immediate postwar years also saw the belated arrival of two long-anticipated developments in broadcasting: television and FM radio. The reverberations of these technological developments extended beyond the music, record, and broadcasting industries to film and advertising, as well as to the visual, performing, and literary arts. They also contributed

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault significantly figures the reproduction and dissemination of power through discourse as an *aural* rather than primarily visual or textual phenomenon. The erotic reciprocity of speech and listening, mouth and ear, is central to Foucault’s project of tracking the transformation of sex into discourse.

<sup>8</sup> A notable exception to this is the large volume of scholarship on John Cage’s experimental sound art, though it’s fascinating to consider the importance of silence to Cage and his critics.

to the growth or emergence of new cultural forms and genres (electronic music, the concept album, kidisks, amateur tape recording, freeform radio, the literary “cut-up”); new techniques of self-fashioning (the “hi-fi” aficionado, the record collector, the DJ); and new practices and places for listening to recorded and broadcast sound (the car, the block, the bedroom).

Within literary contexts, many writers, readers, and literary institutions embraced and experimented with the new technologies for a wide set of literary practices, from composition, publication, and reception to performance, self-promotion, and historical documentation. Poetry has proved especially suitable to mediation through sound technologies given that the genre, as Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin describe in a recent collection of essays on *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, “inherently involves the structuring of sound” and is closely tied to its vocalization (1). In the 1950s, when audio recording technologies moved out of the near-exclusive domain of experts and devoted hobbyists into the general public, poets were at the experimental vanguard of recording, engineering, splicing, and sharing recorded poems and sound works. These technologies are also figured in literary texts—from the phonographic grooves into which Ralph Ellison’s invisible man descends “to hear the silence of sound” (13) to the car radio spewing Top 40 and Vietnam War propaganda in Ginsberg’s *Fall of America*—which in turn contributed to the cultural contexts that shape how new technologies are understood and used.

Yet as Jacob Smith writes in his study of “postwar phonograph cultures,” many of the most prominent sound studies scholars focus on the early years of emergence for sound technologies, which “can obscure the fact that the cultural life of sound technologies has been an

ongoing process” (6).<sup>9</sup> Literary scholars interested in the connections between literature and sound technologies have also tended to concentrate on the early twentieth-century modernist period, especially when studying writers’ engagement with radio.<sup>10</sup> In media and radio studies, the meteoric rise of television as the dominant mass media form in the U.S. for a long time eclipsed radio to the extent that many foundational histories on American radio and broadcasting either end with the emergence of television or transition from radio to television.<sup>11</sup> This is no longer the case as radio scholars contest the cultural perception that radio ended with the advent of TV (or the Internet, for that matter), but significant work remains to be done on the cultural history of the medium in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>12</sup>

The relative critical silence on Cold War American sound culture can also be traced to early cultural studies approaches that emphasized the study of mass popular genres and texts to the exclusion of niche markets (like the markets for poetry or FM radio) and alternative forms of consumption. These biases are waning, however, allowing for more nuanced approaches to the diversity and stratification of cultural production and consumption, and to new texts and publics.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Smith cites Rick Altman, Lisa Gitelman, James Lastra, and Jonathan Sterne as some of the field-defining scholars in sound studies whose work focuses on early sound technologies (though Gitelman and Sterne have also produced significant work on digital technologies). I would add Friedrich Kittler and Emily Thompson to this list.

<sup>10</sup> On literature and sound technology in the early twentieth century, see Edward Allen; Armstrong; Campbell; Kahn and Whitehead; Morris, “Sound Technologies”; Suárez; and Weheliye. For studies of literary modernism and radio, including in the U.K. and Europe, see Avery; Cohen, Coyle, and Lewty; Connor; Feldman, Mead, and Tonning; Fisher; and Noland (141–62). Notable exceptions that focus on the material and cultural conditions of post-1945 literary recording and broadcasting are Davidson, *Ghostlier* (196–223) and ““By Ear””; Furr; and Hayles, “Voices Out of Bodies.”

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Erik Barnouw’s influential three-volume *History of Broadcasting in the United States*, whose final volume, *The Image Empire* (1970), indicates by its title the conceptual shift to television.

<sup>12</sup> For radio scholarship that attends specifically to FM, see Keith and Sterling; Keith, *Radio Cultures* and “Turn On”; and Walker. Studies of African American, Native American, Spanish language, and community radio are also valuable for considering the history of FM; see Barlow; Casillas; and Keith, *Signals in the Air*. As I discuss in more detail in the conclusion, there is also reason to believe that the tide will soon turn for the study of post-1945 and FM radio, in part because the most recent iteration of scholarly interest in sound has been paralleled by an increased archival attention to sound preservation.

The same has been true for literary studies, which has tended to look at the Cold War period and postmodernism primarily through narrative fiction in association with visual culture, visual art, film, and television. Fredric Jameson's and Jean-Francois Lyotard's definitions of postmodernism as essentially a narrative crisis defined by, in Jameson's words, the "unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives" (xii), continues to deeply influence literary criticism about the period. Relatedly, Cold War literary and cultural studies have bafflingly neglected what Catherine Gunther Kodat describes as the era's "striking turn toward nonnarrative works" unless these works "can be recuperated to the reigning interpretative narratives of containment or American cultural imperialism" (39). Poetry and the performance arts thus tend to be described as part of "postwar culture or midcentury modernism" rather than Cold War culture (39).<sup>13</sup> Poetry scholars have been more attentive to the importance of sound, music, and performance in the development of experimental poetics after World War II, but they have generally applied these insights to poetic literary history rather than to broader cultural contexts.<sup>14</sup>

The disciplinary history of African American studies, by contrast, reveals the consistent centrality of music, vernacular literature, and sound to the study of African American culture and history. As Kara Keeling and Josh Kun write in their introduction to a 2011 special issue of *American Quarterly*, "Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies," "sound has been a privileged epistemological and ethical mode through which black existence in the United States

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<sup>13</sup> For scholars who do consider poetry in relation to the discourses and cultural imaginaries of the Cold War, often by recuperating the genre in the ways Kodat describes, see Brunner; Davidson, *Guys Like Us*; Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*; and Nelson.

<sup>14</sup> Prominent scholars and poet-critics who consistently bring an attention to sound, music, and performance to the analysis and literary history of post-WWII American avant-garde poetry include Charles Bernstein, Maria Damon, Michael Davidson, Daniel Kane, Nathaniel Mackey, Peter Middleton, Marjorie Perloff, Jed Rasula, and Lorenzo Thomas.

has been conceptualized, theorized, politicized, and constituted as an object of scholarly investigation” (456).<sup>15</sup> While the phonocentrism of the field has come under important scrutiny, some of the most exciting recent work on sound culture is by scholars like Art Blake, Nina Sun Eidsheim, Fred Moten, Jennifer Stoeber, Gayle Wald, and Alexander Weheliye whose interests in sound and racial formation include attention to the post-1945 era.<sup>16</sup>

This is important, because the silent fifties turn out to be incredibly dynamic, dissonant, and noisy in ways that expose not only the diversity and complexity of American soundscapes at a particular moment in U.S. history but the historicity of listening itself as a socially constructed and constructing practice. I posit that what has made this era in a sense so difficult to hear is the fact that *listening*—as a perceptual apparatus for engaging sonic stimuli, a technologically mediated experience, a set of cultural practices, an object of discourse, and a metaphor—was put into crisis in the two decades after World War II.<sup>17</sup> In the chapters that follow, I analyze how poets, sound artists, and independent cultural producers in sound recording and radio represented

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<sup>15</sup> The privileging of vernacularism and musicality over textuality in the study of African American literature, including in the influential vernacular criticism of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, has also contributed to the continued marginalization of African American avant-garde writers and traditions. Aldon Lynn Nielsen’s *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* is an especially important intervention for the study of twentieth-century poetry.

<sup>16</sup> As Gustavus Stadler argued in a provocative 2015 blog post “On Whiteness and Sound Studies” in *Sounding Out!*, the mapping of sound studies as a field has tended to exclude or downplay approaches informed by critical race and gender studies, while “remain[ing] fixated on sound as a category that exists in itself, outside of its perception by specifically marked subjects and bodies within history” (n. pag.). Like Stadler, I’m most interested in “scholarship that explicitly confronts, and broadcasts, the underlying whiteness of the field, and of the generic terms that provide so much currency in it: terms like ‘the listener,’ ‘the body,’ [and] ‘the ear.’”

<sup>17</sup> While I tend to use the verb *to listen* over *to hear* because of the former’s connotations of an active, learned cultural practice, I occasionally interchange them because I do not believe in maintaining a strong distinction between listening and hearing. In my view, hearing is never fully passive or removed from the realms of culture, technology, and social difference, and listening is never a fully self-possessed act of will. In this, I depart from Sterne who asserts that “[l]istening requires hearing but is not simply reducible to hearing” (*Audible Past* 19). While there may be contextual reasons for marking this difference, too often hearing is used to evoke the kind of unmarked, transparent, universal of “pure interiority” that Sterne also critiques as part of the Christian theological and Enlightenment dialectic between sound and sight (15). The difference is that contemporary epistemologies of hearing as beyond or outside history tend to do so through the authorizing discourse of cognitive science rather than philosophy or theology.

and responded to a perceived crisis in listening in postwar American society, in which codified practices of listening to and conceptualizing sound appeared suddenly inadequate for apprehending the complex soundscapes of the nation.

My sense of a crisis in listening refers in part to problems of aural apprehension specific to the postwar moment: new media technologies, new musical genres like bebop jazz and rock 'n' roll, new industrial noises, new expressive and avant-garde poetic forms, and the changing soundscapes of cities and suburbs were initially incomprehensible to many listeners. But the crisis in listening points also to the massive production of discourse about sound and silence during these years, and the proliferation of figurative tropes of “noise” and “deafness” to signify incomprehensibility itself. These tropes often operated in public discourses to reduce the diverse voices and sounds associated with a subaltern group to incoherent “noise,” or to perpetuate ableist constructions of deafness as pathology—hardly a new phenomenon in Western history but one that resonates in particular ways in the post-WWII context. In the late 1940s, as new communication technologies altered the cultural production of sound, new epistemological paradigms of information theory contributed to what communication theorist John Durham Peters describes as “the single grandest moment in the century’s confrontation with communication” (22). The crisis in listening is thus a crisis *about* listening—the widespread sense, for example, that “we” as a global human society of diverse nationalities, races, languages, and beliefs had lost the capacity to listen to and empathetically understand one another—and a generalized rhetoric that *represents* crisis through aural tropes and representational sound media forms.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> My description of a postwar crisis in listening related to the emergence of new technologies may echo for some readers Rick Altman’s model of “crisis historiography.” In *Silent Film Sound*, Altman calls for a new approach to writing media and technology history that foregrounds the social construction of technologies by users, and narrates the ongoing “identity crises” that accompany the emergence of new technologies as different groups struggle to

This rhetoric of crisis did not manifest the same way everywhere or as a totality, however, even within the aural networks that cluster around Folkways Records and Pacifica Radio, both of which were founded in this context. For Tony Schwartz, whose ethnographic tape recordings of New York City became the source for several documentary montages released in the 1950s and 1960s by Folkways Records, the crisis stemmed from his urgent belief that the rich multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural soundscape of New York City was being silenced by urban renewal projects, suburbanization, and new media technologies oriented toward the private consumption of mass culture. For Lewis Hill, the founder of Pacifica Radio and a committed pacifist, the crisis in listening was a sweeping global, national, and individual breakdown in the will and mechanisms that mediate conflict through communication—a crisis in which the medium of radio was deeply implicated as both cause and cure. For the poet Jack Spicer, the eternal poetic lament that “no one listens to poetry” appears within a body of work that continually insists on the inescapable, and perhaps even productive, static interference impeding the transmission and reception of poetic language for both poet and reader (*My Vocabulary* 369). In all of these different examples, however, the perception of crisis gives rise to new creative possibilities for intervention and change, for developing new forms and practices for listening differently, and for challenging dominant aural norms. The sonic arts, which include poetry as well as music, sound art, and performance, are then especially rich cultural forms for these creative interventions and for imagining new publics oriented around shared and historically specific practices of listening.

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control and define their meaning and use. While “crisis historiography” informs my overall methodology, the notion of a crisis in listening is less about the struggle to define a specific representational medium (e.g. the LP) and more about a general rhetoric of crisis that was often expressed as a communication crisis and that often employed figures of sound, noise, silence, and aurality.

Folkways Records and Pacifica Radio are especially important to the emergence of what I've been loosely describing as a countercultural listening public because of their status as alternative media institutions with ties to the embattled American left at the height of anticommunist blacklisting in the entertainment industries. This is why I focus on these two media outlets for the sounding of postwar poetry rather than on amateur recording practices or the many radio stations and record labels that put poetry in the air after 1945 (including, for example, labels like Caedmon Records, Spoken Arts, and Fantasy Records).<sup>19</sup> If one of the most productive sites for discourse about the silent fifties relates to the silence and silencing of the left—and of overt political affiliation in general in what Daniel Bell famously called “the end of ideology”—listening to Folkways and Pacifica suggests a different narrative, one in which echoes of the “old left” become part of the aural memory of the institutions, cultural forms, and consumption practices of the “new left.” Though institutionally situated on opposite coasts during much of the period that I study, Folkways and Pacifica are connected through the poets and musicians with whom they worked, the overlapping consumer audiences they reached, and their shared aesthetic and ideological approaches to sound recording and broadcasting.<sup>20</sup> These individuals and audiences shared a cultural orientation inflected by the “plebian accent” of Popular Front culture and politics (Denning xx). In reissuing recordings and “rediscovering” artists from the race record trade of the twenties and thirties that constituted the folk revival's

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<sup>19</sup> Caedmon Records, founded by Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Mantell in 1952, is widely recognized as the major commercial recording label for poetry. Many of the most recognized poets of the twentieth century recorded for Caedmon, including Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, and Sylvia Plath, among many others. For detailed discussion of Caedmon in the context of literary and media history, respectively, see Furr (27–52) and Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word* (49–78). For an analysis of how sound editing constructs poetic voice on Caedmon's albums, see Parry, “The Inaudibility of ‘Good’ Sound Editing” and “The LP Era.”

<sup>20</sup> Until 1960, Pacifica was exclusively a West Coast phenomenon, with stations in Berkeley (KPFA) and Los Angeles (KPFK). In 1960, the network acquired the New York station WBAI and later added stations in Washington, D.C. (WPFW) and Houston (KPFT).

usable past, as Folkways Records did; in elegizing a radical political and poetic tradition while fostering a countercultural poetic renaissance in San Francisco, as Kenneth Rexroth did; and in drawing on the experiences and failures of radical pacifism during World War II to create a new model of radio in the U.S. that would contribute to the revitalized pacifism of the civil rights, antinuclear, and anti-Vietnam War movements, as Lewis Hill of Pacifica Radio did, these postwar aural networks help us to draw connections (frayed and full of static) across a bifurcated century.

At the same time, I do not want to completely abandon the narrative of the “silent fifties.” This study is a story of individuals and publics who often sound muted and discordant: of listeners rather than speakers; of recorders or receivers rather than creators of culture; of radicals in retreat; of disaffiliated outsiders; of bad imitators and ventriloquists; of ambient and ambiguous publics. One of the primary ways that Folkways and Pacifica, and many of the artists they recorded and broadcast, challenged listening practices was simply, to put it bluntly, by sounding “bad.” Folkways Records and Pacifica Radio are both notorious for eschewing recording techniques, radio elocutionary standards, and commercial aesthetics that defined “high fidelity” and “good” sound in the post-WWII radio and recording industries. This is likewise true of postwar vernacular and oral poetry, whose practitioners advertised their authenticity by disrupting standards of performance and etiquettes of reception. The audiences and consumers who tuned into Pacifica Radio stations, who purchased Folkways albums, or who attended Bay Area poetry readings did so in part because these aesthetic differences communicated cultural authenticity in an anesthetized mass cultural mediascape. Specific constructions of authentic sound and voice associated with alternative media also constructed the act of listening—to certain kinds of music, literature, and speech; to certain kinds of media; to certain

environments—as participatory, creative, and practiced means through which to fashion an oppositional identity and create a sense of social, political, and even national belonging.

By focusing on these listeners and histories of listening, I am attempting to find another frame through which to apprehend the rich discourse on sound and speech that has been so important to the study of poetry, publics and counterpublics, and American cultural and political history but that has not always conceptualized practices of listening as robustly as practices of speaking. Much of the discourse about poetry by academics and writers, for example, centers on the concept of voice within a dominant “lyric paradigm” that continues to posit “‘lyric’ as *the* mode of subjectivity” (Perloff and Dworkin 3). What happens, though, if we shift our attention away from the voice and the related tropes of “finding one’s voice” and “speaking up” that codify *speech* as the form through which one becomes a subjective “one” and enters the public sphere? What if we attend instead to the experiences, practices, and representations of listening that constitute the public or publics for these speech acts?

To do so, as several scholars have recently argued, is to understand mediated acts of listening as constitutive of the social and as productive of new publics and models of citizenship. Gayle Wald, for example, contends that “the cooperative enterprise of listening” realized in live musical performance “can have the powerful effect of ‘binding’ subjects together through shared affect” in ways that have been especially crucial for realizing “musical vibrations” as “an instrument of oppositional consciousness” for African Americans (675). Lauren Berlant, in conversation with Charles Hirschkind’s work on cassette sermons and the Islamic Revival, describes a common rhetoric that posits ambient listening as the ideal form of attachment to the political, in which “the feeling tones of the affective soundscape produce attachments to and investments in a sense of political and social mutuality that is performed in moments of

collective audition” (*Cruel Optimism* 224). In these accounts, as Berlant describes, “*listening together*” emerges as “an object/scene of desire” for “a sense of shared worldness” that promises a less mediated, more immanently present form of social and political relation (224; emphasis in original). The aural networks I map in this study are created in and through this desire, though often in contradictory (because heavily mediated and commoditized) ways. When Langston Hughes, for example, directs his readers to “Listen closely” to the discordant soundscape and vibratory “rumbles” of postwar Harlem in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, he calls, within the ambiguously sonic and communal space of a poem, for the kind of collective and affective attunement that would bring into presence a fractured and deferred democratic public (*Collected Poems* 308). When KPFA broadcasters asserted that radio “finds its truest analogy in direct personal communication,” they spoke not of the technical means of broadcasting but of their desire for a more immediate, reciprocal, authentic relation to a listening public (*KPFA Folio* Mar. 9–22, 1952).

The individuals who purchased Folkways LPs, who subscribed or even just tuned in to Pacifica Radio, who bought City Lights poetry paperbacks and spoken word LPs and attended jazz poetry readings, did so in part as an expression of their sense of belonging to “a commonly lived history”—a history that included, for example, the memory of bohemianism and leftist radicalism at the moment of its silencing by state hegemonic forces— and an alternative public, one that “provide[d] a better experience of social belonging” in what seemed a degraded, mass mediated pseudopublic sphere (Berlant, *Female Complaint* viii). Moreover, they did so primarily as consumers of these specific objects and genres even when, as I must emphasize here, the commodity culture in which they participated was imagined to be outside of or alternative to commodity culture as such. The choice to listen to the noncommercial KPFA over a commercial

radio station still posits individual consumer choice as the means through which one assumes citizenship, exercises a kind of speech, and enters the public sphere.

For all the rhetoric of social progressivism, liberation, authentic social relation, and *communitas*, the aural networks of this study also often reproduced dominant power relations. While many women, for example, participated in the publics mediated by alternative sound culture, experimental poetry, and leftist politics in diverse social roles as writers, readers, radio producers, listeners, consumers, and activists, there is a reason why none of the central figures of this study are women. Women's participation and labor are occluded or denigrated in these institutions and publics, and in the historical narratives that have been told about them. On the one hand, gender discrimination in the literary publishing, radio, and recording industries meant that women, and especially women of color, struggled to gain access to positions of power and media technologies of self-representation within these networks of publicity, even especially in alternative media industries that rhetorically positioned themselves in opposition to a feminized mass cultural consumer public. On the other hand, avant-garde poetry communities, alternative radio stations, and independent record labels also reproduced dominant aural practices that assumed the primacy and universality of the masculine ear as well as gender stereotypes about women's voices and sounds. As a result, women's material experiences of listening within these gendered networks differed in ways that are difficult to recover by only considering the poems, broadcasts, and records they consumed. In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, however, women and other marginalized subjects who developed modes of attachment to these aural publics contested listening norms with increasing audibility. During these years, feminist, gay and lesbian, black radical, and "Third World" networks for publishing, broadcasting, and circulating multimedia discourse constituted counterpublics that were also significantly oriented around

aural culture. The longer historical narrative of the study initiated here would therefore have to consider how a crisis in listening reemerges *within* these alternative sound media institutions and poetry communities in relation to identity politics, social memory, and new discourses and technologies of sound and listening.

### **A Note on Methodology, or, Against “Close Listening”**

This project is situated in the midst of a revived interest in poetry performance and poetry recordings among poets, readers, and scholars, facilitated by the increasing availability of digital recordings on the Internet and sustained by a growing body of criticism that offers “‘close listenings,’ not only to the printed text of poems but also to tapes and performances” (Bernstein 4). Charles Bernstein has been a prominent advocate for this “aural turn,” and the current wave of poetry criticism on performance owes much to the ever-expanding digital collection *PennSound*, which Bernstein co-founded with Al Filreis in 2005, and Bernstein’s edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998).<sup>21</sup> When *Close Listening* appeared alongside Adalaide Morris’s *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (1997), the two collections intervened significantly in a field still dominated by a dialectic between New Critical and poststructuralist approaches to poetic textuality. At the same time, Bernstein’s and Morris’s call for writers and scholars to listen to poetry also drew attention to the large collections of tapes, LPs, CDs, and early digital files neglected and in many cases

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<sup>21</sup> *PennSound*’s influence extends beyond its digital archive through its institutional association with other projects of the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania directed by Filreis, including the podcast series *PoemTalk*; Filreis’s Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) “ModPo”; and, especially, the online journal *Jacket2*, which consistently solicits and publishes essays and commentaries about poetry recordings from the *PennSound* collection.

deteriorating in public and personal archives around the country, amplifying the need for new conservation efforts. Twenty years later, a formidable record of scholarship that attends to poetic “graphotexts” and “phonotexts” across multiple media forms and performances, often through recently preserved and digitized recordings, testifies to the legacy of these interventions (Stewart qtd. in Morris, Introduction 6).<sup>22</sup>

Much of this scholarship on poetic sound still falls into the two approaches outlined by Bernstein in *Close Listening*, one of which concerns “the contributions of sound to meaning” within a poem, or “sound as material,” and the second of which uses sound recordings to analyze “the performance style of individual poets” (4).<sup>23</sup> While Bernstein characterizes these as poles of a “spectrum” rather than two discrete methods, neither pole accounts for the material, social, and cultural contexts in which poetry’s sound is produced, recorded, and heard.<sup>24</sup> In my research, I found a tendency in many “close listening” projects to treat the poem as a decontextualized object, in whatever media form it appears. When the poetic text under analysis is a sound recording, this tendency can reproduce unexamined assumptions about performance, its

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<sup>22</sup> Garrett Stewart coined the term “phonotext” in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (1990) to describe the aurality of “silent reading”: the interplay between the oral and the visual, the “phonotext” and the “graphotext,” in the phenomenology of reading. Poetry critics who draw on this terminology, including Bernstein and Morris in their respective collections, tend to adapt the term phonotext to refer to sound recordings and vocalized performances as well as print texts. In the process, they lose something of Stewart’s attention to reception and reading/listening.

<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Perloff’s and Craig Dworkin’s 2009 edited collected *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* echoes Bernstein’s two poles in its title. Notable examples of recent scholarship on poetry performance that makes use of archival sound recordings and “close listening” methods include Allison; Furr; Kane; Jones; Middleton; and Wheeler. My study has more in common with these approaches than with those that attend to sonic patterning within poems or sound art, though I do investigate figures of sound, aurality, and audio technologies within texts.

<sup>24</sup> I find this reproduced in *PennSound*’s, and most other online collections’, practices of archival representation, which emphasize authors and poems over dates, places, and provenance. This can be justified by the realities of working with limited resources and with recorded sound collections, especially those constituted by unpublished (i.e. noncommercial) sound documents, where dates and places of recording are frequently lost, and where recordings have often been swapped, recopied, and altered. Nonetheless, as Derek Furr observes of websites like *PennSound*, “the effect is to isolate the poet’s voice—to detach it from the recording techniques and social contexts that framed it” (5).

mediation by recording technologies, and its reception by a listener whose aural experience is imagined to be universally generic, transparent, and ahistorical. Bernstein expresses the hope that attending to a poem's multiple instantiations across print, recorded, and vocalized forms will destabilize the notion of a single, unified text controlled by authorial intention (7–10), but in practice “close listening” has tended to reify if not the poem than the poet's voice as if it were a stable object that existed outside of its mediation by technology and discourse. As Sarah Parry writes, much of the scholarship that uses poetry recordings to make claims about performance “unwittingly echoes the common assumption that a sound recording involves the more or less accurate reproduction of a poet's voice and of the poetry reading as a sound event”; in contrast, she reveals how histories of sound recording and editing co-construct the experience of listening to a recorded poem (“Inaudibility” 24).<sup>25</sup> Attending to technological mediation, however, is still only one part of developing a much-needed contextual awareness, especially since, as sound studies scholars have insisted, technologies emerge with social and cultural contexts that shape how they are used and defined.

In the chapters that follow, I do perform “close listenings” to specific poems across multiple media contexts, but it should be clear by now that my purpose is to build different, more contextually rich interdisciplinary methods and histories to help us better understand why these recordings were made and circulated; how poets, listeners, and readers interacted with them in

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<sup>25</sup> I am also skeptical of some of the digital humanities methods of “distant reading” or, as Tanya Clement terms them, “distant listening,” currently being developed by scholars associated with the NEH-funded High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS) project. A recent post by Kenneth Sherwood in *Jacket2*, for example, describes his experiments with the HiPSTAS's project sound data visualization and categorization tool (ARLO), which, when applied to a large dataset of digital sound files—i.e. the *PennSound* archive—can analyze and tag recordings based on particular sonic identifiers “such as moments of laughter and applause” or, in his project, variances in “tempo, loudness, pitch range, tension, rhythm, and voice quality” across the audio corpus of a single poet, Jerome Rothenberg (n. pag.). The underlying assumption, of course, is that these variances are produced by the poet and the performance event rather than the context of their recording and editing, or the variant mediations and remediations of the recordings in their path to a digital file in *PennSound*'s archive. Given that the sonic features Sherwood lists (“tempo, loudness, pitch range...”) are especially contingent on recording technologies and editing techniques, this is a seriously questionable assumption.

diverse and contradictory ways; and what genealogies might be constructed about our own contemporary listening and reading practices. In addition to driving my interdisciplinary and sound studies methodology, this purpose also guides my attention to archival documents and collections, including recordings, manuscripts, and correspondence that still exist only in analog and print forms housed in brick-and-mortar institutions. The ever-growing volume of online digital content can enable a myth of total access (even while the meaning of accessibility on the Web continues to be contested), but the narratives we can write about our collective “audible past,” to borrow Sterne’s phrase, are still enriched by seeking out and bringing into public those histories and documents that have been forgotten or silenced, that tell of failed or abandoned projects, or that remain guarded by state and commercial entities. Reciprocally, I hope that my attention to analog and print as well as digital archives also encourages scholarly interest in these underutilized collections, which may in turn lend support to archivists’ and librarians’ efforts to record, preserve, and make audible the diverse sounds of our multimedia past and present.

## **Chapter Outline**

This dissertation is organized into two sets of paired chapters oriented, respectively, around Folkways Records and Langston Hughes, and Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance. The paired chapters correspondingly have two central aims. First, I narrate each media institution’s early history in relation to the recording and broadcasting of poetry and the contexts in which these aural networks emerged. Second, I analyze how poets who participated in these networks represented, responded, and intervened in a postwar crisis in listening through their literary works and performances.

Chapters 1 and 2 are about the aural poetics of Langston Hughes as they were sounded in his late, postwar texts, records, and performances, and circulated by Folkways Records within its expansive catalog of folk music and documentary sound. In chapter 1, “Sono-Montage: Langston Hughes and Tony Schwartz Listen to Postwar New York,” I splice the poetic and sonic work of two of Folkways Records’ artists, Hughes and sound documentarian Tony Schwartz, to introduce the concept of a crisis in listening as it manifests formally and thematically in their work and in relation to the rapidly changing soundscape of New York City in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hughes’s experimental poetic sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and Schwartz’s “New York 19” tape montages, released on a series of Folkways LPs in the 1950s, both employ techniques of montage to represent the diverse sounds, voices, and music of their respective Manhattan neighborhoods. I argue that, in doing so, they expose listening as a mediated and socially constructed act intertwined with the structural violence of racial and economic discrimination. By fragmenting and splicing sound, they also develop alternative models of collective listening that together offer contrasting perceptual strategies for remapping social, spatial, and sonic relations in the diverse and unequal urban geographies of the U.S.

While the first chapter centers on an analysis of Hughes’s textually mediated intervention in listening in *Montage*, in the second chapter, “Langston Hughes, Folkways Records, and the Voice of Authentic Folk,” I listen to Hughes’s recordings on Folkways Records to examine the commodification and circulation of his voice in the context of a more ambient national crisis in listening in the 1950s. If Hughes’s late work is more likely to be associated with the Newport Jazz Festival than the Newport Folk Festival, his association with Folkways Records and its founder Moses Asch complicates the dominant reception of Hughes’s late career and the return of “the folk” in an American countercultural and racialized imaginary. I argue that Hughes and

Asch participated in redefining for a postwar generation forms of authentic cultural production, consumption, and social relation by replaying and listening to earlier twentieth-century literary and sonic representations of black vernacular culture. These strategic replays preserved something of the Popular Front culture that was being spectacularly silenced in the creation of a new national public, and promoted interracial forms of social relation mediated by democratic modes of listening to and with one another. But they also revived phonographic constructions of “sonic blackness” that have fueled the minstrel logic of American popular music and that echoed behind white liberal discourses of multiculturalism and colorblindness in the civil rights era. Hughes negotiated his circulation as a commodity within this context through a performance of voice on his Folkways albums that continually calls attention to the mediation, reification, and what Fred Moten terms the “phonic materiality” of blackness (1).

Chapters 3 and 4 move from New York to San Francisco and from phonography to radiophony to narrate the mutually constructing history and relationship of Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance with the context of a crisis in listening linked to mass media’s role in the silencing of dissent. In these chapters, I draw extensively on archival documents and recordings to narrate the crucial role Bay Area poets played in defining Pacifica Radio’s pacifist mission and countercultural ethos; its broadcasting aesthetics; its programming; and its listening public. I also consider how poets’ connections with this aural network, and their relationship to post-WWII sound culture more generally, shaped the poetics, politics, and publics of the San Francisco Renaissance.

Chapter 3, “‘Experiments in the Broadcasting of Poetry’: The Founding of Pacifica Radio,” establishes the poetics of Pacifica Radio under the leadership of its founder Lewis Hill, from 1946 to his death in 1957. I begin by tracing the shared genealogy of Pacifica and the San

Francisco Renaissance to the conscientious objector camps of WWII through the correspondence, biographies, poems, and essays of Hill and poet William Everson. Hill's and Everson's relationship to the radical pacifist movement informed their respective views on the communication crisis driving conflict between nations and individuals, and the role poets could have in furthering the embattled cause for peace by bringing about transformations in individual consciousness within a broader public cultural movement. These ideas directly influenced the postwar establishment of the Pacifica Foundation and KPFA in the San Francisco Bay Area within a network of small presses, theaters, galleries, and bookstores that together fostered a renaissance in oral poetry and public media. Through station KPFA, Hill and the other founders of Pacifica promoted in its early years a participatory form of radio based on literary models of reception, circulation, and ethical subjectivity that they idealistically hoped would restore a liberal public sphere they believed had been destroyed by mass-mediated consumerism and state propaganda. In this model, the broadcasting of spoken poetry was seen as an essential part of a cultural program designed to change how Americans listened to one another and the world. The media, cultural, and political contexts in which KPFA broadcast in the 1950s, however, were profoundly changing in ways that would shift the ground of its intervention and its public.

The final chapter, "The Poet Is a Counterpunching Radio': KPFA and the San Francisco Renaissance," argues that San Francisco poets played instrumental roles in shifting and remapping this ground on KPFA's airwaves throughout the 1950s and early 1960s toward a more radical politics and cultural aesthetic. Reciprocally, KPFA helped to create, publicize, and narrate the poetic movement known as the San Francisco Renaissance, while also contextualizing that movement within the station's increasingly politicized programming and listening public. The problem of censorship becomes the primary site of a crisis in listening in

this chapter, and I examine how poets and broadcasters responded through the auditory forms of radio and poetry to advocate for free speech and the public's right to hear.

To illustrate this crisis and the reciprocal relationship between Bay Area poets and KPFA, chapter 4 introduces three case studies. First, I consider Jack Spicer and his very early KPFA program on American folk ballads (1949–1950), which I contextualize in relation to new archival findings that situate Spicer's show within KPFA and postwar folk music collecting, as well as in relation to the prominent figure of the radio and the folk song in his poetry and lectures. Second, I listen to one of Pacifica Radio's most defining early voices, Kenneth Rexroth, whose more than twenty-year stint as the network's book reviewer exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance. Through his program, Rexroth gave voice to Pacifica's anarcho-pacifist model of broadcasting and to the San Francisco Renaissance as a literary and social movement, but in doing so he also made audible the tensions around public and private forms of address and subjectivity, and around communication and its technological mediation, that both encounter. Finally, I turn to KPFA's involvement in one of the most publicized events of American literary history: the publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). Through an analysis of two significant broadcasts, I argue that the broadcasting of "Howl" raised significant challenges to KPFA's desire to transform radio into a medium for the liberal public sphere and presaged Pacifica's role in combatting the increasing censorship and regulation of broadcasting media over the subsequent three decades. In addition, I connect Ginsberg's ambivalence about broadcasting, recording, and performing "Howl" to the figure of radio within the poem and its formal experiment in order to offer new critical insights on the aural poetics and technics of Ginsberg's lyric.

In the conclusion, I consider some of the larger methodological questions raised by the sonic archive of American poetry. Practically speaking, how does one listen in and to the archive? How might attention to aural culture alter the meaning of what an archive is, what it preserves, and how one should interact with it? What would it mean to theorize listening as already an archival practice or methodology? As sound becomes more central to the ways that we research and represent the past, scholars—and literary scholars in particular—must develop new critical, contextual approaches for how to listen historically. Poetry, I argue, can help us to do so. By attending to the ways that poetry documents experiences and practices of listening, we can amplify the mediated histories that shape our aural past, present, and future.

## Chapter 1

### Sono-Montage: Langston Hughes and Tony Schwartz Listen to Postwar New York

In 1956, Langston Hughes drafted recording scripts for two proposed albums of poetry and documentary sound to be recorded by sound artist Tony Schwartz, “Rhythms of Harlem” and “Poems for Children.”<sup>26</sup> Although the recordings appear never to have been made, the scripts are artifacts of a fleeting and promising collaboration, reflecting both artists’ interests in vernacular urban culture and children’s media as well as their relationships with Moses Asch of Folkways Records, for whom the albums were likely planned.<sup>27</sup> Hughes and Schwartz each released several LPs on Folkways Records in the 1950s and 1960s, contributing to Folkways Records’ influential expansion of the category of folk sound through spoken word and documentary LPs as well as global folk, blues, and jazz music.<sup>28</sup> While we cannot know what “Rhythms of Harlem” and “Poems for Children” would have sounded like, experience with Hughes’s and Schwartz’s other Folkways albums suggest that as sound editor Schwartz would have used his own documentary recordings rather than studio-produced sound effects to craft a dynamic montage of Hughes’s poetic performance and the sounds of New York City. This is especially true of “Rhythms of Harlem,” which juxtaposes an arrangement of Hughes’s Harlem-inspired poems from *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and earlier works with notes for

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<sup>26</sup> Copies of these scripts are preserved in both the Tony Schwartz Collection (154:1) and the Langston Hughes Papers (7188, 7194). I am grateful to Pascal Massinon for first bringing them to my attention.

<sup>27</sup> I identify Folkways Records as the likely recipient of the scripts because of Hughes’s and Schwartz’s established relationships with the label, the likelihood that the two met through this shared association, and the similarity of this script to other proposed but never-recorded albums by Hughes in the Moses and Frances Asch Collection. Hughes also apparently approached the BBC as another potential outlet for the scripts, according to a typewritten note—“Also sent to [D. G.] Bridson, BBC”—on the cover of “Poems for Children” in the Hughes Papers (7188).

<sup>28</sup> Hughes’s Folkways albums, which I discuss in chapter 2, include *Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes* (1952), *The Story of Jazz* (1954), *Rhythms of the World* (1955), *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems of Langston Hughes* (1955), and *The Glory of Negro History* (1955), among other titles.

accompanying sounds and music to be mixed by Schwartz. In contrast to the celebrated spoken word albums that Caedmon Records produced in the 1950s, which used sophisticated sound editing techniques to isolate the poet's voice, Schwartz and Hughes's scripts represent poetic speech as expressive of and embedded in a lively, noisy, urban soundscape.<sup>29</sup>

Coincidence, commercial opportunity, and overlapping networks of social relations likely brought these otherwise quite different artists and folk enthusiasts together in the mid-fifties, and as an unrealized and short-lived collaborative project, these scripts will always remain scholarly curiosities.<sup>30</sup> In this chapter, however, I suggest that the sonic montage that "Rhythms of Harlem" proposes to enact, splicing Hughes's poetry with Schwartz's documentary sounds, offers a method for thinking more expansively about these two artists' respective responses to a crisis in listening in postwar New York City. In the late 1940s, almost a decade before these scripts were drafted, both Hughes and Schwartz experimented with montage as a form through which to fragment and recombine the sounds of the neighborhoods in which they lived. In the process, they each drew attention to a crisis in listening stemming from New York's rapidly changing geography of race and economics. The sounds that accompanied urban renewal projects, suburbanization, and new waves of migration were amplified by new media technologies, efforts to generate dialogue within and between communities, and public discourse about noise pollution, all of which contributed to a general sense that the city's residents had lost the capacity to listen. This sense of a widespread crisis in listening after World War II—at once a

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<sup>29</sup> On Caedmon Records' sound editing techniques, see Parry, "The Inaudibility of 'Good' Sound Editing" and "The LP Era."

<sup>30</sup> I did not discover why the recording projects were abandoned, but it is likely that they fell by the wayside in the wake of other commitments or copyright issues, as did several other recording projects proposed by Hughes to Folkways Records, including an audio version of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a selection of Hughes's poems translated into other languages and read by native speakers, and a recording of poems and music with Hilda Haynes called "Nine Poems" (Asch Collection).

crisis about listening and a rhetoric of crisis dominated by sonic and aural tropes—was not unique to New York but its manifestation there resonates in particular ways in relation to postwar racial and aural regimes. Hughes and Schwartz participated in this discourse of crisis, but they also believed that the new sounds and audio technologies of the postwar period could be used to remap the city’s and the nation’s fractured social relations around communities of listeners. Though their projects differ in significant ways—not least of all in their choices of medium—both use montage as a tool to represent and respond to this crisis in listening because it exposes listening as a mediated and socially constructed act.

In the pages that follow, I splice Hughes’s poetic sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* with selections from Schwartz’s tape recording projects to identify and contrast how each develops an alternative model of listening to the changing soundscape of the city. In Folkways albums like *1, 2, 3 and a Zing Zing Zing* (1953), *New York 19* (1954), and *Nueva York: A Tape Documentary of Puerto Rican New Yorkers* (1955), Schwartz uses techniques of tape montage to remix the diverse, everyday sounds of his west midtown Manhattan neighborhood, developing a model of sympathetic listening that celebrates the multicultural, multilingual, and multimedia environment of urban life. By encouraging listeners in and beyond New York to cultivate aural curiosity and innocence, Schwartz rejects the discourse of noise pollution that racializes urban spaces and defines them as foreign, hostile, and dangerous, contesting what he perceives to be the erasure of public space and local community. In *Montage*, Hughes also manipulates urban sound to complicate dominant practices of listening to Harlem. *Montage* initiates readers into a practice I call deferred listening: a strenuous form of critical listening attuned to the potential of black cultural expression and its sounding of the “dream deferred” to contest and remap the segregation and social fragmentation of the metropolis. Hughes’s poem directs readers to listen

for the ways in which the misunderstood, ignored, or silenced sounds and voices of an emergent postwar Harlem echo the threat and the promise of what is at once past and still to come. For Hughes and for Schwartz, this sense of an uncertain future is expressed through their attention to young people, whose new forms of media consumption, cultural production, and social interaction raised the possibility that sensory experience itself was being radically restructured in the postwar years.

By explicating the ways in which Hughes's poetry actively develops new practices of listening, I aim to add nuance to critical characterizations of Hughes as "a refined listener" to vernacular African American culture (Jemie 34). Prominent scholars of Hughes's work including Herman Beavers, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Arnold Rampersad, and Steven Tracy have characterized Hughes's poetic persona as a silent listener rather than a speaker, and thus positioned him at a distance from the black vernacular that his literary work records, translates, and transforms. While these critics rightly highlight the significance of Hughes's "aural aesthetic" (Beavers 2), representations of the poet as listener often leave unexamined a set of assumptions about listening as a transparent, ahistorical, and unmediated sensory experience.<sup>31</sup> More recent scholarship informed by sound studies methodologies has offered new perspectives on representations of sound and voice in Hughes's work, but the exact nature of his poetics of listening has not been examined.<sup>32</sup> In this essay, I argue that far from a passive reception of sound—or even a "close" or "active" attention as critics usually represent it—listening in

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<sup>31</sup> This dominant characterization of Hughes as listener persists in many of the reviews that were written after the recent publication of Hughes's *Selected Letters* (2015). Lynell George, for example, states in her review for the *Los Angeles Times*, "Hughes wasn't just a voice for 'Negro America,' but an ear—one finely tuned and sensitive—trained on some of the country's most remote and forgotten corners" (n. pag.). The celebration of Hughes's "ear" is accompanied by George's equally typical and prevalent frustration over the "enigma" of Hughes's person and the deep silences of his prolific career and correspondence.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Chasar, "The Sounds of Black Laughter"; Jones; and Neigh.

Hughes’s poetry is didactically exposed as a socially constructed practice intertwined with discourses and technologies of race as well as sound. By considering Hughes alongside the lesser-known sound artist Tony Schwartz—and, in the next chapter, both artists in relation to Folkways Records and postwar American folk culture—I also hope to expand our understanding of how listening has been constructed in sound media, literature, and public discourse since 1945.

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“In 1948,” Tony Schwartz writes in the liner notes to *Nueva York*, “I saw I had a chance to document a migration of a people to New York.” Using an early magnetic tape machine that he had modified to make portable, Schwartz began in the late forties to record interviews with his neighbors, including those recently arrived from Puerto Rico, and the natural, industrial, media, and musical sounds of his environment. Interested in sound media technologies since his amateur “ham” radio hobby as a child, Schwartz bought a Webster wire recorder in 1945 and, after magnetic tape became available in 1948, Ampex and Magnacorder tape machines that he used to record folk music off the radio, musicians and friends who visited his home, and the streets of his city.<sup>33</sup> These early recordings launched what he called his “New York 19” project, a decades-long audio ethnography of daily life in postal zone 19 (now 10019), an area that intersects with Times Square, Hell’s Kitchen, and Central Park South. New York postal zone 19 was also home to the city’s major recorded sound and television industries, including the Folkways Records studio on 117 W. 46th Street. At first, Schwartz used these tapes to participate in mail exchanges with other tape hobbyists around the world, building in the process a rich

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<sup>33</sup> Schwartz frequently, and with some variance, describes his history with audio technologies in his books, the liner notes to his albums, and in interviews; see, especially, *The Responsive Chord*, the liner notes to *New York 19*, and his interview with Richard Kostelanetz.

collection of recordings that he described as forms of modern folklore. Schwartz shared some of these recordings with Moses Asch of Folkways (“Interview with Tony Schwartz” 57), who shared Schwartz’s expansive definition of folklore. Soon after, Schwartz began to create audio documentaries using an approach he called “sono-montage” to fragment and splice sounds from his tape collection for Folkways and, later, for radio broadcast. *Nueva York* is just one example of the many “sono-montages” produced as part of his larger “New York 19” project, but its focus on im/migrant experience and everyday speech and sound as forms of modern folklore is typical.

*Nueva York* represents through interviews and music the experiences of Puerto Rican migrants seeking employment and housing and battling discrimination, racism, and homesickness in New York City. Schwartz’s liner notes generalize the specific struggles of his interviewees as part of a long, archetypal history of successive migrations to the city stretching back to the seventeenth century. “It is my hope,” he writes, “that this record will bring some understanding of the problems a people have in moving to a new location, leaving their old homes and ways of life” and “be a bridge between the Puerto Rican New Yorker and the other New Yorkers.” Schwartz encourages his assumed listeners (the mostly non-Spanish-speaking “other New Yorkers”) to reject the cyclical return of prejudice and discrimination that has accompanied each new arrival to the city and instead celebrate New York as a cosmopolitan city of “all peoples.” Through the new medium of tape and the possibilities it opened for oral narrative, Schwartz saw himself as rewriting an old story in a new form, one that echoed tales of his own grandparents’ arrival and efforts at assimilation while promoting democratic and antiracist ideals.

Yet while arrivals and departures have always defined New York’s dynamic character, after WWII, three mass migrations into and out of the city dramatically altered its social

geography in ways that belied the melting pot narrative. Though a small population of Puerto Ricans settled and lived in New York before the war, during the 1950s almost 25 percent of the island's labor force relocated to the continental U.S., and to New York City in particular, in search of economic opportunity (Cruz 38); by 1970, the Puerto Rican population in New York was estimated at 860,584, more than ten times its size in 1940 (Sánchez Korrol 213). Newly affordable air travel also facilitated the first airborne migration to the U.S.—a phenomenon that can be heard in the opening track to Schwartz's *Nueva York*, in which an automated voice announces the arrival of a flight from Puerto Rico over a public address system.<sup>34</sup> The Second Great Migration of African Americans from the south to northern and western industrial cities also had a profound effect on New York's demographics: from 1940–1950, New York's African American population rose a dramatic 62 percent, much of it concentrated in Harlem (Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* 3).

The arrivals of Puerto Rican and African American migrants to New York City were countered and often preceded by a mass exodus of white-identified New Yorkers. An estimated 464,000 white residents in the 1940s and 1,214,000 in the 1950s left the city (Rosenwaik 135), many relocating to newly built suburbs in New York and New Jersey, of which 85.1 percent were racially restricted (Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* 114). Within New York City, Robert Moses was at the height of his influence, overhauling the city's public works (including its public housing) while making what Martha Biondi describes as “extraordinary constitutional and legislative interventions in promoting racial segregation in New York” (“Robert Moses” 117). The racism of the postwar housing boom, suburbanization, and urban renewal “rapidly

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<sup>34</sup> Operation Bootstrap, the U.S. government plan initiated in 1947 to industrialize the Puerto Rican economy, also fostered the emigration of Puerto Rican laborers. New York's Idlewild Airport (now John F. Kennedy International Airport), which opened in 1948, became one of the major gateways for travel to and from Puerto Rico.

expand[ed] the segregated landscape,” as bank policies of redlining, race-restricted covenants in property deeds, and the discourse of slum clearance in urban renewal projects generated a severe housing crisis for nonwhite New Yorkers (Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* 114).<sup>35</sup> Schwartz’s *Nueva York* offers an extended sequence on this crisis as it affected Puerto Rican residents, splicing together the voices of Puerto Rican apartment seekers, a white resident fighting to exclude them, a tenant in poor housing conditions, and a landlord describing slum renovation.<sup>36</sup> The effects of discriminatory housing were especially felt in Harlem, where many African American and Puerto Rican migrants settled. During the 1940s, Harlem’s population more than doubled without any increase in available housing, promoting slum conditions alongside inflated rents (Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* 113). While New York had always been a racially and ethnically divided city, these divisions intensified rather than loosened under the banner of postwar prosperity and renewal.

In the midst of Harlem’s escalating housing crisis, in July 1948, Langston Hughes moved to a brownstone on 127th Street, establishing with Emerson and Toy Harper the home that he would live in for the remainder of his life (Rampersad, *Life* 2:145). By September, he had composed *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which explicitly addresses the contradictions of the neighborhood’s restrictive yet ever-changing geography and its iconic status as the physical and

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<sup>35</sup> Biondi argues that “in contrast to trends in employment and public accommodations, the direction of the housing market in postwar New York was toward segregation,” making fair housing one of the major sites of struggle during this period (*To Stand and Fight* 112). See also Lizabeth Cohen for an analysis of these trends as they impacted the New Jersey suburbs in particular and in relation to what she terms “the landscape of mass consumption” (194–256).

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Stoeber offers a cogent analysis of the “housing crisis” section of *Nueva York* (“Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 74–76), arguing that Schwartz’s editing techniques create strategic “encounters” between authoritative white voices and a multiplicity of Puerto Rican voices “that dramatize white and Puerto Rican conflicts over urban space” (74).

symbolic center of black culture.<sup>37</sup> The poem “Good Morning” describes the transformation of Harlem from the perspective of a native resident who has “watched Harlem grow / until colored folks spread / from river to river” (*Collected Poems* 426). This growing population of migrants includes not only those who arrive “in buses . . . / from Georgia Florida Louisiana” but those who come “up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica” and on “planes from Puerto Rico.” By including Caribbean im/migrants among the “dark tenth of a nation,” Hughes encourages alliances across some of the internal divisions that marked postwar Harlem. The poem’s celebratory tone turns, however, when the speaker considers the restrictions that have accompanied this growth. “I’ve seen them come dark . . . ,” he states,

out of Penn Station—

but the trains are late.

The gates open—

Yet there’re bars

at each gate.

(427)

In the paradoxical image of gates that are at once open and barred, Hughes illustrates the contradictions of New York economic and housing practices in the 1940s. If New York’s status as the gateway to the American dream is usually signified metonymically by Ellis Island, Penn Station marks an alternative space of arrival, one where the dream is simultaneously promised to and withheld from those who do not enter its narrative through the traditional route. Yet the “bars” that keep the “dream deferred,” including discriminatory housing practices, also helped to make Harlem the “dusky sash across Manhattan” that the poem celebrates. Many observers,

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<sup>37</sup> Though several poems were composed and published earlier, *Montage* as a sequence came together quickly in the summer of 1948 (Rampersad, *Life* 2:151).

including Hughes, warned that the combination of Harlem's restricted geography with its expanding disenfranchised population created highly explosive conditions, of which the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 were only an intimation. In "Good Morning," the explosive potential of "a dream deferred" also takes on more radical connotations, suggesting that such paradoxes, and the new alliances they might foster, could herald a new revolutionary "morning" for the oppressed.

"Good Morning" is one of the last poems in the published print text of *Montage*, but the recording script for "Rhythms of Harlem," like many of Hughes's remastered or republished texts, remixes the original arrangement to create new meanings and effects. The script begins with the final poem of the print edition, "Island," followed by "Good Morning," an arrangement that defines Harlem first and foremost by this racialized geography rather than, for example, as the center of African American musical or literary culture. While vision is the dominant sense in both of these poems, Hughes's and Schwartz's notes in the script to "Rhythms of Harlem" call for the accompanying sounds of trains, airplanes, buses, "boat whistles," "bongo rhythms," "auto horns," "station noises," and "chatter" (Schwartz Collection 154:1). This proposed soundtrack, which picks up on the aural emphasis evident elsewhere in *Montage*, highlights the degree to which the transformation of the urban landscape of New York was also a sonic phenomenon, one that could be heard in the sounds of building construction and demolition, new traffic patterns, new accents, voices, and languages, and the commodities and media—new household appliances, television, hi-fi stereos—that accompanied suburbanization.

While these sounds were objectively a part of the New York soundscape, scholars have increasingly argued that audition, like vision, is a discursively and socially constructed practice. Especially relevant to this discussion of Hughes, Schwartz, and postwar New York is Jennifer

Stoever's Du Boisian concept of the "sonic color-line," which she uses to explicate how rhetoric about sound and dominant norms of listening have historically operated to assign and enforce racial identities and segregated spaces.<sup>38</sup> In "Splicing the Sonic-Color Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar *Nueva York*," Stoever shows how *New York Times* journalists in the 1950s "frequently utilize sound as a stand-in for race" (68), invoking "peace and quiet" and "noise" (63) to disseminate, among other racialized meanings, "the aural stereotype that Puerto Ricans were noisy and loud" while "silence and quiet [became] the province of white suburban identity" (67). The discourse of noise pollution reinforced white panic about immigrant and nonwhite "takeover" of the city, retroactively justifying white flight, discriminatory housing, and slum removal while contributing to a crisis in listening.<sup>39</sup> Stoever persuasively interprets *Nueva York* as attempting to "translat[e] mainstream representations of the so-called homogenous 'noise' of Puerto Rican life into textured, meaningful sound to assimilated (white) Americans" (63). Through "sono-montage," Schwartz "splices the sonic color-line" (63), but he also, Stoever acknowledges, risks replicating it, since the heavily edited final document erases his presence as interviewer while marshaling the interviewees' self-representation into a traditional narrative of successful im/migration (79).

While *Nueva York* might not succeed in fully escaping the "sonic color-line" whose operations in mainstream media Stoever exposes, placing this obscure album in the context of

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<sup>38</sup> Stoever develops the concept of the "sonic color-line" across several articles that examine different nonmusical sound media forms and practices, including tape recording in an article on Schwartz ("Splicing the Sonic Color-Line") and another article on the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* ("Reproducing U.S. Citizenship"), and radio in an article on W. E. B. Du Bois ("Fine Tuning the Sonic Color-line").

<sup>39</sup> The discourse of "noise pollution" was not unique to the postwar period; Lilian Radovac argues that Depression-era antinoise campaigns in New York City "framed noise . . . as a symptom and even a cause of urban disorder" and led to "the reconfiguration of urban space by municipal officials and urban planners as a way to protect the stability of the city's suddenly volatile social relations" (736). Schwartz rejects the discourse of "noise pollution" in *The Responsive Chord*, arguing that cities sound more noisy not because they are demonstrably louder than they used to be, but because lives are increasingly oriented around sounds emanating from telephones, TVs, and radios, reframing street sounds as interference rather than information (140–45).

Schwartz's larger "New York 19" project and alongside a more canonical artist like Hughes helps us to recover the complexity of postwar listening, in which "the mutually constitutive relationship . . . between sound, listening, and race" (62) was not determined but deeply contested and in process. After all, Schwartz was not the only artist to employ techniques of montage as an alternative means through which to represent sound. Schwartz and Hughes both participated in the broader revival and transformation of montage in music, literature, and audio projects beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s. Though montage is primarily associated with the medium of film—and particularly the temporal juxtaposition of visual fragments—with the introduction of magnetic tape and the portable tape recorder after WWII, recorded sound could for the first time be manipulated as easily as film to make new sound documents both in and out of the studio.<sup>40</sup> These innovations in sound recording and editing had a significant impact on postwar culture and their reverberations can be heard in a wide range of cultural objects, from the compositions of John Cage and the "cut-ups" of Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs to electronic music, the popular songs of The Beatles, postwar radio documentary, and advertising.<sup>41</sup>

Interpretations of the title of Hughes's *Montage*, however, have typically done so in reference to early twentieth-century modernist cinema and literature, and often in contrast with

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<sup>40</sup> Even when used to describe literary form, montage and collage usually connote the visual juxtapositions of image, discursive, or narrative fragments. Marjorie Perloff defines both literary montage and collage in relation to "the technological revolution of the late nineteenth century: the mass production of paper and textile products, with the attendant possibilities for splicing film, photographs, and printed materials" ("Collage and Poetry" 385). Though sound recording was also invented at this time, and techniques of montage and collage applied to modernist music and recording, Perloff's definition underlines montage's strong association with visual media.

<sup>41</sup> Schwartz worked in advertising and had a significant impact on the representation of sound in commercial and political advertising; most famous for designing Lyndon Johnson's controversial 1964 "Daisy" presidential ad, he is also credited as the first to use recordings of children's voices rather than adults pretending to be children in advertising. See Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord; Media, the Second God*; "Interview with Tony Schwartz." For more on the impact of tape on postwar radio documentary aesthetics, see Ehrlich; for electronic sound and the postwar advertising industry, see Taylor.

the text's bebop influences.<sup>42</sup> A few early reviewers of the long poem found the “high flown” modernist title in conflict with its jazz sound and Hughes's proper subject matter, “the people's language . . . particularly of the Negro people” (R.Y.E. 384, West 398). More recently, Lesley Wheeler has argued that the title “cues us to watch as well as listen to the poetry” by comparing “the experiments of be-bop . . . to the discontinuities of experimental film” (82). James Edward Smethurst, arguing that Hughes's 1940s works “attempt to create a ‘usable’ African-American ‘neomodernist’ poetry,” excavates the political connotations of montage by highlighting its association with “the more politically radical side of international 1920s artistic modernism” (*New Red Negro* 144, 162). Without discounting the significant modernist resonances of the term *montage* for Hughes, I contend that by considering *Montage of a Dream Deferred* in relation to contemporaneous experiments in fragmenting and recombining voice and sound, we can better situate Hughes's poem not as a belated modernist work but as a distinctly postwar document, and one particularly attuned to the problems of listening.

From its first lines, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is a manual for listening to a city changed and changing under the effects of postwar economics, politics, and technologies on racialized geographies. The repeated imperative in “Dream Boogie,” the first poem in the published text, to “Listen closely,” suggests that the sonic space into which we have entered—of the jazz club, Harlem, even the poem itself—requires new forms of audition to make sense of its fast-moving cuts and ambivalent significations (*Collected Poems* 388). What we are to listen for is no secret, though. The first stanza of “Dream Boogie” tells us exactly what we are to hear: “Ain't you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?” The stanzas that follow then tune and test our ears and eyes for this bass line “rumble”:

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<sup>42</sup> Janet Neigh is the only scholar I know of to interpret the title in reference to “a recorded montage of sounds as found in radio plays” (276).

Listen closely:

You'll hear their feet

Beating out and beating out a—

*You think*

*It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:

Ain't you heard

something underneath

like a—

*What did I say?*

Since we already know *what* is “underneath” the boogie-woogie beat, these stanzas illustrate, through the performance of deferral, *where* and *how* we should listen for it. The movement from “Listen closely: / You'll hear” to the past-tense “Ain't you heard” a few lines later cuts the instant where the “boogie-woogie rumble” would sound, forcing the reader to attend instead to its reverberations before and after. One of those reverberations comes through the interruptive voice of another speaker, who challenges our interpretation of the “rumble” we haven't fully heard: “*You think / It's a happy beat?*” In this moment of dispersed and deferred sound, the “rumble” is identified as “feet / [b]eating”—an image that will return throughout *Montage* and

that also takes on menacing, prophetic connotations of barely submerged rage and militant, potentially revolutionary action.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout *Montage*, juxtaposition, polyvocality, fragmentation, and other techniques associated with montage as well as bebop plunge us into the discontinuous experience of postwar Harlem, but they also direct us toward specific ways of comprehending that experience, teaching readers both in and beyond Harlem to listen for the effects of the continued oppression and exploitation of African Americans that has “deferred” America’s democratic promise of equality and freedom. In *Montage*, deferral is a motif and a formal strategy that enacts a poetic “Signifyin(g)” on the trope of the dream; ambivalent statements like “Sure, / I’m happy! / Take it away!” (388) poetically perform the “double-voicedness” that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorizes as central to black vernacular culture and literature. In directing readers to attend to what is at once past and still to come, though, Hughes emphasizes not just doubleness or ambivalence but the temporal and spatial connotations of deferral. He employs strategies of poetic montage to materialize the ways in which listening, intertwined with technologies and discourses of sound, orders our experience of time and space—and how that experience might be ordered differently. Deferred listening, the term I use to describe the new aural strategies of *Montage*, extends the significations of deferral in the motif of the “dream deferred” to the poem’s exhortation for its readers to “Listen closely” to the voices and sounds of an emergent Harlem. By insisting that the

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<sup>43</sup> As Benjamin R. Lempert notes, these “feet / [b]eating” are also poetic feet, calling attention to the formal metrics of the lines themselves, which Lempert interprets as imitative in their use of a poetic adaptation of 4/4 time similar to boogie-woogie rhythm (309). Lempert’s reading departs from mine in his assertion that the poem’s “conceit” is that poetic formal imitation of musical style or rhythm “makes the experience of reading identical to that of hearing” and thus “to effectively do away with poetry’s materiality qua poetry” (309). In contrast, I’m arguing that *hearing* as an undifferentiated, transparent experience of immediacy is exactly what is called into question by the poem, and the jazz tradition upon which Hughes draws; in my analysis, Hughes uses the specificity of poetry as a written and oral form to perform deferral as part of the experiences of reading and listening.

effects of the “dream deferred” are still undetermined, Hughes amplifies a radical, potentially revolutionary temporality in the gap between sound and its apprehension.

Perhaps nothing for Hughes revealed Harlem’s crisis in listening—or its potential cure—quite like the appearance and reception of bebop. Hughes’s insistence in *Montage* that comprehension must come through the ear is not only figurative; it reflects Hughes’s lifelong belief in the power of popular jazz to overcome physical, racial, and cultural boundaries and foster collective action among initiated listeners. Seismic shifts in the world of jazz, however, must have posed serious challenges to this belief. If, as Hughes proclaimed in his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, “[a] good Dixieland stomp can break down almost any language barriers” and Louis Armstrong’s horn could encourage “spontaneous friendships” anywhere in the world (114), bebop’s seemingly aggressive insularity and modernist experimentation made conflict its governing ethos.<sup>44</sup> As Eric Lott claims, bebop’s “relationship to earlier styles was one of calculated hostility” that provoked backlash from black as well as white jazz audiences, critics, and older musicians—including Armstrong—many of whom denounced the wild sounds that emerged from clubs like Minton’s Playhouse as threatening to the very ontology of jazz (“Double V, Double-Time” 602).

The crisis in listening provoked by bebop (and its associated styles of speech, dress, and social relations) also reflected the music’s ambiguous politics and relationship to wartime Harlem, which, in Lott’s phrasing, “attempted to resolve at the level of style what militancy combatted in the streets” (509). Hughes, through his *Chicago Defender* character Jesse B.

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<sup>44</sup> Ralph Ellison, to whom *Montage* is dedicated and whose interpretation of bebop influenced Hughes, argued that bop’s complexity and emphasis on solo virtuosity “sprang partially from [the musicians’] desire to create a jazz which could not be so easily imitated and exploited by white musicians to whom the market was more open simply *because* of their whiteness,” and through this new style to carve and defend a niche *within* rather than outside the marketplace (“Golden Age” 366).

Simple (or “Simple”), also situated bebop’s “nonsense” in the “dark days” of police brutality, worsening slum conditions, riots, and the exploitation of black musicians (“Bop” 228). In one darkly comic tale, for example, Simple asserts to his skeptical and uninitiated interlocutor that bebop’s sounds and even its name mimic the absurdity and aggression of police violence: “Every time a cop hits a Negro with a billy, that old stick says *BOP! BOP!!*” “Be-bop,” Simple states, is “beaten out of some poor Negro’s head into these horns and saxophones, and guitars and piano keys that plays it.” By locating the source of bebop’s “noise” in the oppressive social conditions of “slum-shocked” Harlem, and in the very sounds of white violence on black bodies, Hughes counters hysterical representations of bebop in mainstream media as a corrupting influence on white youth while offering an alternative narrative of bebop’s relationship to racial conflict.

Throughout *Montage*, Hughes works to legitimize bebop as a site of resistance for a wide audience—much as he worked to legitimize the blues as authentic black folk expression in his early poetry—by linking bebop to more traditional sites of black expression and activism: social clubs (“Parade” [388–89]); street corner oratory (“Corner Meeting” [403]); the church (“Mystery” [416]); and the marketplace (“Deferred” [413–14], “Same in Blues” [427–28]). In adopting what Ralph Ellison calls bebop’s “texture of fragments,” “melodic lines underground, secret and taunting,” and “rhythms . . . out of stride and seemingly arbitrary” (“Golden Age” 203), Hughes also draws on bebop’s own sonic performance of deferral, its insistence on new practices of musical listening, and the communities of initiates that formed around its novel musical reinterpretation of temporality, memory, and sound. As Ellison argued from the vantage point of 1959, in the “chaos” of bebop’s sound, “the steady flow of memory . . . summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood swept like a great river from its old, deep bed” (203). The capacity of listeners to “recognize the old moods in the new sounds,” however, was only

“becoming” in the 1940s. In Hughes’s analysis, those who hear in bebop only meaningless noise or youth rebellion fail to apprehend the music’s connection to other changing and emergent counterpublic spheres engaged in redefining what Harlem *will have been* for an as yet unrealized future.

Hughes’s insistence throughout *Montage* that we must (re)learn to listen reveals the extent to which bebop, and Harlem more generally, are still misheard and misunderstood. Individuals who cannot or will not listen appear throughout the poem, indicating that this crisis is as much endemic to Harlem as it is projected onto it, and emerges out of very old divisions of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and generation that were rapidly taking on new configurations in the postwar moment. As Peter Brooker argues, *Montage* proposes “a homology between jazz composition and the relation of the individual to the social collective in the new modern city” that can be seen in the poem’s representation of speech through monologue, dialogue, and choral forms (244). *Montage* is not unique in this regard; Hughes often employed dramatic forms of recitation, choral speaking, dialogue, and monologue in dramatic poetic works of the 1930s and early 1940s that sought to represent forms of collective action and identity.<sup>45</sup> As Smethurst argues, Hughes’s work of this period crafts a voice that “is not that of the individual narratorial consciousness, but of a simultaneously unitary and multiple urban community” (*New Red Negro* 94). In *Montage*, however, this “simultaneously unitary and multiple” voice is significantly more divided and strained than the expansive communal “I” that speaks in poems like “Freedom Train.”

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<sup>45</sup> Examples in this style include “The Colored Soldier” (1931), “Open Letter to the South” (1932), *Scottsboro, Limited* (1931), *Don’t You Want to Be Free?* (1938), and “Freedom Train” (1947). “Freedom Train” was included in the first edition of *Montage*.

In thwarted attempts at dialogue—like “Dime,” where “*Grandma acts like / She ain’t heard*” (*Collected Poems* 420)—or through the juxtaposition of different voices within and between poems, the poems’ speakers often appear to be talking past each other, highlighting the need for a critical listening practice that would bridge conflicts between men and women, old and young, migrants and natives, and laborers and derelicts by attending to a shared exposure to economic and racial oppression. “Lady’s Boogie,” for example, offers a portrait of the stereotypically upwardly mobile Harlemit who “ain’t got boogie-woogie / on her mind” and thus misses an opportunity to listen, and ally herself with, the suffering of the neighborhood (412). Yet while the interruptive last line of the poem—“*Be-Bach!*”—mocks the lady, suggesting that even “if she was to listen” she would probably still mishear by translating bop into the more respectable Bach, it also uses this mocking tone to entertain the possibility that bop *could* ally itself with Bach on the streets of Harlem.

Indeed, it already has; the college-aged speaker of “Theme for English B” wishes for “records—Bessie, bop, or Bach” (410), suggesting that younger generations might be especially capable of overcoming cultural divisions, spinning records that cross musical genres, tastes, and centuries together on one turntable. Such hopes are tempered, however, by the student’s doubts about his white instructor’s ability to “hear” him, and his own strained effort to listen to the city: “Harlem, I hear you: / hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page. / (I hear New York, too.) Me—who?” (409–10). These lines mimic the repetitive “nonsense” of bebop lingo and lyrics to enact the deferral of the collective *we* that would connect “me” and “you,” black student and white teacher, Harlem and the rest of New York, and speech and writing. If the voices of *Montage* largely struggle to understand why “*my dream*” has been “deferred / overlong” (396), the reverberations of the “dream deferred” across the poetic sequence puts

pressure on that sense of isolation by situating that “*my*” within a larger *our*. Yet the effects of the belated, unrealized dream, in particular on a generation that seems destined to be defined as *post*, raise significant challenges to the formation of collectivity. Many African Americans of Hughes’s generation must have felt intense frustration and despair in the immediate postwar years as the marketing of the American dream collided with the persistence of Jim Crow segregation, new legally sanctioned forms of discrimination in housing, employment, and education, and growing poverty and violence in restricted and overpopulated black urban neighborhoods. The apparently endlessly belated realization of centuries of struggle for equality—most recently articulated in the wartime campaign for “Double V”—also led some to project that frustration onto the younger generations, who appeared not only ill-equipped to realize those dreams but hopelessly cynical, escapist, and iconoclastic.

The divide between older and younger generations is only one of the many social divisions cataloged in *Montage*, but it points to Hughes’s larger interrogation of the specificity of the postwar moment, the meaning of deferral for an imagination of black futurity, and the challenge new forms of music and speech issued to dominant practices of listening. In “Children’s Rhymes,” for example, an older resident directs us to “listen at them little varmints!” (390), but what we “hear” above all is his or her failure to empathize with or recognize the resigned cynicism of the children’s songs, which express a precocious defeatism that is particular to the moment in which they have been born:

Some of these young ones is cert’ly bad—

One batted a hard ball right through my window

and my gold fish et the glass.

*What's written down  
for white folks  
ain't for us a-tall:  
"Liberty and Justice—  
Huh—For All."*

*Oop-pop-a-da!  
Skee! Daddle-de-do!  
Be-bop!*

The sudden interjection of bebop scat into this scene of generational misunderstanding suggests that bebop's fusion of childlike play and cynicism into what sounds like meaningless noise is likewise misunderstood and may take on more radical significations for initiated listeners. The childhood accident of batting a baseball through a neighbor's window, for example, echoes in this context the shattering storefront windows during the Harlem riot or Hughes's own description of bebop's own shattering sound: "Mirror-go-round / where a broken glass / in the early bright / smears re-bop / sound" (397). Like many observers, Hughes understood both bebop and the 1943 Harlem riot as forms of youth rebellion to which he was more an observer than a participant; this did not mean, however, that they should therefore be dismissed as youthful excess.<sup>46</sup> Always attentive to the voices of the young, Hughes understood early on that the younger generations signaled the emergence of a new "structure of feeling" particular to the contradictory and inequitable social conditions of postwar society (Williams 128–35). By

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<sup>46</sup> Hughes argued repeatedly, against many other commentators in both black and white press outlets, that the 1943 riot was the inevitable result of "slum-shock" from economic and racial injustice in Harlem. See, for example, the editorial "Down Under in Harlem"; the story "Ways and Means"; the poem "The Ballad of Margie Polite" (*Collected Poems* 282–83); and the unaired radio play *Pvt. Jim Crow*.

developing readers' capacity to listen for deferred sounds and significations—and to situate themselves within that unresolved experience of deferral in which the younger generations of Harlem already live—Hughes opens the specter of an undetermined “tomorrow” that remains always on the poem's horizon.

Through this poem, and its attention to children's speech, we might return to Schwartz, who also responded to a larger crisis in listening by attending in particular to how the young navigated the sounds of their city. While Hughes encourages us in *Montage* to listen to bebop's childish play as expressions of deferred futurity specific to the postwar conditions of Harlem that both threaten and promise a coming explosion, Schwartz's representations of children seek to overcome racialized stereotypes about the noise of urban space by amplifying the affective registers of nostalgia and innocence associated with childhood. In *New York 19*, an album named for Schwartz's larger tape recording project, a composition simply titled “Children” uses montage to represent the way that children remix a diverse set of cultural forms in their play, and to advocate for similar strategies of remixing aural experience of space, time, and social relations in public space. “Children” is a sono-montage of excerpts from six separate recordings that previously appeared on the albums *1, 2, 3 and a Zing Zing Zing* and *Nueva York*; the first four excerpts are of rhymes and songs from children's games, and the final two are longer selections of teenage drum circles.

To my ear, the sequential ordering of these fragmented and spliced recordings primes listeners to confront and reassess their own biases about the “noise” of children and, in particular, adolescents who occupy New York's urban neighborhoods. The liner notes for *New York 19* especially stress the “mixed” make-up of children's play in the city: “Negro and white, of Puerto Rican, Italian, Irish, Jewish and other national backgrounds, play together in the

streets, backyards and play centers.” Encouraging his listeners to likewise reject prejudice, Schwartz excludes details about the identities of his anonymous young performers beyond age and sometimes location in the liner notes—an effect even more pronounced in the recording, where the fast cuts and absence of narration beyond a very brief introduction by Schwartz (“Children, on and off the streets”) collapse time and space to draw parallels between the different sounds. Schwartz’s sono-montage technique, much as in *Nueva York*, helps him “to navigate across the sonic color-line” by encouraging “listeners to become aware of how much they use sound to determine a speaker’s identity” in ways that reproduce assumptions about essentialized racial, ethnic, and class difference, even when listening to children (Stoever-Ackerman, “Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 73, 75). At the same time, Schwartz’s method of recombining sounds from different places and times to create a new sound document parallels the hybrid nature of children’s culture, suggesting that the latter offers a model for overcoming seemingly entrenched social divisions.

From the first seconds of “Children,” play is represented as intrinsically communal, loud, and part of the nuanced texture of New York’s urban soundscape that *New York 19* documents. The montage begins with the sounds of a group of children clapping and calling out names as they play the familiar circle game, “Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?” while another child practices a bugle in what is acoustically recognizable as an outdoor, urban space. The next three excerpts feature smaller groups and games, but from these classic playground sounds the recording moves to new sonic territory in its final two excerpts of percussionist play by groups of older youth, which together take up more than half of the piece’s 3:42 running time. Placing drum circles unexpectedly in the context of children’s play, Schwartz draws sonic parallels with the percussive and repetitive sounds of clapping, skipping rope, bouncing balls, and rhyme heard

earlier. In doing so, he recontextualizes and domesticates the sounds of the city's drum circles, which, as Stoeber notes in her analysis of *Nueva York*, were frequently invoked in public discourse as part of the “threatening noise” of Puerto Rican and African American neighborhoods (“Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 76). Instead, Schwartz invites listeners to attend with interest, curiosity, and above all sympathy to the drum circles as expressions of innocent childish play, improvisation, and cross-cultural exchange. Typical of what David Suisman calls Schwartz’s “little-recognized iconoclasm, his polite radicalism,” Schwartz advocates here a form of “listen[ing] to the city with a benevolent catholicity” that “both called attention to and disturbed the social and cultural boundaries that were becoming, in the postwar years, increasingly reified” (“Listening to the City” n. pag.).

Schwartz’s construction of the sympathetic ear is especially evident in the inclusion and framing of the drummer’s voice that closes “Children”—the only voice, besides Schwartz’s in the brief introduction, that isn’t reciting a rhyme but instead speaks extemporaneously. As the musical sounds fade out, a young man speaks:

about five, ten minutes I be playing, you know, it doesn’t, you know, it doesn’t suit me, then, you know. But after a while, about fifteen minutes, twenty minutes playing, well I start, you know, feeling good, you know, and then I be able to bring out a few more beats better than the others. It brings a good feeling to me, . . . I know that. After a while, it brings a good feeling.

(Schwartz, *New York 19*)<sup>47</sup>

By including the percussionist’s own explanation of his reasons for playing—rather than providing, for example, a voice-over interpretation—Schwartz makes space for voices rarely

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<sup>47</sup> The transcription from the audio recording is my own, as it is elsewhere unless otherwise noted.

heard in mainstream media, and in so doing attaches sounds that might otherwise be heard as the “noise” of racial and economic others to individuals and, in this context, to an individual child. The young man’s description of the “good feeling” he gets from playing counters representations of such sounds as threatening, and moreover elicits sympathy by implying that this “good feeling” ameliorates the harsh effects of urban poverty. This implication is supported by the liner notes, which draw attention to the ad-hoc instruments used by the youthful percussionists in the closing excerpt: “These teen-agers were using one bongo drum, several chairs, a long wide wooden bench, metal waste baskets, several sticks and an empty Pepsi-Cola bottle.”

Additionally, the liner notes subtly place these sounds within New York’s shifting spatialization of poverty and race, locating the very first circle game “in a yard created by the demolition of a building on west 52nd Street” and the last recording “in the basement of a housing project apartment.” If we trace the excerpted recordings on “Children” to their appearance on other albums, this geography becomes even clearer: the liner notes to *1, 2, 3 and a Zing Zing Zing* indicate that nearly all of the *New York 19* recordings of children were made at housing project play centers, while *Nueva York*, which features the first drum circle on a more extended track, identifies its players as a group of Puerto Rican youth whose version of street mambo draws voyeuristic contempt from passersby (Stoever-Ackerman, “Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 76–78). Thus, as is typical of Schwartz’s records, the seeming lack of intervention by Schwartz as documenter in this moment is countered by the heavy framing produced through montage and in relation to paratexts like the liner notes.

It is here that we might begin to see the ambivalence of Schwartz’s “sono-montage,” which while using montage to circumnavigate biased preconceptions also redeploys aspects of the “sonic color-line” to teach an assumed audience of white, middle-class listeners to

sympathetically listen to the sounds of African American, Puerto Rican, and low-income neighborhoods. Yet as he seeks to translate these sounds into expressions of a modern American hybrid folk culture, he also assumes that this culture is endangered and that his audience is not exactly of it; they are, after all, listening to these sounds on a record rather than in their own streets. With the postwar reorientation of children's play around commodities (through the introduction, for example, of children's media like Schwartz's albums) and the segregation of the metropolis (supported in part by Robert Moses's role in designing new public housing and play centers), "mixed" play among children of different races and classes in the streets of the city must have increasingly seemed more a liberal utopian dream than a given reality.<sup>48</sup> As Schwartz stated in an interview conducted in 1985, "the records I did were really the end of an era" that in his view ended because of a shift in public interest from "external sound" to the "internal sound" associated with the mediatized space of the private home ("Interview" n. pag.). *New York 19* as a whole seeks to document the sounds of a particular place and time, but in doing so also adopts the assumptions of salvage ethnography as it mourns a moment that it imagines is quickly passing and sounds that will, like the 9th Avenue El discussed on the following track, be heard only in the memory of residents and archival recordings. As *New York 19* fades from the sounds of drumming to the earsplitting sounds of street drilling, Schwartz transforms the drum circles from threatening to threatened urban sounds, and frames demolition as a highly audible form of silencing.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, he transforms through montage what should represent futurity—the sounds of an emerging generation—into an already receding past.

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<sup>48</sup> See Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word* (13–48) and Cohen (319–20) on the commodification and mediatization of children's play during this period. For discussions of Moses's role in developing the geography of play in New York City, see Biondi, "Robert Moses, Race, and the Limits of an Activist State"; and Gutman.

<sup>49</sup> Stoever discusses Schwartz's protest of the "clearance" of low-income neighborhoods in San Juan Hill and Lincoln Square to construct Lincoln Center, which reveals his developing sensitivity toward the "silencing" that

By using montage to interrogate the ways in which we interpret sound, and representations of children's play to investigate how assumptions about urban noise reinforce the conditions that reproduce poverty and social inequality, Schwartz's albums record not only the sounds of the drum or the drummer but an experience of listening. *New York 19* is, in a sense, a portrait of the aural *flâneur* who navigates and appreciates the city through its variety of sonic stimuli—a portrait, perhaps, of the largely silent presence of Schwartz and his recording device. Schwartz's method of sympathetic listening notably avoids “the spectacle of suffering” that Saidiya V. Hartman critiques in abolitionist literature (19), and that was also characteristic of the photo and film montage style of social documentaries of the 1930s and 1940s, but that does not mean that it escapes the “slipperiness of empathy” (Hartman 18). Instead, the listener's projection of his or her subjectivity as the one who listens sympathetically to the voices and sounds of economic others threatens to supplant those very individuals. Moreover, Schwartz's domestication of drum circles as the “feel good” expressions of children's play empties them of other potential significations, including those that Hughes heard in the games of Harlem's children and the fast bopping and also racially mixed sounds of contemporary jazz. That does not mean, however, that we can't choose to listen differently. If we listen instead as Hughes instructs, Schwartz's recordings open possibilities for alternative interpretations, through which we might hear in the “good feeling” of one man's improvisational drumming a note of the “dream deferred” that Hughes heard in bebop as masked rage (“Sure, / I'm happy!” [*Collected Poems* 388]) or, in “Flatted Fifths,” as exotic, escapist flights of fancy (404).<sup>50</sup>

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could accompany demolition and the construction of enclosed, privileged forms of entertainment (“Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 70–71).

<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Hughes sampled Schwartz's recording of the housing project drum circle on his children's record, *The Story of Jazz*, also released on Folkways in 1954. Appearing near the end of the LP, the drum circle recording is framed through Hughes's narration as an example of the contemporary resonances of African and African American rhythmic folk musical traditions, ingenuity and resilience in conditions of oppression, and spontaneous

Splicing Schwartz with Hughes also helps us to identify a fierce struggle over contested public space, revealing how the young musicians “tried to make themselves visible and audible in defiant violation of white cultural norms concerning privacy, propriety, and ‘peace and quiet’” (Stoever-Ackerman, “Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” 77). In *Montage*, representations of parades and funeral marches show how these public performances radically remap the relationship between Harlem and the rest of the city, directing us in practices of deferred listening that might help us navigate and activate sound’s movement across physical, social, and psychic borders. Sound’s ability to travel far beyond its source and exceed physical boundaries has made it “an instrument of oppositional consciousness” in many struggles over literal and imagined geographies of power (Wald 674). In Hughes’s poem “Parade,” a march by the Harlem Elks Club performs a visual and sonic spectacle of blackness that far exceeds the de facto borders of Harlem. The power and threat “solid black” poses to segregated urban spaces provokes another parade of state-sponsored repression:

Motorcycle cops,  
 white,  
 will speed it  
 out of sight  
 if they can:  
 Solid black,  
 can’t be right.

(*Collected Poems* 389)

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improvisational “fun”: “Boys making up their own music—just like the old-timers did in long-ago New Orleans—improvising just for fun” (liner notes). Hughes’s narrative refrain in the album that jazz is “just for fun” resonates with the double-voiced irony of “Sure, / I’m happy!”

The rhyme, unique in the poem to this stanza, draws attention to the assumed association of whiteness, vision, and rightness only to undermine its authority (“if they can”) in the production of the counter-image of “solid black.” This counter-image is accompanied by a counter-sound, but not, as we might expect, a representation of the blare of a marching band. The absence of music becomes even more striking if we compare this poem to Schwartz’s sono-montage of 5th Avenue parades on *Music in the Streets* (1957), which revels in the deafening, festive sounds of horns, drums, and chants that perennially take over the street.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Hughes’s directs us again to the deferred rhythms of “marching . . . marching . . . / marching . . .” feet, and the voices, whispered and shouted, of both parade participants and voyeurs who are linked by the spectacle.

*I never knew  
that many Negroes  
were on earth,  
did you?*

*I never knew!*

## PARADE!

A chance to let

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<sup>51</sup> Performance scripts for an undated “poetry-to-jazz” performance of “Parade” also offer an interesting perspective on the published version of this poem, as instrumental notes indicate that the band would alternate between “When the Saints Go Marching In” and percussion sequences played at a slower tempo, the latter of which corresponds to the poem’s description of marching feet (Hughes Papers 7160).

PARADE!

the whole world see

PARADE!

old black me!

(389)

By making visible and audible New York's sizable and diverse African American population, the Elks parade also makes visible and audible the city's streets and public spaces as sites of constant contestation and struggle, denaturalizing segregation by exposing it as uneven, incomplete, and imposed only by repressive force. In actuality, the parade is neither "solid black" nor solid white—the parade's Grand Marshal wears a "white suit" after all—but is an occasion where different representational maps of the city come into contact and conflict. Supported by the interruptive discontinuity of the poem's form, the undercurrent of sound in Hughes's representation of the parade defers and proliferates meaning across the poem and, by analogy, across the streets of New York.

The repetitive march of feet pounding the pavement "noon till night" (389) in "Parade" also recalls Hughes's frequently used trope of weariness, and as the triumphant march of Harlem's "dignitaries" warps into the nighttime funeral marches of "Dead in There" (399) and "Night Funeral in Harlem" (419–20), we're reminded that *Montage* is concerned not only with the hyper-visual performance of dignified protest but with the more ambivalent sights and signs of Harlem—like the pomp and circumstance lavished on memorializing the alarmingly frequent

deaths of young black men. While the parade challenges the segregated geography of New York City, the excess of bop funerals challenge the exclusions, assumptions, and social hierarchies within Harlem—though it's unclear what “diff” such performances finally make for the marginalized lower-class that lays out for them (399). If the nighttime spectacle of the funeral has anything in common with the daytime spectacle of the parade that is its mirror image, it's that both make visible and audible in public spaces violence perpetrated against people of color and a struggle over competing forms of representation. In this, they point forward to what Houston A. Baker, Jr. theorizes as the revolutionary act of “critical memory” performed by the civil rights movement and, in particular, by Martin Luther King, Jr., who “made fully visible and audible the black public sphere” (“Critical Memory” 16) by “transform[ing] the invisible deprivations of black day-to-day life into a national *scene*” and “national media *spectacle*” (21) through “an aesthetics of *montage*” (22). Hughes's *Montage* also insists on listening especially for the invisible and inaudible deprivations of the frequently maligned, ignored, and misrepresented expressions of the black lower classes. Hughes thus challenges his African American readers to attend to the way the “sonic color-line” informs the way they hear and dismiss the suffering in their own neighborhoods as so much noise.

Hughes and Schwartz splice public representations of the incomprehensible noise of the city with the speech and expressive sound of those individuals associated with and constructed by that noise in efforts to “translat[e] the ‘nonsense’ of emergent counterpublic expressive forms into a language of utopian possibility” (Lowney 127). The contrast that I've drawn between Hughes's and Schwartz's models of listening, however, hinges on their divergent conceptions of the urban neighborhood as a site of that “utopian possibility.” In Schwartz's montages, the act of recording transforms a postal region into a neighborhood, and that neighborhood into a figure for

the inherent multiculturalism of New York, the United States, and ultimately modernity itself as a McLuhan-esque “global village.”<sup>52</sup> For Schwartz, electronic forms of communication like the tape recorder create “the possibility of re-establishing autonomous local communities” threatened by suburbanization and segregation in part by redefining what autonomy and localism mean (Schwartz, *Responsive Chord* 149). Just as *New York 19* is not limited to sounds recorded in New York and includes excerpts from tapes mailed to Schwartz from all over the world, and just as the im/migrant residents of New York bring their culture and language with them to the city, so too are all listeners invited to project themselves into Schwartz’s neighborhood through the act of consuming his audio documentaries. Schwartz’s representation of the urban neighborhood as a last bastion of liberal progressivism, multiculturalism, and meaningful local community—an image that would later circulate in children’s television programs like *Sesame Street*—crafts a powerful, progressive alternative to the mainstream media’s construction of white middle-class identity through the image of the suburban family home as a space of private, domestic quiet.

This tendency toward an inclusive multiculturalism in which Schwartz’s sympathetic model of listening participates, however, ultimately lacks a more developed critique of the ways in which neighborhoods are also formed through discriminatory exclusions—as Hughes’s *Montage* and the opening plan for “Rhythms of Harlem” amplifies. In contrast, Hughes represents Harlem as, in Brooker’s words, “a stratified and permeable heteropolis, experienced simultaneously as an autonomous but dependent, and in significant ways subordinate community within the metropolis” (237). This situates Harlem as a specific site of local black activism that

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<sup>52</sup> Schwartz’s works of media theory, *The Responsive Chord* and *Media, the Second God*, show the heavy influence of Marshall McLuhan on Schwartz’s view of how different communication technologies have impacted human cognition and perception, social organization, and history, and how new electronic communication technologies are superseding print and visual culture to create a new “global village.”

also necessarily exceeds the de facto borders of Harlem's racialized geography precisely because the "sonic color-line" that helps to produce those borders is never fully complete or totalizing, and thus always itself deferred. Hughes adopts bebop's own example of "sono-montage" to remap the relationship between the local, the national, and the transnational by exposing the uneven and unequal effects of racist, capitalist, and global modernity even within the restricted "island" of Harlem. Hughes also addresses a plural audience made up of those discordant publics and counterpublics divided by uneven and unequal effects of power that are already actively engaged in listening to and translating the sounds of Harlem. By initiating these readers into new practices of deferred listening attuned in particular to those forms of emergent black expression that they might most frequently mishear, ignore, or silence, *Montage* makes audible the politics of listening that shape but do not determine how neighborhoods are formed as imagined communities and by whom.

By disseminating their new approaches to listening through recorded sound and literary publishing, Hughes and Schwartz invite a national audience of listener-readers to participate in the imagined community of a virtual, urban "neighborhood" that would counter the national construction of suburbia—with its restriction and silencing of minority voices and bodies—as the future of local community in the U.S. Sound, as Gayle Wald argues, has been an important "tool in struggles over space, including spaces that symbolize the nation," because "the cooperative enterprise of listening . . . can have the powerful effect of 'binding' subjects together through shared affect" (675). Yet Wald's analysis of the affective "vibrations" produced by live black musical performance raises questions about how far those "vibrations" can travel and who can participate in "the cooperative enterprise of listening." Do strategies of deferred or sympathetic listening extend beyond the pages of Hughes's text and the grooves of Schwartz's albums onto

actual city streets or to those listeners who live far from New York? What kind of knowledge is produced through the commercial circulation of *New York 19* as a specific, local soundscape in the context of Folkways Records' larger catalog of global folk music and life? How does Hughes's remediation of his poetry in multiple print, performance, and recorded forms—including on Folkways LPs—alter and condition the way his work and persona were received?

These are the questions to which I turn in the next chapter, where I investigate how soundings of Hughes's voice traveled far beyond New York City in print, performance, recordings, and broadcast media, and how Folkways Records constructed and marketed that voice within its larger catalog of folk sound and in the context of the civil rights movement, the “red scare,” and the folk revival. To borrow Lorenzo Thomas's phrasing, to study Hughes in his vexed position as the representative voice of African American folk experience requires attention to “the technical quality of both *recording* and *playback*” (217). This applies to Hughes's attempt to record and replay black vernacular speech, sound, and music in the print and oral forms of literature and lyric poetry. But it also points to the contexts of playback in which Hughes's literary and recorded voice(s) have so often echoed in narratives of American national identity. In the next chapter, I move from New York in the late 1940s to a more ambient national crisis in listening in 1950s, from recorded sound as a documentary medium to its status as commodity, and from poetry as a predominantly print to an oral and multimedia form. As Folkways Records published Hughes's spoken word albums and Schwartz's “New York 19” documentary montages—and, by extension, the models of listening that both propose and perform—within its larger folk catalog, Hughes's recorded voice entered a competitive public sphere in which circulated differing notions of authentic sound, racial identity, and citizenship in the Cold War context of the 1950s.

This broader desire for collective forms of audition, however, takes place within a “hi-fi” era where new technologies and aesthetics of recorded sound increasingly worked to isolate the individual listener, reframing the consumption of recorded sound as a subjective, internal experience (Bergh and DeNora). Folkways Records, and its artists and audiences, play in the grooves of these contradictions. Before moving to them, though, and cycling back to the summer of 1948, it’s worth emphasizing that for both Hughes and Schwartz listening is primarily a communal and social rather than individual act: a perceptual apparatus for interacting in lived social space. For scholars of American literary and cultural history, a more nuanced understanding of the contested culture of listening in the postwar and Cold War United States has the potential to challenge the perception of this era as dominated by visual culture and silence; it also, however, encourages us to critically interrogate contemporary practices of listening to minority voices and urban soundscapes. By attending especially to those literary and multimedia artworks that seek new, creative forms through which to splice aural experience, such approaches might likewise point to new perceptual strategies for remapping radical collectivity in the diverse and unequal, local and nonlocal, real and virtual neighborhoods in which we live.



Rendering the folklorists' desire to "CAPTURE" the "WHISPERS" (507) emanating from "THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" (508) indistinguishable from the big game hunter's desire to bag the rare beast and the colonialist's desire to civilize by conquering, Hughes indicts the racist primitivism that continues to locate the origin of black culture in an ahistorical, undifferentiated myth of Africa. As "ILLUSIVE" and elusive "AS A SILVER UNICORN," however, the "WHISPERS" remain "UNANALYZED UNECHOED / UNTAKEN"—and therefore free, autonomous, and alive—despite the collectors' arsenal of sensitive microphones, portable tape recorders, and detailed fieldnotes that would master the sound as either codified knowledge or commodity (507).

Hughes's attention to the specific technologies used by folklorists reflects the close relationship between recording technologies, modern ethnography, and primitivism.<sup>53</sup> As Meta DuEwa Jones argues in her astute analysis of this poem, Hughes "signifies on the ethnographic and transnational technologies by which the sounds and scripts of a folkloric essence were systemized" (65) and the "codifying procedures" that "not only 'captured' but also changed and contained black improvisatory eloquence" (66).

Yet in the poem, blackness resists, and it does so with what Fred Moten describes as the "dispossessive force" of the object or the commodity that screams and "SHOUTS," that irrupts into the recording with a "phonic materiality" that cuts (1). "TACIT," Hughes instructs in the script for musical performance in the right column, cutting the as-yet-unsounded (because written) music with the "phonic materiality" of a silence that sings by way of deferral—"not yet"—the sequence's leitmotif, the "Hesitation Blues." While Asch and Lomax are brought into this space of hesitation and deferral, they fail to understand what they will not hear. By contrast, Hughes attunes his own poetic recording to the revolutionary (and comedic) timing of those deferred

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<sup>53</sup> See Brady on the vexed meaning of phonography to the codification of modern ethnography, anthropology, and folklore as academic sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

notes and notes of deferral that are sounded, circulated, and heard within diasporic black popular cultures. He attends to what “black improvisatory eloquence” (Jones 66) carries not from the mythic oral purity of Africa to the miscegenated mass culture of Western modernity but “*FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE QUARTER / . . . TO THE FARTHEREST CORNERS*” of global capitalism. *Ask Your Mama* expands and amplifies *Montage of a Dream Deferred*’s intervention in listening by performing deferral as an aural inscription of blackness.

The poetic speaker’s ironic astonishment that “NOT EVEN FOLKWAYS” can catch this sound, repeated twice in “Is It True?,” both mocks the recording label and implicitly credits it as one of the most established and persistent documenters of “the folk.” Hughes would know: despite his critical portrait of Folkways Records in *Ask Your Mama*, he released several LPs with the independent label and maintained a more than twenty-year close acquaintance with Moses Asch that lasted from the mid-1940s until Hughes’s death in 1967.<sup>54</sup> The Folkways albums on which Hughes appeared or to which he contributed include recordings of his poetry and short stories such as *Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes* (1952) and *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1955); anthologies of recorded literature such as the *Anthology of Negro Poetry* (1954); educational children’s records such as *The Story of Jazz* (1954), *Rhythms of the World* (1955), and *The Glory of Negro History* (1955); and songs and scenes from dramatic productions of *Tambourines to Glory* (1958) and *Jericho–Jim Crow* (1964). These albums helped to establish Folkways’ literary spoken word offerings in a wide and eclectic catalog especially known for its documentary recordings of blues and global folk music.

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<sup>54</sup> Archival collections of correspondence in the Hughes Papers and Asch Collection between Hughes, Asch, and Asch’s secretary Marian Distler (a title that obscures her significant role and influence at Folkways) provide ample evidence of a warm acquaintance sustained by recording projects (realized and unrealized), letters, postcards, and visits.

Jones notes that Hughes could therefore include his own voice among those sounds “CAPTURED / BY MOE ASCH” (Jones 65), and under this rubric we might see Hughes’s relationship with Asch as another iteration in his long struggle to wrest the terms of his own artistic production from white publishers, readers, and critics, beginning with his early and painful patronage relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason (Kaplan 193–254). The publishing relationship between Hughes and Asch, however, is significantly more complicated than it might first appear in *Ask Your Mama*.<sup>55</sup> Given the significant autonomy that Hughes exercised over the content, production, and sale of his Folkways recordings, for example, he appears as much a contributor to the Folkways project as one of its folk subjects. Moreover, Hughes, like Asch, had built his career by attempting to faithfully record African American vernacular culture in a medium that would capture and communicate its uniqueness to a wide audience and for socially progressive (and personal financial) ends.

In this chapter, I seek to better understand Hughes’s complex relationship to Folkways Records through a set of challenging questions raised by this association. How do Hughes’s efforts to represent the vernacular of the “low-down folks” (“Negro Artist” 32) differ from Asch’s efforts to do the same through his recording label? How does Hughes’s voice—literary and literal, printed, performed, and recorded—travel as a document and a commodity in the context of Folkways’ catalog of African American folk voices, and how did it signify in postwar American culture more broadly? How does considering Hughes within the Folkways archive change our perspective on his work, on the aural history of the folk revival, and on the 1950s as a

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<sup>55</sup> The published text of *Ask Your Mama* reflects this complicated relationship in its innovative double-column structure, which is formally identical to the scripts that Hughes wrote for his Folkways albums and his poetry-to-jazz performances, upending the relationship between the written, performed, and recorded texts.

decade of silence, retreat, and capitulation for the cultural producers of the Popular Front era, including Hughes, Asch, and so many of Folkways' artists?

The second reference to Folkways in "Is it True?" may allude to Hughes's ambivalence about his biographical connection with the label, though in my analysis the lines remain, in a sense, "UNPARSED":

AND I CANNOT WRITE COMMERCIALS—  
 TO MY CHAGRIN—NOT EVEN SINGING—  
 AND THE WHISPERS ARE UNECHOED  
 ON THE TAPES—NOT EVEN FOLKWAYS.

*(Collected Poems 508)*

*Ask Your Mama* is not oriented around a single, coherent lyric subjectivity, so we cannot locate the source from which this first-person voice emanates, and the lines' departure from norms of grammatical usage also resists straightforward interpretation. Is the speaker unable to "WRITE COMMERCIALS" because of a lack of talent or because of the racially discriminatory employment practices of the advertising industry? Does the subsequent phrase "NOT EVEN SINGING" qualify that statement by indicating that the speaker is even barred from writing the lyrics to commercial jingles, or does it introduce another source of embarrassment, that the speaker cannot sing? These ambiguities are furthered in the next two lines, which if read as a continuation of the sentence (by no means the only way to interpret their repetition) may suggest that the speaker's inabilities extend to recording the "WHISPERS" of authentic black experience.

For readers familiar with Hughes's Folkways albums, his struggle to make a living in the racist culture industries, and his determination to be a songwriter though he "could never carry a tune" (*Big Sea* 172), these lines could be interpreted as a tacit admission that "THE WHISPERS ARE

UNECHOED” even on Hughes’s own Folkways albums. They may even signify on the criticism, directed at Hughes by other prominent African American writers like Richard Wright and James Baldwin and increasingly in the fifties and sixties, that his literary works, too, failed to capture “the subtler nuances” of contemporary black experience (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 530).<sup>56</sup> This is the plight of the race representative, as *Ask Your Mama* makes abundantly evident with its panoply of black illuminati, musical stars, and cultural ambassadors—including one “LANGSTON HUGHES” (478)—who must navigate the untenable “tension between representation as a practice of depicting and representation as a practice of delegation” (Gates, “Black Man’s Burden” 82).

While the previous chapter considered Hughes as listener alongside fellow Folkways artist Tony Schwartz, examining how Hughes represents an alternative practice of deferred listening, this one turns to the well-worn flip-side of that characterization: Hughes as the voice of the black lower classes.<sup>57</sup> I make this shift by listening to particular recordings of that voice within the context of just one of its distributors, Folkways Records, and the broader return of the “folk” as a countercultural, sonic, racialized imaginary in the 1950s and 1960s. Literary scholars, including Jones, have occasionally attended to one or another of Hughes’s Folkways records, but the conditions in which those recordings were made and circulated have never been fully documented. Admittedly, these records, many of which were made for children, are relatively

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<sup>56</sup> Baldwin, for example, published a critical review of Hughes’s *Selected Poems* (1959) in *The New York Times* that accused Hughes of failing to represent the depths of meaning in African American vernacular speech and music: “Hughes knows the bitter truth behind these hieroglyphics: what they are designed to protect, what they are designed to convey. But he has not forced them into of the realm of art where their meaning would become clear and overwhelming. ‘Hey, pop! / Re-bop! / Mop!’ conveys much more on Lenox Avenue than it does in this book, which is not the way it ought to be” (“Sermons and Blues”).

<sup>57</sup> Jones argues that “the figure of the voice in Hughes criticism presents a paradox” in that it elides Hughes’s representation of “literary,” “literal,” and “instrumental” (staged or musical voices) into one generic “voice,” while largely ignoring Hughes’s own “instrumental” performance of those voices recorded on tapes and records (and remediated into CDs and digital files) (47). I follow Jones here in considering how that doubly instrumental voice circulated and was encircled in Hughes’s recorded performances for Folkways in the fifties, but I’m also interested in how the “generic ‘voice’” that she critiques was also created in part by Hughes as well as the commodification of his work and person across his career.

obscure in Hughes's vast oeuvre, and moreover, like much of Hughes's literary output in the 1950s and 1960s, largely remediate and "repackage" earlier works into new commodities for new audiences. In the postwar decades, Hughes turned toward the republication of earlier works, children's genres, editorship, and popular media forms, while excising and suppressing much of his earlier radical work. This has often been judged as crass commercialism and embarrassing political retreat by contemporaries, biographers, and scholars, many of whom would rather focus on the simple genius of Hughes's early blues poetry; the uncompromising radicalism of his socialist poetry, fiction, and journalism; or the modernist experimentalism of his two long poems, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama*.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, I build on the work of several recent scholars who have begun to critically reassess Hughes's late career by examining here his association with Folkways Records and an aural network that sought to salvage but in the process transformed the sounds and listening protocols of the Popular Front era into and through the McCarthy years.<sup>59</sup> I argue that the aural network that connects both Hughes and Folkways redefined the forms of authentic cultural production and consumption for an emergent countercultural public within the 1950s crisis of the political and cultural left. As Asch and Hughes looked back to the sounding of folk authenticity in the early twentieth century as a way to confront the vexed problem of social memory in the 1950s, both contributed to a new aural aesthetic that would emphasize listening and the consumption of authentic sound through "new" and "old" media forms as affective, alternative

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<sup>58</sup> Arnold Rampersad is overtly critical of Hughes's commercial pursuits, and his radical political works, in his influential two-volume biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Karen Jackson Ford is one of the only scholars to take seriously Hughes's "commodification" of his poetry in an oft-cited (and oft-critiqued) essay, but her assessment still carries a judgmental tone that fails to consider the "commodification" of all artistic and intellectual labor under capitalism and the significance of Hughes "making poetry pay" as an African American writer.

<sup>59</sup> For critical reassessments of Hughes's late work see Chinitz; Kim; Scott; Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* and "Don't Say Goodbye."

modes of civic engagement and democratic feeling. Yet the construction of sonic authenticity within Folkways' and Hughes's aural aesthetic depended on interpreting and capturing certain sounds and voices, certain musical genres, and even certain recording practices as intrinsically and authentically black in ways that resonated with the postwar discourse on the "race problem." As Jennifer Stoeber writes of the label that issued so many of Tony Schwartz's "sonomontages," "The stakes of Folkways' mission were great . . . and their recordings often risked reifying the sonic color-line while purporting to dissipate it" ("Splicing the Sonic Color-Line" 80n2). The same can be said, and often has been said, of Hughes's literary project, as he was deeply aware.

Rather than disavow these stakes, Hughes brought them into his work through a profound ambivalence that is registered tonally across his poetry, prose, and performances. As readers and critics of Hughes's work have often noted, his negotiation of "the burden of representation" is registered in his literary and literal voices, which are cut by a curiously audible silence that rather than communicate an interior subjectivity seems to operate as a medium for the transmission of other voices and personae (Gates, "Black Man's Burden" 82). Hughes's voice is often analogized to sound technologies. Herman Beavers, for example, describes Hughes's "artistic project" by way of an analogy with sound technology as an effort to "amplify the African American vernacular speech event . . . almost as if he were a loudspeaker serving as a medium through which sound travels, rather than the source itself" (2). However, as Hughes's contemporary Marshall McLuhan would insist, "the medium is the message." In performing not the source of the voice but its mediation and reception, Hughes "BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND" onto the folk record, introducing elements of noise, interference, and silence that disrupt the fidelity of the recording technology (*Collected Poems* 477).

To better understand the social, historical, and aural networks that connect Hughes and Asch, and that shaped their views on the relation between folk culture, race, phonography, and practices and technologies of listening, this chapter examines how the culture industries of the Popular Front era influenced Hughes's and Asch's aesthetics and ideologies, even into the forties, fifties, and sixties. Considering the figure of the folk in what Michael Denning describes as the "plebian accent" of the "cultural front" (xx), I briefly narrate how this "accent" was sounded and heard by Hughes and Asch in the context of their pre-World War II work and biographies, and in the first album Hughes ever recorded, *Poems by Langston Hughes*, which was released on Asch's first label Asch Records in 1945. I then turn to Asch's founding of Folkways Records in 1948 in the context of a postwar crisis in listening that would become deafening in the early 1950s for documenters of the folk. Asch's expansive notion of the locations of folk culture posited a practice of democratic listening that would implicitly oppose McCarthyism and Cold War containment rhetoric while operating in support of the civil rights movement. At the same time, this aural aesthetic reproduced the white listening ear as the generic norm for apprehending and appropriating the sound-objects of a multicultural world, contributing to the discourse of multiculturalism and "color-blindness" that influenced a new generation growing up with Folkways albums in their homes and classrooms, and in search of new, more authentic and socially progressive forms of identity and relation.

However, the relative freedom that Asch and Folkways gave to the performers they recorded meant that alternative forms of representing and listening to the folk also appeared under the Folkways label. I conclude this chapter by attending to how Hughes plays back the voice of the folk on his Folkways albums, and *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* in particular, in relation to his promotion of his work through lecture tours, radio and television appearances,

and republication. Critics and readers have often judged Hughes harshly for commodifying his literary works and even his body as a performer and “race man” obsessed, as one recent reviewer has put it, with presenting to the world “a palatable or marketable public persona” that would be “socially acceptable,” while keeping his true self a masked “enigma” (Als n. pag.). Rather than attempt to reincorporate Hughes into notions of authorial authenticity, I follow Moten in listening for the phonographic materiality of the commodity that speaks.

### **Phonography, Authentic Folk, and “the Cultural Front”**

Separated by only a few years in age, Langston Hughes (1902–1967) and Moses Asch (1905–1986), like many other artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers of their generation, were deeply affected by the development of new mass media technologies, European and American modernisms, and the ideologies and aesthetics of the Popular Front. Despite significant differences in their backgrounds—Asch, the son of the celebrated Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, immigrated with his family to the U.S. in 1915 at the age of ten—Hughes and Asch shared an internationalist perspective shaped by early familial instability and extensive travel; strong stances against racism, segregation, and fascism rooted in personal experiences of prejudice; a love of New York City as a multicultural and multiethnic center; and a belief in the democratic ideals of the U.S. Constitution. In *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records*, Peter D. Goldsmith describes Asch as “a cultural ‘broker’” (4) whose experiences “liv[ing] on an assortment of social fault lines . . . enabled him to see both ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ to understand multiple perspectives and to facilitate a kind of cultural ‘translation’ across ethnic, racial, class,

and national boundaries” (3).<sup>60</sup> Hughes was also a cultural broker who sought throughout his career to “translate” the vernacular culture of the African American lower classes across “ethnic, racial, class, and national boundaries.”

This desire to forge alliances through cultural exchange emerged in the context of Hughes’s and Asch’s individual lives, but it also resonated with the left coalition politics and “cultural pluralism” of the Popular Front (Denning 9). This is in spite of the fact that the biographies of both Hughes and Asch are marked by narratives of affiliation and disaffiliation—with racial, ethnic, religious, and national identities—and, above all, with party politics. While biographers and historians have often struggled to define cultural producers like Hughes and Asch in terms of that era’s “committed” Communist Party members, labor unionists, New Deal liberals, and “fellow travelers,” Michael Denning’s revisionist history, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, offers the most useful framework for understanding their shared ideological, aesthetic, and generational perspective. Adopting Raymond Williams’s concept of “alignment” over “commitment” (Denning 58–59), Denning argues that “the cultural front” of the 1930s and 1940s “was not simply the product of individual political commitments” (xvii) by artists and intellectuals but “the result of the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement—the Popular Front—and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education” (xviii). This encounter gave rise to a new class of working-class cultural laborers and cultural producers who contributed to the “‘proletarianization’ of American culture” and the creation of a set of forms, genres, styles, and

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<sup>60</sup> Asch associated this kind of cross-cultural translation with the boundary-crossing possibilities of radio and his experiences with amateur radio as an adolescent: “I saw the possibility, coming from Europe where there were only boundaries, that this was a medium that overcame boundaries, overcame customs. The air was free” (“Moses Asch, Documenter” 294). Hughes associated it with the popular musical genre of jazz, and its spread across the world through radio and recording technologies.

idioms that still reverberate in popular culture (xvii). Hughes and Asch are part of this Depression-era generation and new class of working-class, first- and second-generation im/migrant, and African American workers whose “alignments” reflected a coming-to-consciousness of class, national, ethnic, and racial identity in relation to industrial unionism, the rise of the American mass culture industry, expanded public education, the antilynching movement, and antifascist sentiment.<sup>61</sup> As cultural producers and consumers, they also participated in the “‘popularization’ of high culture and diffusion of ‘proletarian’ and ‘folk’ culture” (42), in which “high culture and mass culture took on a distinctly plebian accent” in the commercial culture industries (xx).

The radio and recorded music industries were especially instrumental in creating, commoditizing, and replaying a folksy, vernacular, “plebian accent,” as Denning details. His narrative, however, does not fully account for the ways this accent also drew on appropriative representations of ethnic and racial vernacular music and speech that circulated heavily in this period, and which translated the earlier (and also working-class) culture of minstrelsy and vaudeville into sound media.<sup>62</sup> One of the ways that the Popular Front era represents, in Denning’s phrasing, “the laboring of American culture” has precisely to do with a worrying of the dialectic between representation as appropriation and representation as documentation. The

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<sup>61</sup> Denning intentionally sidelines the influence of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), and critiques contemporary scholars for fetishizing the CPUSA and “card-carrying” members, which he argues “leads to a remarkably inadequate understanding of the depth and breadth of the social movement” and the significant role of institutions like the unions of the CIO, the ILD, John Reed Clubs, the WPA and other New Deal state institutions, and the culture industries (xviii). Hughes’s deep connections with many of these institutions combined with his ambivalent relationship to the CPUSA lend support to Denning’s argument.

<sup>62</sup> See Hilmes, *Radio Voices* for an analysis of how “golden age” radio increasingly circulated a homogenized “nonaccented” English announcing norm (18) alongside performances of vocal masquerade, usually of white male speakers playing a series of ethnic, racial, and gendered vocal impressions within a “carefully selected aural context” that reestablished social difference within the “colorblind” and invisible medium of radio (21). On blackface minstrelsy as a white working-class cultural form that also facilitated the emergence of class-consciousness among the white working classes, see Lott, *Love and Theft*.

early history of the circulation of folk music by radio and, as I will focus on here, the recorded music industry and the “race record” trade, dramatizes the co-construction and co-commoditization of race, sound, and American folk culture in the first half of the twentieth century through audio technologies.<sup>63</sup> It’s a history of particular significance to Hughes’s blues poetry and to Folkways Records, which sparked the folk revival of the fifties and sixties in part by reissuing commercial “race records” and documentary recordings of blues, jazz, and ethnic music from the 1920s and 1930s.

A brief history of the relationship between phonography, the objectification of what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls “sonic blackness,” and the figure of the folk in the cultural politics of the left in the early twentieth century brings into relation three historical sites of particular importance to Hughes and Asch: the race record industry, the academic discipline of folklore, and the folksong movement. The earliest commercial hits of the recorded music industry from the 1890s through the 1910s were sentimental minstrel ballads recorded by white musicians for predominantly white audiences in the production of a stereotypical “black” sound produced through racial masquerade. In the 1920s, however, a number of small labels began recording and issuing what became known in the industry as “race records”: commercial records featuring and marketed to African Americans. Beginning with Okeh Records’ successful release of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” in 1920, race record labels gradually began to eschew minstrel genres and stereotypes in favor of blues and jazz recordings that redefined black sound for black audiences through the racial authenticity of the performer.<sup>64</sup> The race record trade, while celebrated in the black press

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<sup>63</sup> See Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, on the commodification of sound as an object of consumption through sound recording and the early recording industry.

<sup>64</sup> Karl Hagstom Miller’s *Segregating Sound* and Ronald D. Cohen’s *Rainbow Quest* discuss the early recorded music and race record industries’ dualistic approach to niche marketing that distinguished between popular mass-general audiences and more narrowly defined novelty markets connected to the music of specific geographies, races, or ethnicities. As Cohen writes, “Record companies often sold the records to the communities that produced them,

as the breaking of the recorded music industry's color-line, instituted another, less visible color-line that relied on a discourse of racial and folk authenticity to sell its records, while sharply limiting the musical genres, performance styles, and roles African Americans could perform within the industry (Miller).

The discourse of racial authenticity in the marketing of race records—"Genuine Race Artists Make Genuine Blues for Okeh," stated Okeh's 1925 blues catalog (qtd. in Miller 225)—dovetailed with the development of folklore as an academic discipline. Though folklorists initially dismissed the blues as a mass cultural form, by the mid-1920s, some folklorists began to interpret the blues as an expression of an authentic African American folk culture rooted in the rural South. These folklorists still rejected commercial recordings of blues and jazz by the music industry as inauthentic imitations that were displacing supposedly isolated (i.e. segregated) folk cultures through invading technologies like the phonograph—technologies that folklorists also increasingly relied on as documentary tools (Brady). Soon, race record companies, who followed folk music collectors like John Lomax into the rural South in search of new markets, also began to distinguish categorically between the urban, commercial blues, exemplified by "classic" female blues singers such as Bessie Smith, and the southern, rural blues of male musicians like Blind Lemon Jefferson. While these performers and musical genres were equally contemporary, many collectors drew on a primitivist tropes that cast the latter back as the more authentic and patriarchal origins of jazz and the blues and, by extension, African American culture (Miller 225). "The search for the roots of jazz in the thirties," writes Robert Cantwell in his history of the roots of the later folk revival of the fifties and sixties, was "inspired in part by a deeper inquiry . . . into the nature of American democracy itself" through the romance of its pastoral past, but

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believing no other market existed" (10). The truth was more complicated, though, as the case of race records demonstrates; marketed exclusively to African American audiences, the records quickly found their way to niche white listening audiences for whom "the Negro was in vogue" in the 1920s (Hughes, *Big Sea* 175).

“took the form it had taken in early minstrelsy: a quest for the grail of black cultural origins” where “the contemplation of the black cultural Other both epitomized and essentialized the contemplation of ‘the folk’” (69).

In the process, this folkloric quest for black cultural authenticity also authenticated the phonograph as an objective, documentary medium, which, while separating voice from its visibly apprehensible source, could still capture and communicate the markers of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. As Alexander Weheliye argues, while the “(dis)juncture between sound and source” introduced by the technology of the phonograph “rendered sound more ephemeral, . . . sound gained its materiality in the technological apparatuses and the practices surrounding these devices and in the process rematerialized the human source” (7). This materialization of sound and rematerialization of a (racialized) human source also transformed (black) sounds into commodities that could be reproduced, exchanged, and fetishized. Eidsheim and Jacob Smith examine this phenomenon as it relates to the codification of blackness as a quality of vocal timbre through dominant listening practices in their complementary studies of opera singer Marian Anderson and popular jazz performer Louis Armstrong, respectively (Eidsheim; Smith, *Vocal Tracks* 115–62). As Eidsheim argues, white audiences confronted with African American classical singers consistently projected “[v]isual blackness . . . onto timbre, resulting in the perception of sonic blackness” regardless of the singer’s actual vocal style (653). Smith points to the significance of sound engineering and phonography in particular in amplifying and isolating timbral micro-sounds, such as the “raspy” style of Armstrong. These technologies made the individual sound of a specific performer more important than the song or the score for selling records—and open to performative and technological exaggeration, imitation, and appropriation. The racial meaning given to these specific timbres, however, “is not the resonance of a particular

type of body” but “*resonates in the listener’s ear*” (Eidsheim 646; emphasis in original). The relationship between document, commodity, and aural constructions of blackness are thus central to the cultural genealogy of phonography and phonographic practices.

This discourse on African American musical culture and sound from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s informed the vernacular folk aesthetic of the Popular Front and the popularity of folk songs, folk ballad forms, and jazz music among the new working class of cultural producers and consumers. Indeed, the documentation, preservation, and production of an American folk culture can be said to be one of the most significant legacies of the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Alongside the building of a national infrastructure of roads and bridges, schools and museums, national parks and public transportation, the WPA also labored to build a national cultural infrastructure by supporting folklore collecting, oral history, and documentary projects (including several high-profile projects focused on African American culture and history); research into traditional and vernacular music; and musical and cultural education. The intellectuals, musicians, artists, and writers employed by the WPA, many of whom hailed from working-class and im/migrant families, also began to see themselves during this period as cultural laborers aligned with other labor struggles. On the infrastructure of this national folk culture and labor movement, a Popular Front cultural aesthetic was built that mediated between documentary and commercial representations of American vernacularism in the context of the coalitional leftist movement by popular writers, musicians, and radio “stars” such as Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, Josh White, Duke Ellington, Orson Welles, Tillie Olsen, Woody Guthrie, and Langston Hughes. “Under the sign of the ‘people,’” Denning writes, “Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo American culture, the culture of ethnic workers, and African American culture, in part by

reclaiming the figure of ‘America’ itself, imagining an Americanism that would provide a usable past for ethnic workers” (9).

The vernacular music of the Popular Front adopted a strikingly different perspective on the source of cultural and racial authenticity of folk music than academic folklore or the race record trade, even as it built on the documentary and commercial ethos of each. When Paul Robeson performed the cantata “Ballad for Americans” for broadcast on CBS in 1939, he looked not backward at a sentimentalized American past but forward to a new national democratic culture that might yet be forged in the revolutionary synthesis of a multiplicity of vernacular traditions and international struggles (Denning 134–35). As Denning argues, this synthesis, represented by “the people,” is not completed in the song but deferred, refused, and questioned through modernist tropes and forms. In the cantata, “America” represents the “locus for ideological battles over the trajectory of U.S. history, the meaning of race, ethnicity, and region in the United States, and the relation between ethnic nationalism and internationalism” (129). Lisa Barg persuasively extends Denning’s argument about the lyrics of “Ballad for Americans” to analyze how Robeson’s voice functions “as the locus of such ideological battles” waged in the difficult musical synthesis of the song, and through and against aural protocols of sonic blackness through vocal and musical allusions to minstrel, southern blues, folk musical, popular music, and patriotic ballad and march styles (31, 44). Similarly, when Josh White recorded the 78rpm record *Chain Gang* for Columbia in 1940—or, for Moses Asch in 1942, the antifascist song “Freedom Road,” composed by Langston Hughes and Emerson Harper—his vocalization of an African American vernacular did not attempt to document or imitate an “authentic” black folk sound or speech but derived from “a volatile mixture of popular race records, black unionism and political activism, and the Harlem literary and intellectual elite” (Denning 359). The radical

leftist aesthetic of these African American musicians employed tropes, styles, and forms of black vernacular culture to amplify the struggle for racial and economic justice and equality rather than to represent an ethnically “pure” folk culture. The “impure” folk aesthetic of the Popular Front, and its performance of a failure to represent “the people,” must also be understood in the context of the rise of fascism in Europe, and corresponding *völkisch* movements.

Langston Hughes participated in this aesthetic as a writer and a lyricist, but his continual attention to practices and cultures of listening suggests a way that we might add to Denning’s and Barg’s analyses by identifying the interpretive act of listening as another “locus” of the ideological struggles materialized in the vernacular culture of the Popular Front. In other words, the unresolved contestation over nationalism, history, and social formations of race, class, and ethnic difference found in the circulation of the lyrical trope of “America” and in a performer’s vocal style also hails a listener tasked with hearing in these performances of deferred synthesis what Hughes figured as the still-deferred “dream” of American democracy. It is the listener who, in reproducing learned aural practices mediated by technologies and discourses of sound, reproduces the conflicts and contradictions of American culture. And it is this same listener—the subject produced through and against these normative aural performances—who might learn to listen differently through collective auditory experiences, real and imagined, in the forging of a new revolutionary and coalitional public. Authenticity inheres, in this aesthetic, not in a performer’s racial and regional identity, or in mythic prehistories, but in the poor and laboring classes whose performative acts of reception expose the terrain of “the popular” as structured by contradictory social relations that produce what Stuart Hall describes as the “double movement of containment and resistance” (228).

Hughes's prominence as one of the most celebrated and prolific writers of the Popular Front makes him a touchstone for revisionist historians of the era and its literature, including Denning, Alan Wald, Cary Nelson, and James Edward Smethurst. Hughes's participation in the Popular Front's "laboring of American culture" can be seen across many aspects of his work and life: his connections with Popular Front institutions such as the International Legal Defense (ILD), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), John Reed Clubs, and the CPUSA's League of American Writers; the urban vernacularism and proletarianization of his style across many genres; his leftist journalism, editorial columns, and reviews in the black press; and even his consumption of vernacular and mass-mediated popular culture.<sup>65</sup> Like many African Americans within the movement, Hughes also used his position to challenge the racism of the culture industries and left labor coalitions. His continued activism on these fronts into the war and postwar years, despite his increasing disaffiliation from leftist organizations and radical socialism and his suppression of his own leftist work, parallels that of many African Americans of his class and generation, and reveals how Popular Front periodization fails to account for the specificity of African American activism and history.<sup>66</sup>

Hughes's poetry and dramatic works of the mid-1930s to early 1940s nonetheless appear very much within the "impure," syncretic, and commercial Popular Front aesthetic of singers like Josh White and Paul Robeson. In poems like "Let America Be America Again," first published

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<sup>65</sup> These institutional and aesthetic affiliations are of course many of the same cited by the conservative press and Roy Cohn, chief counsel of Senator McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee, during Hughes's 1953 testimony. There can therefore be a discomfort in repeating them, as if one were once again damning Hughes either for his communist affiliations or for recanting them. However, Hughes never denied his leftist institutional affiliations (even if only because the evidence of his involvement was apparent). Moreover, the statement he presented to the Subcommittee reflects a Popular Front cultural ideology through the lens of his antiracist activism. This is not to deny the radical leftism of Hughes's socialist works or the extent of his self-censorship of that work in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>66</sup> Denning's periodization is less absolute than many historians of the era as he engages a series of periodizing frames to complicate the question of the movement's end and its "failure," but he also overlooks the way African American history and wartime and postwar activism particularly complicates the midcentury break.

in 1936, Hughes constructs the nation as a site of ideological struggle mediated through the performance of a lyric, choral voice that resonates well with “Ballad of Americans” (*Collected Poems* 189–91). “Let America Be America Again” negotiates a series of dialectics—between the evocation and rejection of the populist synthesis promised by the figure of “America”; between the individual and the collective in an expansive and plural first-person perspective; and between myths of a pastoral American past and a reimagined “Americanism that would provide a usable past” for African American, ethnic, and laboring classes (Denning 9). As Hughes writes, “O, let America be America again— / the land that never has been yet— / And yet must be” (*Collected Poems* 191). Hughes also sought oral and aural forms through which to disseminate the collective, vernacular lyric voice of his poems through songwriting, reading tours, radio, and recording. The practiced vocal performance of his deferred folk synthesis becomes part of the record that Hughes’s later performances and recordings replay.

Moses Asch’s biography and early career likewise reflects his alignment with the aesthetics and ideologies of the cultural front. Though as a cultural producer he would make his biggest impact through Folkways Records in the late twentieth century, it is within the context of the labor movement that Asch underwent a coming-to-consciousness of his Jewish, immigrant, and national identity. Born in Warsaw in the midst of the Russian Revolution and rising anti-Semitism in Poland, Asch spent much of his childhood in Western Europe and, after the outbreak of World War I, in New York City. Due to Sholem Asch’s prominence as a Yiddish writer, the Asch household, wherever it was situated, was a center for Jewish artists and intellectuals, and Asch’s childhood experiences shaped his cosmopolitan perspective and his negotiated relationship to a tradition of Jewish political radicalism. He also sought experiences beyond his familial purview in American popular culture, folk music, and a ham radio hobby that developed

into a passion for audio engineering (Goldsmith 48). After training in radio electronics at a technical school in Germany, Asch returned to New York in 1925 where he worked as a radio repairman and engineer. Through his father's connections, he quickly built early professional relationships with Jewish theatrical, cultural, political, and union organizations, including the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Yiddish leftist radio station WEVD. He made his first recordings for WEVD, and in 1940 incorporated the label Asch Recording Studio, specializing in records of Yiddish folk singers and Jewish cantors (Goldsmith 89–90).<sup>67</sup>

Around the same time, Asch met Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) through Simon Rady, a conductor and record producer who had worked on the ILGWU's successful theater production *Pins and Needles* (Goldsmith 98). In 1941, Asch recorded Lead Belly performing children's songs, released as *Play Parties in Song and Dance, as Sung by Lead Belly*. This record marked, in Goldsmith's words, Asch's "foray into a different kind of market, still perhaps significantly Jewish but one more closely identified with progressive politics than with Jewish religion or culture" (98). It also represented another leftist arena of folk music production associated with the "cultural front," one more explicitly politically leftist, which Cantwell loosely terms the "folksong movement" and Goldsmith identifies with the "political folk singers" who brought collective folk singing of topical songs in traditional styles to union halls, assemblies, and radical leftist gatherings (Goldsmith 113). The Almanac Singers' Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell; Lead Belly, Earl Robinson, and Aunt Molly Jackson; Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee: these are the names that evoke the politicized singing of folk songs

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<sup>67</sup> According to Goldsmith, Asch's first recording was of the Barry Singers, then known as the Bagelman Sisters, who performed popular Yiddish tunes (90). In addition to recording content for WEVD, Asch also transcribed recordings of their broadcasts to sell to other stations and labels.

during the Popular Front era that became the foundation—in part through Asch’s Folkways Records—for the later folk revival. The construction of the folk within these contexts tended to emphasize singing over listening, and rural musics and union songs over urban, popular, commercial forms, as more expressive of working-class experiences and consciousness. As Goldsmith and Denning make clear, though, the boundaries often drawn between the “authentic” folk style of these musicians and the “impure” folk vernacularism of mass popular culture are hard to maintain. This is evident in the earliest recordings released on Asch Records; during the war years, Asch recorded Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Mary Lou Williams, Josh White, and Woody Guthrie, building a modest catalog of leftist folk singers and African American jazz and folk music that appealed to a predominantly Jewish progressive audience.

During this period, Asch also met and recorded Langston Hughes, initiating an acquaintance that would last two decades. The occasion of Asch’s and Hughes’s first meeting was not recorded by either but, as Goldsmith writes, it “was more or less inevitable” given their overlapping social networks (143).<sup>68</sup> Hughes’s established status as folk, blues, and Popular Front poet must have appealed to Asch as a perfect fit for his growing catalog. As Goldsmith describes, “Asch was no doubt pleased with the opportunity to promote another aspect of African American arts, and particularly a poet who so openly celebrated black folk culture and the black working masses” (144). In 1944, Asch recorded Hughes reading selections from his poetry for a series of four ten-inch 78rpm discs released on the Asch Records label in 1945. *Poems by Langston Hughes* represented the first spoken word recording for Hughes and for Asch, and entered an industry in which the genre of “commercial ‘spoken word’ recordings was all but

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<sup>68</sup> Asch and Hughes most likely were introduced through one or several of the following shared contacts: Mary Lou Williams, Elie Siegmeister, James P. Johnson, Sterling Brown, or Moses Asch’s brother, the novelist Nathan Asch, who Hughes had met during a 1943 artist residency at Yaddo (Goldsmith 143).

unknown” but would soon take off with the invention of the long-playing record in 1948 (Goldsmith 143).<sup>69</sup>

*Poems by Langston Hughes* is inflected by the “plebian accent” of the Popular Front in which both Hughes and Asch were situated as cultural producers and consumers, and reflects their respective views on the cultural and racial politics of “the folk.” The album cover art, designed by illustrator David Stone Martin, depicts a shirtless black man carrying an anvil who appears, with his mouth slightly open, to be singing what one might presume is a work song. Evoking issues of industrial labor and racial justice, the album cover frames the listener’s first visual encounter with Hughes’s poetry recordings within the recognizable iconography of the Popular Front.<sup>70</sup> The back of the album offers a contrasting image—a photograph of a dapper-looking Hughes—and descriptive liner notes, written by (though not attributed to) Hughes.<sup>71</sup> The notes describe the poet as himself a listener, whose spontaneous methods of composition “by ear” both mimic improvisatory jazz performance and index a range of vernacular forms and styles that include “singing ballads,” “husky folk rhythms,” and “delicate lyrics.” Hughes also uses the notes to frame the voice that will “sing the strengths and hopes of our democracy”: “He presents [the poems] simply, with no dramatic flourishes. His one feeling about poetry is that it

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<sup>69</sup> The idea and practice of recording literary sound emerged simultaneous to the invention of technologies of recorded sound in the late nineteenth century, and often in the context of making literature more accessible to the blind and vision-impaired. Edison imagined that his machine could be used in the recording of “talking books,” and many writers were recorded in the early twentieth century. I follow Jacob Smith, however, in identifying a specific post-WWII history for the emergence of “spoken word” literary recording as a distinct recording genre and commodity for general public consumption that is related to the invention of the LP (*Spoken Word*).

<sup>70</sup> The Popular Front aesthetic of this album cover, and its implications for how the album would be received by listeners, is even more apparent when contrasted with the impressionistic style of Martin’s influential jazz record album art from the same period for Asch Records. On Martin’s relationship with Asch, see Goldsmith (133–34). Cary Nelson details the visual tropes accompanying literary publication in the Popular Front era; see, for example, Nelson’s discussion of the original publication of Hughes’s “Christ in Alabama” (*Repression* 200–213; *Revolutionary* 69–75) and “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (*Repression* 212–13).

<sup>71</sup> Drafts of the liner notes, the recording script for the album, and correspondence about the Asch Records album are archived with the Hughes Papers (194, 7185, 7186).

should not be read in a ‘far-away voice.’” Much like the blues and vernacular forms and subjects of the poetry, Hughes describes his performance persona as unpretentious, direct, and “simple”; at the same time, though, he does not position himself as a folk speaker. These descriptions chime with Hughes’s crafted self-representation as he performed it in other written and performance contexts (though I’ll soon have more to say about the connotations of that “far-away voice” within the medium of sound recording and Hughes’s performances).

The discs record a selection, again determined by Hughes, of more than twenty poems encompassing his career, from iconic early poems like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “I, Too,” blues and vernacular poems like “The Weary Blues” and “Ma Lord,” and leftist works like “Ballad of the Landlord” and “Good Morning, Stalingrad,” to more recent poems like “To Captain Mulzac,” “Ku Klux,” and “Harlem Sweeties.”<sup>72</sup> The characteristically thematic (rather than chronological) sequencing of poems on the album links Hughes’s representation of an African American vernacular in music and speech to a struggle against racist and capitalist systems of oppression and violence. Once again, though, synthesis is not achieved but distributed and deferred across an assemblage of discrete poems—an effect heightened by the limitations of recording before the invention of the long-playing record, since the relatively short playing time prevented Hughes from providing the extra-literary commentary he typically offered in his performances.

The recordings, each done in a single take (Goldsmith 145) and from scripts prepared in advance with notes for vocal performance (Hughes Papers 7185), showcase Hughes’s well-established performance style honed from years of making a living on the lecture circuit. Hughes

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<sup>72</sup> I am grateful to archivist Jeff Place at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage for giving me the opportunity to listen to this rare recording. While Smithsonian Folkways has extended Asch’s commitment to keeping all Folkways titles in print by making them digitally available through *Smithsonian Global Sound*, this does not apply to releases on Asch’s earlier labels.

would also bring his recordings to sell on reading tours, and was generally active in marketing this and future albums in local print and radio outlets while on tour, and within the black counterpublic sphere of newspapers, publishers, radio hosts, and institutions (Hughes Papers 1205). Indeed, Hughes's ownership over the entire process of the recording project is striking, and reveals Asch's developing and unique approach to making and selling records, which gave significant autonomy to musicians, artists, and documenters while deemphasizing intensive sound engineering and production methods. As jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, who Asch signed as his first exclusive artist around the time he released *Poems by Langston Hughes*, recalled, "He never told a performer how to record or what to do. If you only burped, Moe recorded it" (qtd. in Goldsmith 134). Hughes's final poem on the fourth disc, "Note on Commercial Theatre," attacks the co-optation and false representation of African American culture by commercial media and the music industry: "You've taken my blues . . . / And you fixed 'em / So they don't sound like me" (*Collected Poems* 215–16). In the context of the recording, the concluding lines of the poem signify as an assertion of both Hughes's ownership of his recorded voice and the authenticity of his representation of African American folk culture: "But someday somebody'll / Stand up and talk about me— / . . . I reckon it'll be / Me myself!" (*Collected Poems* 216).

If Asch's and Hughes's decision to record *Poems by Langston Hughes* emerged in the context of their shared connections to a Popular Front aesthetic and a social network in New York, the 1945 album was also situated at a moment of uncertainty, change, and crisis for Asch and Hughes, that leftist community, the recording industry, and American society at large in ways that would deeply influence the founding of Folkways Records and Hughes's late career. Disillusionment and internal conflict had been widening fractures within the precarious alliances

of the political left since the Hitler-Stalin pact, but the rising anticommunist movement would take that crisis to a new pitch after the end of World War II and with the beginning of hostilities between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. By the time Hughes came to Asch's studios in 1944, he had already been hounded for years by the conservative press and the FBI, had lectures and tours canceled by protests over his supposed communist affiliations, and been named as a communist in testimonies given to the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) (Rampersad, *Life* 2:90). While Hughes did include "Good Morning Stalingrad" in his selection for *Poems by Langston Hughes*, Rampersad is right to note that the album in general "slight[s] his radical socialist verse" (2:107). It was Hughes's status as a leftist artist working in such politicized folk vernacular forms, however, that made the album of interest to Asch's niche market.

Indeed, Asch was able to record so many important folk and jazz performers on his tiny independent label during the war and immediate postwar years because of a changing political climate that dovetailed with both the recording ban of the musician's union strike of 1942–1944 and a military-induced shellac shortage that together basically silenced the recorded music industry.<sup>73</sup> After the war, the industry rebounded and expanded in influence with a growing consumer market for records, especially after the invention of the long-playing record in 1948. However, musicians, writers, and other cultural producers associated with the Popular Front, from the Woody Guthries to the Paul Robesons of the music world, increasingly found themselves under surveillance by the FBI, called in front of HUAC, and blacklisted in the culture

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<sup>73</sup> Asch was able to record a few musicians during the ban, including Seeger, by employing the loophole argument that folk musicians were not professionals according to the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). He was also quick to negotiate an agreement with the AFM after Decca first broke the ban in 1943, and recorded many folk and jazz union musicians during this period of instability for the major recording labels (126–27). Noncommercial folk music likewise flourished on radio during the recording bans (Cantwell 174–75).

industries. These cultural figures became the unwilling stars of a new spectacle—the purging of American communism—that performatively silenced the “cultural front” in the creation of a new national culture organized around enforced consensus, free-market capitalism and mass consumerism, and conservative white midwestern Christian values. This crisis in listening was felt most acutely within Hughes’s and Asch’s milieu, while its production of silence contributed to a repression of collective memory that would create the conditions for recovery and revival only a few years later.

Asch continued to record folk singers alongside jazz and blues musicians on Asch Records and its successor Disc Records into the postwar years. He also joined the People’s Songs organization, which helped legitimate his commercial ventures within the folk music community as a (supposedly) non-profit-motivated distributor of authentic folk records.<sup>74</sup> In most historical accounts of this era, however, People’s Songs, and the organization’s support of Henry Wallace’s presidential bid as a Progressive Party candidate in 1948, represent the last gasp of the political and cultural left. Asch’s label also went under in early 1948 and Asch declared bankruptcy; when the label resurfaced later that year as the new venture Folkways Records, it entered a dramatically altered political, musical, and technological soundscape. As I turn now to this new label, its construction of folk sound and folk listening, and Hughes’s Folkways albums, my aim is to show more specifically how both Hughes and Asch negotiated the 1950s crisis in listening in part by replaying, remediating, and thereby transforming vernacular sounds from the earlier period and aesthetic of the Popular Front for new audiences.

### **“Sound Has More Truth than Sight”**

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<sup>74</sup> Goldsmith documents Asch’s shifting accounts of his affiliation with People’s Songs (174–77).

In May of 1948, Moses Asch and Marian Distler founded Folkways Record and Service Company, which operated out of a recording studio on 117 West 46th Street in New York. Distler, who started working for Asch Records in 1941 and who was the administrative force beyond all of Asch's recording ventures, was named as Folkways' official incorporator in order to get around the terms of Asch's bankruptcy after the collapse of Disc.<sup>75</sup> It was an auspicious moment to start a record company; Columbia Records would release its first LP records in June of that same year, and magnetic tape also entered the commercial market around this time. Though Asch could not have foreseen it, these technologies would transform the music industry and prove essential to the survival of Folkways and other independent labels. The portability, resilience, and manipulability of tape allowed many of Folkways most important records to be produced inexpensively by amateur documenters and sound editors outside the studio.<sup>76</sup> The LP, with its capacity for holding twenty minutes of continuous sound on each side, proved especially suitable to the new genres and niche markets in which Folkways specialized, appealing to consumers seeking substantial documents of sound and song from around the world. In the year of its founding, however, Folkways was a precarious and perhaps even foolhardy business enterprise, particularly given Asch's association with People's Songs and the folk, blues, and

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<sup>75</sup> Distler unquestionably played a significant role at Folkways Records and through her twenty-three-year career working for Asch and his recording companies as a secretary—a title that obscures the scope of her labor. Despite her significance to Folkways, however, she is generally neglected or in some cases completely erased from histories about the label. Goldsmith includes her in his biographically oriented history of Folkways Records, but too often he marshals her life story into a familiar, sentimental, gendered melodramatic arc that begins with a love affair and ends with her tragic suicide in 1964. Distler's documented struggle with depression and her suicide are tragic, but the histories told about Folkways Records—including my own—still lack a full accounting for her role in shaping the label's cultural production. The rush by historians like Goldsmith to declare, in discussing the founding of Folkways, that "Distler's status in Folkways was a fiction" and that "Folkways was to be Asch's business in every significant sense," contributes to the broader silencing of women's labor in the culture industries (214).

<sup>76</sup> Ethnographers and folklore collectors had of course been producing field recordings since the early twentieth century, but the relative ease of recording with tape and the possibilities for editing made this practice much more widespread and newly commercially viable.

jazz musicians of the Popular Front. Nonetheless, in the late 1940s and early 1950s Asch and Distler developed a unique and ultimately viable business model that avoided the boom-and-bust hit cycle of the popular music industry to cultivate niche markets for an expansive catalog of always-in-print folk, jazz, and documentary sound titles, some of which sold steadily for decades (Olmsted).

In many ways, Folkways Records appears like “an artifact of left-wing culture” (Goldsmith 8) whose catalog reflected through its artists and its aesthetic the relationship established within the Popular Front between traditional American folk songs, ethnic music, cabaret blues and jazz, documentary recording practices, and socially progressive causes. However, I argue that Folkways Records also reconstructed the ground for those cultural relationships in ways that were filtered through Asch’s individual experiences and the Cold War crisis in listening. Most importantly, Folkways Records contributed to the circulation of new discourses about American cultural uniqueness, about authentic forms of identity and social relation, and about listening as a perceptual and cultural apparatus. First, and most obviously, it did so by significantly expanding where the “folkways” of the world could be found and what defined authentic folk culture for its listeners. While Folkways may be best remembered for its contribution to the folk revival and its important jazz recordings, its catalog is much, much more expansive, encompassing sound projects like Tony Schwartz’s “New York 19” albums, audio documentaries of the civil rights movement, nature recordings, audiobooks in a wide range of genres (literature, science, history, self-help), sound effects, and records designed for educational and technical training—not to mention the label’s cornerstone genres of blues, jazz, ethnic, and global folk music. Asch would later describe Folkways Records as “an encyclopedia” and “a

living archive,” “created to document contemporary sounds, be they music, speech or natural phenomena” (qtd. in Olmsted ix).

Asch’s interest in and ever-expanding definition of folk sound developed slowly in negotiation with his own ethnic and national identity and with earlier twentieth-century constructions of American folk culture, and race and ethnicity, formulated by the recorded music industry, folklore collectors, and Popular Front culture. By his own account, he first became interested in folk music while studying radio technology at the Electronische Hochschule in Bingen-en-Rhine, Germany from 1924 to 1925. As the school’s international students gathered regularly to share folk songs from their home countries, Asch confronted his own ignorance about folklore:

That’s when I first started to hear about folk music. And the first thing I heard was that there isn’t any folk music in America. . . . One day when I was in Paris on vacation from school, browsing through the bookstalls along the Seine, I came across the 1913 edition of John Lomax’s cowboy ballads [*Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads*], and it had an introduction by Teddy Roosevelt which guided me through life because he said that folklore and folksongs were the real expression of a people’s culture. And when I got back I was able to show the kids at school that there was a uniqueness in our culture. It was not just a melting pot.

(“Moses Asch, Documentor” 295)

Asch’s account obscures as much as it reveals about the origins of his interests in folklore and his belief in a “unique” American folk culture. As Goldsmith notes, the singing of folk music in the politically contested Rhineland of 1924 “could not have been an entirely innocent endeavor” (55). Asch’s encounters with the “cult of the folk” in Weimar Germany and its virulent anti-

Semitism must have offered a negative model of folklore that he would work all his life to counter (54). Lomax's *Cowboy Songs* and its accompanying myths of the American West provided Asch with a means through which to join his peers' interest in folklore via a claim for the "uniqueness" of American culture rooted in frontier myths, but it also serves as the means through which Asch constructs an American identity for himself. By claiming *Cowboy Songs* rather than Yiddish songs as "our culture," the Polish-Jewish-American Asch strategically participates in the melting pot logic he denounces.

As we've already seen, however, Yiddish songs represented Asch's first forays into folk music recording, and he would eventually negotiate a new understanding of authentic American culture through his experiences recording African American musicians. In the same 1978 interview in which Asch discusses his discovery of American folk music in Germany, he narrates the significance of his first recordings with Lead Belly for his developing folk aesthetic. John Lomax, whose *Cowboy Songs* Asch just cited as a touchstone for his life, becomes in the next instant a perpetrator of the racist stereotypes and power relations that structured early folklore collecting practices, and against which Asch explicitly develops his documentary ethos. "I hated [Lomax's] guts," he asserts:

[Lomax] had just produced the March of Time movie about Leadbelly. He dressed him up as a convict, and he would drag him around to show what a great guy John Lomax was because he was his guardian. . . . I guess by that time Leadbelly had been singing for progressive and left groups. So Sy [Rady] brought Leadbelly around, and immediately Leadbelly and I were brothers. I understood him, he understood me, and he utilized me; and I was willing to be used because he knew that through me and through my medium he was able to express what he wanted.

(“Moses Asch, Documentor” 299)

Asch objects to Lomax’s appropriation of Lead Belly for his own commercial ends, and to early twentieth-century constructions of folkloric authenticity through primitivist and minstrel stereotypes. In contrast, he positions himself as part of an interracial coalition of “progressive and left groups” and a nonintrusive “medium” for Lead Belly’s artistic creation, over which he would refuse to assume ownership (even while attempting to sell Lead Belly’s records for profit). In rejecting Lomax’s inauthentic cooptation of Lead Belly’s art, Asch also claims for himself and for Lead Belly an authentic relation to folk culture that would maintain the purity of art’s separation from the market. Lead Belly, Asch claims, “was not like Josh White and other guys who sang just to make money” (299).

By positioning Lead Belly against Josh White, Asch communicates less the ideological positions that guided his recording practices in the early and mid-1940s, when he recorded both Lead Belly and White, than the revisionist historiography of the folk revivalists (including John Lomax’s son, Alan Lomax) and its definitions of authentic folk culture against commercial culture. Historians and critics who came of age in the 1960s have tended to hear the folk ballads, popular tunes, and proletarian poetry of the earlier cultural front era as a set of embarrassingly naïve, sentimental, “middlebrow,” nationalistic, and propagandistic “insipid ballads” (Denning 117). Preferring the grain of Lead Belly’s early Lomax recordings as the authentic folk sound of African America to “the agit prop ‘impurity’” (119) and cabaret sound of Popular Front Café Society musicians like Paul Robeson and Josh White, these critics have tended to neglect or dismiss some of the more popular vernacular musicians of the era. While Folkways Records contributed to that revisionism through its cultivation of an authentic folk sound, that sound was not constructed through strict determinations about what constituted a commercial genre or artist

versus a folk one. Instead, in ways that reflected Asch's and many of Folkways artists' alignment with Popular Front vernacular culture, the catalog consistently promoted an inclusive approach more concerned with the uses of vernacular culture for inventing a usable past and a syncretic vision for the future than mythic folk origins.

This is evident in many of the Folkways LPs to which Hughes contributed. The album *Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes* (1952), for example, Asch's first release of recordings by either writer on the Folkways label, presents Brown and Hughes as two different but exemplary writers of "the contemporary folk idiom" in African American literature (liner notes). In bringing together the work of such different contributors, however, and selecting works made at different times and for different purposes, the album also barely coheres. Brown's readings on side A of poems from *Southern Road* (1932), recorded by Asch in the forties, offer Brown's representation of African American experience and dialect in the Depression-era southern United States. Hughes's performance of stories on side B from *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) dramatize postwar Harlem through the character of Jesse B. Semple (or "Simple"). In addition, the liner notes, written by Arna Bontemps in the first of many projects he would do for Folkways, attempt to link both through a tradition of folk poetry (even though Hughes's readings are from prose fiction), while the cover image—a reproduction of Jacob Lawrence's "Dixie Café" (1948)—depicts Jim Crow segregation. The ad hoc nature of the album reflects Asch's lax approach to making and issuing recordings, but in presenting multiple different representations of African American vernacular experience—most obviously through the strikingly different literary and performance styles of Brown and Hughes—the recording also offers an inclusive and heterogeneous sounding of a "folk" voice in African American literature that emphasizes the social and political resonances of those representations for the struggle against Jim Crow. Thus

Brown's performance of southern black dialect and folklife, rendered overtly political in poems like "Sharecropper" and "Slim in Hell," and Hughes's mostly comic stories of Simple's opinions on love, nagging landladies, the threat of nuclear war, and racial discrimination are both framed within Bontemps' liner notes and Folkways' larger catalog as authentic forms of folk expression—not because they express a timeless, traditional culture but because they speak to a contemporary, modern struggle for self-determination and equality.

This album also represents Folkways Records' development of the genre of the literary spoken word LP through the label's association with Hughes. Beginning in the 1950s and throughout the next three decades, Folkways consistently released recordings of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, making it, in Goldsmith's words, one of "the progenitor[s] of 'books on tape'" (246). When compared to a literary spoken word powerhouse like Caedmon Records, Folkways' literary selection can appear small and somewhat random. But Hughes, in many ways, is the linchpin. Through Hughes and his social and literary connections, Folkways would release albums by a number of African American writers and poets, including Bontemps, Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker, developing an important collection that in later years would expand to include recordings of black feminist writers Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Nancy DuPree.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, Asch was less interested in building a literary catalog than he was in extending Folkways' representation of African American vernacular culture and the American struggle for racial justice and equality. These albums fit logically alongside others that

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<sup>77</sup> Folkways did issue other literary recordings, including a series of recitations of older verse (e.g. *Early English Poetry*) and a few recordings by other contemporary writers such as John Ciardi, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and Kenneth Patchen. The centrality of African American writers, and Hughes in particular, to the Folkways catalog, however, was reaffirmed in the early 1990s, when folklorist and long-time Folkways contributor Ann Charters abandoned a "Spoken Arts Series" rerelease project for Smithsonian Folkways after learning that recordings by Hughes and other African American writers were earmarked for another project. In her words from a letter dated July 10, 1991, these recordings "were at the heart of my suggestions . . . I don't think the catalogue is sufficiently rich enough . . . when the Langston Hughes and black writers' material is taken away" (Asch Collection).

presented contemporary readings of speeches by Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, narrated episodes in black history (including Hughes's *The Glory of Negro History*), speeches and music from the civil rights movement, and recordings of blues, jazz, and spirituals.

Asch's dream that Folkways Records would become "an encyclopedia" or "living archive" of the world's sounds would appear to extend beyond any narrow argument for American cultural exceptionalism toward a more anthropological interest in global folk cultures. While this is certainly true, I'd like to suggest that Asch's earlier desire to "show . . . that there was a uniqueness in our culture" also remains part of the project of Folkways Records. Rather than locate this uniqueness in a particular kind of music, geographical location, or racial or ethnic group, however, Folkways Records constructs the uniqueness of American culture as a particular approach to listening. What makes American culture unique for Folkways, in other words, isn't necessarily its traditional forms of cultural expression—though it also has these—but its grand experiment in democracy, which is expressed in a democratic form of listening that can recognize the inherent value of all forms of human culture as folk culture without threatening to dissolve them into a generic melting pot. The range of Folkways' catalog imagines an idealized American listener that can move easily between diverse records of music, sound, and speech—from, for example, Schwartz's *New York 19* and Hughes's *Rhythms of the World* to *Blind Willie Johnson*, *Folk Dances of Greece*, *Calypso and Meringues*, *Music of Afghanistan*, *Sounds of North American Frogs*, *Sounds of the Junk Yard*, *The Songs of Joe Hill*, and *The Nashville Sit-In Story*. This form of democratic listening—indebted to Popular Front-era debates about the place and nature of American folk culture and the relation between mass culture and a politics of the masses—took on particular significance for embattled liberal identity in the 1950s. It's also easy to see why Asch would champion a documenter like Tony Schwartz, whose own

construction of sympathetic listening through “sono-montage” resonates with the larger Folkways project.

This approach to listening is mediated on Folkways, however, through a much narrower representation of sonic authenticity that articulates a specific kind of listener. While maintaining a stated commitment to “authentic” rather than “commercial” music, Asch rarely entered the heated debates about what exactly constituted authentic versus commercialized folk music that embroiled many of the artists he recorded.<sup>78</sup> Asch did, however, hold strong opinions in another debate about authenticity that circled around the use of stereophonic sound and affiliated techniques of sound engineering to create “high fidelity” recordings. As technological innovations spurred by the invention of magnetic tape, multi-track recording and playback, microphone technology, sound engineering, and rpm speed greatly expanded the possibilities for recording and representing sound in the fifties, the adapting industry and “hi-fi” stereo aficionados redefined the meaning of fidelity in sound recording.<sup>79</sup> Proponents of stereo and sound editing argued that these techniques were more true to the multidimensional experience of live listening because, unlike monophonic recordings, they simulated the sensory experience of receiving sound through two ears rather than one, edited out errors and the incidental sounds of the recording device and the studio, amplified desired vocal and musical effects, and constructed illusory sonic spaces through reverberation that worked more effectively to place a listener in space. These claims for realism, however, ultimately transformed rather than simply mimicked

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<sup>78</sup> Moreover, it is likely, as Goldsmith and Olmsted assert, that Asch’s avoidance of “commercial” music was as much a commercial decision as an ideological one, since the precarious existence of Folkways’ small operation depended on even sales in niche markets rather than a boom-and-bust model of popular hits.

<sup>79</sup> What constitutes realism in sound recording has been a hotly debated issue since the advent of electric recording in the 1920s meant that recording involved a translation of “fluctuating air pressure to oscillating electrical current” that necessitated “feats of aural interpretation” by sound engineers about how to best simulate the experience of “live” sound (Zak 64). The complex technological materiality of the postwar period, however, made the issue of fidelity infinitely more complex (Anderson 111–12).

the experience of listening. Tim Anderson argues, “one of the driving forces behind stereo and other high-fidelity techniques was to convince listeners that they not only heard ‘reality’ . . . but also that the material act of listening had become much more sensitive—and, most important, that as listeners they had been significantly altered in the process” (177). The stereo movement and the debate it sparked about the nature of realism in recorded sound forged, in Anderson’s view, a musical “aesthetic movement that is listener-oriented rather than music-oriented” (xliii).<sup>80</sup>

Asch’s doctrinaire rejection of stereophonic sound and affiliated techniques of sound engineering contested these definitions of sonic fidelity, offering a counter-model of authenticity and a different “listener-oriented” aesthetic that was linked to his conception of folk sound. As Asch stated in one interview, “I hate the stereo recordings, and mixing can never give you the accurate sense of the original sound. That’s what I wanted to preserve and document, the actual sound that was there. . . . A hundred years from now it is as natural as the day I recorded it” (“Moses Asch, Documentor” 300). Asch’s approach to sound recording was shaped by his belief that recordings were faithful documents that reflected the intention and expression of the performers, not the sound engineer, and as a result he took a remarkably noninterventionist approach to the recordings he issued, even going so far as to issue demo tapes that interested him directly onto records (Petrusich 197). “Folkways succeeds,” he wrote, “when it becomes the invisible conduit from the world to the ears of human beings” (qtd. in Olmsted ix). It’s important to emphasize, however, that monophonic recording is no more a true or unmediated document of

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<sup>80</sup> The “listener-oriented” technology and aesthetic of postwar sound recording also facilitated the production of subjectivity by increasingly isolating the listener, objectifying performance as an acquirable commodity, and encouraging an “affiliat[ion] with the micro-features of performance” through repetitive, attentive listening as a means of producing a durable, aesthetic experience of subjectivity that unfolded predictably with the recording itself (Bergh and DeNora 108, 109).

“original sound” than stereo but simply represents an alternative way of constructing sonic authenticity.

In Folkways’ case, the construction of sonic authenticity also replayed and repurposed the earlier representations of authentic sound that circulated in the recording industry of the 1920s. “A hundred years from now,” Asch speculates, the recordings will be “as natural as the day I recorded it,” but to many of his early listeners, Folkways’ albums already sounded like ancient artifacts, dug up out of some old collector’s basement—and indeed many of them were, as reissues and anthologies of recordings from the twenties and thirties, and especially the race, hillbilly, and ethnic record trade, became essential to Folkways’ output. Reissues and anthologies like Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Asch’s and Ramsey’s *Jazz* series, and Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* also blurred into Folkways’ new releases that not only featured similar genres and musicians—including “rediscovered” blues and folk artists heard on those older albums—but also mimicked older industry approaches to and techniques of recording. In this context, Folkways became one of the major myth-making and memory-machines for the ghostly sounds and voices of what Greil Marcus calls “the old, weird America,” even if its search for authentic folk extended far beyond the borders of the U.S.

Ironically, then, consumers of Folkways’ records would come to hear the “flat” sound of mono-recording and even the sonic interference of the technology itself on Folkways’ “low-fi” recordings as intrinsic to “authentic” folk sound precisely *because* they echoed the commercial sounds of the early twentieth century. As I discussed earlier, however, the construction of authentic sound in the recorded sound industry of the 1920s was not a wholly innocent question of technological capability. The race record trade and folklore collectors of the early twentieth century defined folk musical authenticity through the racialized body and regional source of the

performer, reifying a “sonic blackness” that could circulate beyond that source as a commodity while, at the same time, authenticating the phonograph as a documentary medium. By replaying and remediating old 78s into the new medium of the LP, Folkways defined the authenticity of its cultural productions through its authentic folk performers but also through older sound recording practices and sounds positioned as documentary forms against the new media of hi-fidelity recording and television. However, by mediating this phonocentrism through earlier, racialized constructions of authentic sound, Folkways could not escape the machinations of the color-line. Cantwell draws attention to the way that white folk revivalists, in their search for more authentic and democratic forms of culture and social relation, replicated earlier “quest[s] for the grail of black cultural origins” (69) and recirculated “the many motifs and images that descend from minstrelsy” (25). Folkways albums like Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* contributed to this recirculation of minstrel “motifs and images” but my point here is that Folkways’ recording practices, across its catalog of diverse music and sound, could also produce for white listeners a sense of unmediated access that facilitated democratic listening while reifying phonographic blackness.

There is, then, a dramatic tension within Folkways’ significant catalog of African American music, history, documentary, and spoken word recordings, to which Langston Hughes is a significant contributor. On the one hand, Folkways’ representation of race throughout its entire catalog is clearly progressive and driven by a liberal multiculturalist and antiracist ideology. African American culture is represented on Folkways through multiple genres and forms of expression as socially, geographically, and culturally heterogeneous; rich in history; linked to but distinct from African and other Afro-diasporic forms of expression; and expressive of a long and continuing struggle against oppression with which all Americans should be united.

In the historical context of the fifties and sixties, in which African American access to the mainstream culture industries as performers, writers, or producers was still severely restricted, Folkways' extensive and varied recordings of black culture are remarkable and commendable. On the other hand, however, whatever Asch's and his contributors' intentions, Folkways' quest for authentic folk also compulsively repeats in a new form the primitivist search for the origins of black culture, as Hughes exposed in *Ask Your Mama*. In constructing and instructing approaches to a more democratic form of listening, in part through its representation of authentic sound, Folkways Records participated in the history of sound recording as "a technology of the self" through which "social elites developed a particular kind of knowledge about those less powerful than themselves through their music" (Bergh and DeNora 109; Goldsmith 4). While Goldsmith also credits Folkways with providing a "means through which some traditional musicians . . . came to regard themselves as the bearer of a unique 'culture' that had a value that could be marketed," that "value" was ultimately defined in relation to those "cultural and intellectual elites" who sought in the consumption of recorded music and sound new, usable codes of authenticity that could serve in the production and performance of their own identity (5).

Asch's approach to niche marketing further reveals the extent to which Folkways' idealized, democratic listener was specifically and narrowly defined. "People who buy these records of sounds are individuals that read books," Asch stated in one interview, appealing to potential consumers: "They are mostly professional people, in the upper-middle class, and homeowners" (qtd. in Anderson 212n8). While the early recorded sound industry's dualistic approach to market segmentation imagined local audiences for local music and mass audiences for mass-popular music, the postwar music industry and independent companies like Folkways recognized

that narrowly defined markets demarcated not by geographical proximity but by shared consumption habits could be cultivated and even invented around specific kinds of cultural objects.<sup>81</sup> To put it another way, while Paramount Records in the 1920s marketed race records to African American audiences largely of the urban north, Folkways Records remarketed those same records alongside a diverse range of recorded music and sound from around the world to middle-class, politically left-leaning, and predominantly white educators and connoisseurs of folk and blues. After Asch and Distler's brief flirtation with the possibility of a popular hit contributed to the demise of Disc Records, they concentrated through Folkways on a specific set of narrowly defined niche markets that could be relied upon to purchase the label's unique documentary experiment in folk sound. These markets included schools (for both student learning and teacher training), museums, and libraries (Olmsted 104). The remarkable growth of the children's, educational, and folk music market for recorded sound in the fifties and sixties made this business model a smart if not exactly lucrative bet, especially as public anxiety about the new medium of television elevated recorded sound as its safe, educational, and more interactive "antidote" (Smith, *Spoken Word* 8). Additionally, Folkways' promotional strategies, practically designed to fit its shoestring advertising budget, "was always about Folkways Records as an entity" rather than individual performers or recordings, cultivating a consumer base around the reputation of the brand and its central product: authentic sound (Olmsted 186). Distinct sub-categories of Folkways' catalog and certain stand-out records and musicians of course circulated among other niche audiences—devotees and scholars of jazz, folk, and certain

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<sup>81</sup> Though the age of niche marketing is usually situated later, in the seventies and eighties, and in contrast to the mass marketing and mass consumerism of Fordism, Cohen (292–344) and Jacob Smith (*Spoken Word* 1–12) offer compelling accounts of the development of niche marketing and "narrowcasting" in the postwar era, while Miller historicizes the recorded sound industry's even earlier experiments with market segmentation in his study of the southern music trade (51–84).

forms of regional music, for example—but the concentration on educational markets helped build Folkways’ brand as a serious documenter.

Folkways’ brand cultivated the growth of a niche market of self-identified “serious” listeners who also saw their consumption of recorded sound media as part of a countercultural search for more authentic, socially responsible, and democratic forms of living in the consumerist, conformist, and silent 1950s. As Cantwell argues, the “real milieu” of the folk revival that Folkways helped spur “was extra- or subtelevisual, one of records, concerts, and clubs” (201) because it increasingly forged a sense of alternative community and progressive identity against mass consumerism through the consumption of recorded sound as an alternative form of cultural capital. Asch also actively promoted the medium of recorded sound as more authentic and socially progressive than television or film. “Folkways is a documentor,” Asch stated, “We believe that sound has more truth than sight” (qtd. in Anderson 212 n.8). As Folkways records entered schools, libraries, and private homes, they did so as examples of “true” documents celebrating the diversity of the world and the democracy of American culture that reinforced an emerging multiculturalism in American education and new forms of educational media, helping to teach a generation of young people how to listen to and consume cultural difference in the postwar decades of racial, social, and political crisis.

However, while these listeners participated and were trained in those forms of democratic listening promoted by Folkways Records, they themselves largely represented an elite, privileged class of consumers whose countercultural performances and alignments presupposed their innate capacity to access, understand, and assimilate through the act of listening the decontextualized cultural expressions of the world’s marginalized people. This is not to deny that such performances can and did help spur some of these same cultural elites into forms of social and

political activism in solidarity with antiracist and anticolonialist movements in the U.S. and internationally in ways that would have a profound effect on consensus attitudes in American society. In the context of a crisis moment in mainstream, middle-class American identity, Folkways Records became one important site for the circulation of the fantasy of authentic belonging, self, and attachment through supposedly more immediate, less mediated, sensory experiences of listening and through acts of collective memory and recovery. Yet as Folkways Records redefined the meaning and location of folk sound for the crisis in listening, relocating authenticity from an embodied folk source onto the medium of sound recording itself, it also enabled the continued reification of “sonic blackness” by predominantly white audiences.

### **The Voice of the Poet**

While Folkways Records as an institution strove to redefine the meaning of folk sound for its audiences, many of the voices recorded and released on the label themselves represented various efforts to translate and transport authentic folk experience to new audiences through artistic forms. Some of Folkways’ most successful artists and recorders were those who established their own reputations as recorders, “cultural brokers,” and interpreters of “the folk,” such as Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Guy Carawan, Tony Schwartz, and, of course, Langston Hughes. Hughes’s records for Folkways reflect not only the label’s project and catalog but his own efforts to represent, translate, and market black vernacular experience—as well as his own work—for diverse audiences and through a wide range of genres and media. By the 1950s, Hughes had achieved literary celebrity status among white and black, and lower-class and middle-class American audiences. Although his publicized appearance in front of McCarthy in

1953, hounding by the conservative press, and self-suppression of his radical work had led to denouncements on the far sides of the political spectrum, for many Americans, Hughes's status as "spokesman" and "poet laureate of the Negro race" only solidified during this period.<sup>82</sup> For Folkways Records' audience, Hughes would have been familiar from his already decades-long association with leftist groups and social causes, public appearance on NBC's radio program *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, lecture tours and literary events, and published works with Knopf. Indeed, Hughes directly marketed his work to this audience much as, in a different way, he marketed his work to African American middle-class readers through his writing for the *Chicago Defender*, tours and speaking events at black universities and institutions, dramatic productions in black theaters, and support for younger African American writers. This characterization, however, overstates the division between "black" and "white" audiences. Many of Hughes's works and public appearances were consumed and designed to be consumed by diverse audiences simultaneously.

Critics have commented on Hughes's repackaging of his work for various audiences in the 1950s, often derisively. Arnold Rampersad and Karen Jackson Ford, for example, center on Hughes's suppression of his radical verse and characterize his appeal to white, middle-class audiences as a cynical, commercial ploy derived from his need to make a living that at times overshadowed and conflicted with his desire to speak *to* and not only *of* the black lower classes. Other critics, such as Faith Berry, Brian Dolinar, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, Daniel Won-gu Kim, Jonathan Scott, and Smethurst, offer different accounts of Hughes's postwar works as deft

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<sup>82</sup> Alain Locke was the first to apply the moniker "spokesman" to Hughes in a 1926 review of his first book, *The Weary Blues* (qtd. in Raymond Smith 120). The source of the "poet laureate" phrase is debated, sometimes attributed to Carl Van Vechten or even Hughes himself (Rampersad, *Life* 1:330), but was already enough in circulation in the 1920s that one negative review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* dismissed him as "the poet 'low-rate' of Harlem" (qtd. in Rampersad, *Life* 1:140).

negotiations of divergent audiences that represent, in Smethurst's words, Hughes's exploration of how radical themes could "be expressed in the 'high' cold war era in which it is not only dangerous to express radical political positions directly but also practically difficult, since the institutions . . . had collapsed or were becoming increasingly isolated" (*New Red Negro* 163). In my view, Hughes efforts to find, create, and exploit both new and established markets for his work was in part motivated by commercial gain (his financial concerns are well-documented), but in seeking to expand audiences for African American writers, challenge racial bias and outright discrimination in the culture industries, and promote mainstream visibility of African American speakers and social issues, Hughes also challenged and changed those markets even as he remained circumscribed within them. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Hughes's work during this period is suffused with an awareness of the untenable position of the African American artist within the culture industries.

The "voice" played back in Hughes's recorded performances inscribes its own ambivalence, at once inhabiting and not inhabiting the persona of Langston Hughes, representing and refusing to represent the speech of "the folk," broadcasting and censoring radical political positions, and constructing and deconstructing how racial difference is heard. The Folkways album *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, released in 1955, offers one example through which to explore this phenomenon. The album features Hughes reading poems from his 1932 children's book of the same name with explication and commentary. Like the book, the album of *The Dream Keeper* is designed for children and situated among the other remediated children's books that Hughes released on Folkways: *The Glory of Negro History*, *Rhythms of the World*, and *The Story of Jazz*. These works correspond with Hughes's broader turn toward children's literature in the fifties, particularly through his *First* series for publisher Franklin Watts. Alongside Hughes's

*Selected Poems*, his children's works of the fifties are most often held up by critics as evidence of his retreat from radicalism to a minor genre largely seen as "safe" and apolitical, especially given his significant suppression of relevant political content within these works. Hughes's Folkways album *The Glory of Negro History*, for example, and the books on which it is based (*The First Book of Negroes* and *Famous American Negroes*), do not include any mention of W. E. B. Du Bois in the survey of illuminati from African American history.<sup>83</sup> However, as we saw with Tony Schwartz's recordings of children, precisely because children's media represented a "safe" genre, it could be used to bypass adult biases and educate adult as well as child listeners toward socially conscious (if not exactly avidly political) orientations. By considering the album of *The Dream Keeper* in the larger Folkways context and its construction of democratic listening, folk sound, and audience, we are able to hear how Hughes navigated his role as spokesman during this era, both contributing to and challenging the circulation of "the folk" in the discourse of liberal multiculturalism.

*The Dream Keeper*, recorded roughly twenty years after the publication of the book, departs from the printed text most notably through its resequencing of select poems and the addition of extra-literary commentary.<sup>84</sup> In both the original print publication and the record, Hughes groups poems thematically, following his usual approach to selection and organization. But while the order of the groupings in the 1932 book appears somewhat arbitrary, the recording marshals the themes into narrative arcs. The record's two sides offer two different origin stories

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<sup>83</sup> Rampersad chronicles Franklin Watts' censoring pressure on Hughes for the books but as Goldsmith notes, Asch exerted no such pressure (Rampersad, *Life* 2:191; Goldsmith 245–46). Asch even issued his own recorded interview with Du Bois on a 1962 record. Despite such glaring omissions, Jonathan Scott argues that Hughes's children's work of the 1950s, along with his other Cold War works, reveal an "internalization of socialism" that aimed to prepare young people for the "anticipated . . . eradication of white racial oppression" and new populist democracy (223, 11).

<sup>84</sup> Since *The Dream Keeper* in its print publication was already a selection of poems largely published elsewhere and for adult readers, the album marked at least a third (and for most poems more) re-presentation of the work.

for Hughes's identity as a poet. On side A, he begins with his experience as a traveler and confrontation with the peoples of the world (and their poverty); on side B, he opens with his interest in African American vernacular culture and music. The recurring trope of "dreaming" is initially defined as a universal human desire that drives creativity, innovation, and "progress": "All the progress that human beings have made on this old earth of ours grew out of dreams" (*Dream Keeper* liner notes).<sup>85</sup> But as the album progresses the term takes on particular meanings specific to the African American struggle for access to the American dream. Hughes presents his socially and racially conscious work only after establishing a biographical (rather than ideological) origin for his poetry; on the first side, this means that he delays poems about his travels to Africa until after describing trips to Europe and Mexico, altering the order in which he actually visited these places. He then uses the poems about Africa as a way to move back in time and place to an American racial context informed by the legacy of slavery. The second side continues themes specific to African American experience, but again Hughes leaves more political verses for the end, establishing first his biographical interest in spirituals, the blues, and jazz. Both sides, though, culminate in sequences that direct youthful listeners to join the civil rights struggle. Side A concludes with the poem "I, Too," introduced with Hughes's explanation that "there is still a way for the Negro—and democracy—to go" in the realization of "the American dream." Side B concludes with a reading of the poem "Youth" and a call for all young people to "march / Americans together!" Issued just one year after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Hughes's album makes poems written twenty years earlier or more speak to contemporary causes and listeners.

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<sup>85</sup> The liner notes to the album *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, like most of Hughes's children's albums for Folkways, include a complete transcript of the recording, which I cite here for consistency.

Listening to *The Dream Keeper* album, I hear a delicate voice exercise, one that continues in the medium of recorded sound the complex negotiation of authorial presence and relation to “folk” expression that defines many of Hughes’s print poems and texts. Frequently, and especially at the beginning of each record side, he weaves poems with his oft-recited stories about his childhood, his travel as a sailor, and his days as a young poet, asserting that the poems straightforwardly express the personal and often instantaneously composed thoughts of the poet based on things seen and experienced. In his description of the source for the poem “Mexican Market Woman,” for example, Hughes states that it was a direct and immediate representation of a woman he saw in the market of Toluca: “this old woman had come into town one day with a bag of vegetables on her back that she spread out on the earth in market place to sell. So I wrote: This ancient hag . . .” (*Dream Keeper* liner notes; ellipses in orig.). Since Hughes frequently presented his poetry to audiences generally unfamiliar with poetry, including audiences of children, descriptions such as this one demystify the writing process by linking it directly to the author’s personal life, suggesting that the poetic voice that speaks is Hughes’s own and follows spontaneous codes and methods of vernacular expression. The poems, however, often complicate this interpretation, most obviously by assuming the voices of personae or an expansive, communal first-person perspective, as in “I, Too,” that exceeds Hughes’s personal voice. On the album, Hughes also often presents the personal experiences that inspired his poems as moments when he was a listener or observer to the experiences and expressions of others. In doing so, he frames his writing process as a record of critical and democratic listening.

When Hughes speaks in his poems in the the voices of others—and particularly in poems inspired by the blues, spirituals, prayer, and everyday speech of the “low-down folk”—his performance walks a delicate line that attempts, in Lorenzo Thomas’s words, “not to impersonate

the unlettered but to elevate their idiom to a plane on which its poetic qualities would be recognized” (194). While Hughes sometimes moves from discursive commentary to reading a poem without varying his voice, as in the opening sequence of the first side of *The Dream Keeper*, elsewhere he registers the switch from commentary to vernacular poems vocally in ways that mark a difference between them without exactly “doing the voices.” Hughes’s performance of “Wide River” is the most performative and playful on the album. In that poem, Hughes adopts a deeper tone and includes elements of dialect; when he reads the lines, “I got to cross that river / An’ git to ma baby somehow, / Cross that river, / Git to ma baby somehow,” his pitch raises sharply on the second “cross” and his voice cracks. Even in this example, however, Hughes’s performance wavers between such bluesy flourishes and the more prosaic, higher-pitched voice he has established on the recording as his own. Moreover, the poem’s persona is framed extensively by a preface about the formal qualities of the blues and its combination of sorrow and humor that make it clear that Hughes is signifying on standard blues performance tropes rather than the authentic voice of a “folk” speaker. In the rhetoric of the album as a whole, Hughes’s negotiated and subtle performance of black vernacular speech and music aims not to capture the essence of authentic blackness for his audience’s uncritical consumption but to encourage his audiences to celebrate the resiliency and creativity of black culture as a means of challenging oppressive racial and economic regimes that keep the “dream deferred.”

Hughes’s recorded performance on *The Dream Keeper*, and particularly his rhetorical use of commentary with lyric to further arguments about social consciousness, replays and repurposes performance protocols Hughes developed in early in his career. Thomas describes the codification of Hughes’s performance style during a reading tour to southern black colleges and

institutions in 1931 and 1932 as at once in the tradition of and in rejection of the dialect performances of earlier race representatives like Paul Laurence Dunbar:

Hughes understood what his audience wanted. Fashionable and debonair, employing a slightly sardonic tone, he read his poems with precise and elegant diction—even those written in the blues stanza form. . . In all of his poetry, and his performance style, the character and experience of his personae are revealed by the words that Langston Hughes has chosen for them, not by a stage accent.

(194)

Adapting the performance styles of the “poet-performer movement” of the 1870s–1930s, African American oratory and literary performance of the early twentieth century, and the vernacular style of an emerging Depression-era interest in folklore, Hughes incorporated his poetry into lecture-like performances that offered both significant autobiographical commentary on his origins as a writer and social commentary on issues of segregation, racism, labor and economics, and international anticolonial and socialist movements (Thomas 191–92). Hughes, in his own account of the literary program that he established on this first reading tour, explains that he often began by emphasizing his midwestern “Americanness”: “I began my programs quite simply by telling where I was born in Missouri, that I grew up in Kansas in the geographical heart of the country, and was, therefore very American” (*I Wonder* 85). After reading poems written during his high school years and early career, many of which adopted vernacular personae and blues-inspired verse to get his audience engaged, he would then introduce “documentary, journalistic and topical” poems on racial injustice that he hoped would provoke his “nonliterary listeners . . . to think in terms of their own problems” (87). The program would invariably conclude with the hopeful crowd-pleaser “I, Too” (88). As Raymond Smith argues,

Hughes's affirmation of a midwestern American identity pulls against his simultaneous claim, "I am a Negro," and his black vernacular aesthetic and subject matter, to inscribe the experience of double consciousness (131).

As reading tours became Hughes's major source of income, he shuffled between a few different basic scripts of this kind, modified only slightly the specific context and current events. In a recording of a reading Hughes gave at the San Francisco Poetry Center on December 5, 1958, for example, the poet's opening site-specific introductory remarks soon give way to the familiar thematic narrative, beginning with stories about his poetic origins, transitioning to topical, antiracist material, and concluding with "I, Too." Rampersad characterizes the consistency of Hughes's performance style as a kind of mindless repetition that he likens to a sound recording: "In most places, Hughes simply spun the old scratchy Gramophone disc of his program" (*Life* 1:382). Hughes's recorded performances, including his Folkways records but also recordings made at "live" events, do make clear the almost monotonous consistency of his literary programs. Yet while Rampersad frames Hughes's repetitive performance style as automatic, passive, and at an increasing distance from the authentic folk "source" of his poetry, Hughes's honed performance style is also what made him a successful public figure, one whose reliable and repeatable performance of a certain kind of "voice" could become an object, a commodity, that would circulate far beyond its physical source.

As Hughes's crafted negotiation of voice did circulate on records, radio, and eventually television, however, its critical reception varied widely as listeners compared the aural voice with their experience of the written one and their expectations for black performance. While an early review of his first recording, *Poems by Langston Hughes*, praised Hughes's "simple, vigorous and friendly" performance and his "successful fusion" of poetry and social commentary

(qtd. in Rampersad 2:107), a brief 1955 *New York Times* review of *The Dream Keeper* critically noted that “it is hard to tell poetry and prose narrative apart,” concluding that “[t]he poet is not especially gifted as a reader” (Rev. of *The Dream Keeper*). More recently, when Smithsonian Folkways released in 1995 an album of selected readings from Hughes’s Folkways recordings, *The Voice of Langston Hughes*, a reviewer for *Rolling Stone* disparaged Hughes’s “oral delivery,” stating that while “[h]is slightly nasal voice maintains the deliberate simplicity that makes his poetry so elegant and accessible . . . his presentation makes the rhythmic demands of oral communication seem beyond him” (Touré n. pag.). Even contemporary scholars of Hughes’s work sometimes express disappointment at his performance style when encountering it on recordings, as Lesley Wheeler does, for example, in her “close listening” of a 1959 recording of Hughes reading “Dream Boogie,” recorded by the Library of Congress. “Complexity of printed voice yields, in recording, to lyric smoothness,” she asserts, pointing to Hughes’s intractably midwestern accent, his failure or unwillingness to perform the poem’s multiple voices, and his performance of stable rhythm and rhyme (87). She couches her disappointment by acknowledging that the recording context might be a contributing factor—“perhaps Hughes read differently at the Library of Congress than he did for predominantly black crowds”—and speculating that Hughes’s personal experience with McCarthyism might have made it even more necessary “to speak to different audiences in different ‘voices’” (87, 88).

We cannot recover enough data about the range of Hughes’s performance style to definitively describe its audience-specific range. However, written accounts and the recordings we do have suggest that Hughes did not so much project “different ‘voices’” as he worked to craft one ambivalent voice and persona that could speak multiply to different audiences and through different public and counterpublic institutions simultaneously. Hughes’s continued

success on the lecture circuit, the popularity of his Chicago *Defender* column, and the overwhelmingly positive responses to some of his most public performances—including, for example, his 1944 appearance on the popular radio program *America's Town Meeting of the Air* on the subject of “the race question” and, in 1958, a jazz poetry performance televised on NBC—suggest that Hughes’s performance style did appeal to many listeners (Rampersad, *Life* 2:83–84, 284). As I’ve argued, the voice that Hughes crafted through performance primarily and paradoxically works by vacating that same voice at certain moments, a performance that draws attention to the construction of the poetic persona as noncoincident to the poet himself, as Wheeler acknowledges, but that also invites *and* evades the audience’s own aural projections of “sonic blackness,” especially in relation to timbre. Hughes’s “slightly nasal” and midwestern accent, his refusal of impersonation, and his “genial public persona” bypass these constructions, in part by evoking the increasingly codified sound of a homogenized “American” voice in radio and television (Wheeler 87).

Originally crafted in the thirties, the voice that Hughes replayed in the fifties looked back to the Harlem Renaissance and his own central role in the literary and artistic movement, in part through the repetition of blues-inspired and vernacular poems composed during that era. However, Hughes’s early conception of and representation of folk music and sound in this poetry also emerged in conversation with the commercial music industry of the twenties (Steven Tracy). Curiously, then, like Folkways Records and its reissues of early race and hillbilly records as authentic folk music, Hughes’s performances of vernacular and blues poetry also recirculate his own representation of a black vernacular voice that was, in its origins, entangled with the recorded music industry and early academic folklore. However, while Folkways’ reissues and techniques of recording largely left unquestioned the authenticity of this earlier music in pursuit

of its authentic sound, Hughes's ambivalent performance of vernacular speech in his literary programs especially draws attention to his "failure" to accurately inhabit that voice. This is why I like Rampersad's metaphor for Hughes's consistent performance style; while "old scratchy Gramophone disc[s]" would come to evoke for many of Folkways' listeners the sound of authenticity itself, Hughes, in positioning himself as both an imperfect recording and a flawed playback technology, produces interference in the determining mechanics of the medium and in the sonic commodity.

### Chapter 3

#### “Experiments in the Broadcasting of Poetry”: The Founding of Pacifica Radio

At a reading at the Poetry Center at San Francisco State College on December 5, 1958, Langston Hughes warmed up the crowd by recalling fondly his earlier experiences in the city with Noel Sullivan and Josephine Miles and by crediting San Francisco poets “for starting recently the vogue of reading poetry to jazz”:

Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Patchen began that form of poetry reading out here a year or so ago and it’s since spread to the east coast, and seems to be spreading all over the country. And now a great many people seem to be disappointed when I come to read my poems that I don’t have a jazz band with me. Well, the Poetry Center doesn’t furnish jazz bands as yet, but maybe the next time.

(“Langston Hughes: December 5, 1958 Reading”)

With characteristic coyness, Hughes attributed to the San Francisco scene a phenomenon that many attributed to him. Kenneth Rexroth, for example, in an article published in *The Nation* that same year on “Jazz Poetry,” states that “Langston Hughes recited poems to jazz” decades before the Beat “fad” (68).<sup>86</sup> Certainly by this time Hughes was regularly giving what he called “poetry-to-jazz” performances, and he had even asked Ruth Witt-Diamant, the founder and director of the Poetry Center, to find out if any local universities or clubs might be interested in such a program during his visit (Poetry Center Records 4). Though he performed with jazz musicians several times during his West Coast tour, during his short stop in the Bay Area he stuck to his

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<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, Rexroth embroidered anecdotes about Hughes, Maxwell Bodenheim, and himself performing poetry with jazz accompaniment in the 1920s at the Chicago bohemian club The Green Mask (Interview 240; “Poetry and Jazz at the Blackhawk” n. pag.).

well-established repertoire of poems and commentary at the Poetry Center, the University of California–Berkeley, a local NAACP unit in Palo Alto, and a junior college in Monterey.<sup>87</sup>

Witt-Diamant and the Poetry Center’s secretary Ida Hodes proposed an additional and different sort of public appearance for Hughes’s work, one that appealed to another of his longtime interests even if it offered no pay. The Poetry Center, Hodes explained in a letter dated September 4, 1958, had developed a close relationship with their local, noncommercial FM radio station KPFA in Berkeley, which was interested in recording for broadcast an interview and a reading of some of his poems. “They have programmed,” she accurately noted, “just about every poet who has come to read for the Poetry Center” (Poetry Center Records 4). Hughes, always interested in good publicity, consented, and on December 10 he recorded an interview with Eleanor McKinney for the regularly scheduled program *Meet the Writer*. In January of 1959, KPFA broadcast the interview and a taped recording of Hughes’s University of California performance in the first of what would be many appearances by Hughes on the Pacifica Radio network.<sup>88</sup> It was not, however, the first time that Hughes’s recorded voice had been heard by KPFA listeners; five years earlier the station had aired in its entirety the Folkways Records album *Anthology of Negro Poetry* (1954), edited and compiled by Arna Bontemps, which included recordings of Hughes performing “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “I, Too.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Hughes also appeared on San Francisco public television station KQED, which broadcast an interview with the visiting writer on the program *Books and Authors* and played tracks from his recently released poetry-to-jazz record *Weary Blues* (Hughes Papers 3538). Like KPFA, KQED’s broadcasting of poetry was in part due to the influence of poet Richard O. Moore, who worked for KQED after leaving KPFA.

<sup>88</sup> In the 1960s, for example, Hughes appeared on Pacifica’s New York station WBAI several times to read from *Ask Your Mama*, give an interview, and participate in a charged discussion on “The Negro in American Culture” with James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, critic Alfred Kazin, publisher Emile Capouya, and moderator Nat Hentoff.

<sup>89</sup> KPFA frequently broadcast complete Folkways albums, including those of Hughes and Tony Schwartz. Moses Asch appeared on the Berkeley station for a 1955 interview, and Tony Schwartz’s radio program, *The Sounds of New York*, regularly aired on WBAI and several other Pacifica stations in the 1960s.

By appearing on KPFA, Hughes also participated in a San Francisco Renaissance phenomenon that was linked to and at least as important as performing poetry with jazz or reading at the Poetry Center. Since Pacifica Radio's founding in 1946 by a group of Bay Area pacifists, and since its first station KPFA went on the air in Berkeley in 1949, the broadcasting of poetry had been central to a programming schedule that also included classical and folk music, radio dramas from the BBC Third Programme, and public affairs roundtables, interviews, commentaries, and documentaries. Pacifica Radio was the brainchild of Lewis Hill, a committed pacifist and World War II conscientious objector who had worked for the ACLU and as a radio announcer before launching the nation's first listener-sponsored radio network. Hill was also a poet who had studied philosophy and literature at Stanford University, published poems in the pacifist literary magazine *Illiterati*, and developed friendships with William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Richard Moore, Kenneth Rexroth, and Dylan Thomas, paving the way for the ongoing involvement of poets with KPFA and Pacifica Radio. In the fifties and sixties, KPFA became the unofficial broadcasting home for the poets and poetry of the San Francisco Renaissance. To name just a few examples of poet's involvement with the station: Jack Spicer briefly hosted a folk music program; Rexroth taped a weekly book review and commentary program; Allen Ginsberg read from *Howl and Other Poems*; Helen Adam performed ballads; and Lawrence Ferlinghetti composed poems especially for KPFA. The station also regularly broadcast readings by and interviews with writers visiting the Poetry Center, the University of California, and other venues in the area. These poets helped KPFA and Pacifica Radio find a niche as the broadcast voice of the counterculture, and shaped and challenged the station's programming, broadcasting aesthetics, and mission. At the same time, access to an independent, noncommercial, local radio station helped poets publicize new work (including unpublished

work), experiment with new forms of performance, promote events, and stay informed on the happenings, publications, and gossip of the local literary scene.

This chapter initiates a sustained investigation, which will take place across the next two chapters, into the poetics of the Pacifica Radio network during roughly its first fifteen years of broadcasting on KPFA in Berkeley.<sup>90</sup> In the chapters that follow—on the poetic foundations of Pacifica Radio, and the mutually constitutive relationship between KPFA and the San Francisco Renaissance—my focus will be on the poets who played central roles in station history, who participated in associated literary and listening communities and networks, and whose work evinces an engagement with broadcast media and figures of radio, sound, and listening. These especially include poets and literary scenes loosely associated with what has become known as “the New American poetry,” after the title of Donald Allen’s groundbreaking 1960 anthology. Many of the poets included in *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, such as William Everson, Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), and Paul Blackburn, had significant connections to Pacifica Radio—connections that reflect the oral and *aural* emphasis of the “new” poetry.

Yet it is important to emphasize that poetry programming on the Pacifica network—which in addition to KPFA and WBAI now includes independently operated stations in Los Angeles (KPFK), Washington, D.C. (WPFW), and Houston (KPFT), as well as numerous affiliates around the country—has never been limited to local writers or the New American poets, as Hughes’s several appearances make clear. In its sixty-five years on the air, Pacifica Radio stations have consistently put poetry on the schedule, programming a surprisingly diverse

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<sup>90</sup> In this chapter and the next, I occasionally treat Pacifica Radio and Berkeley station KPFA as though they are identical and interchangeable entities since in the early years they largely were, sharing staff, leadership, offices, and mission until Hill’s death in 1957 and the founding of Los Angeles station KPFK in 1959 resulted in a more independent national network and local station management.

range of poets and poetry that complicates dominant literary historical narratives of American poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not to mention assumptions about where poetry is heard and by whom. At the height of the so-called anthology wars, which pitted the “raw” poets in Allen’s anthology against the “cooked” new formalists in Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s *New Poets of England and America* (1957), Pacifica Radio stations broadcast, cheek by jowl, the poetry of Gertrude Stein and Robert Frost, Allen Tate and Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and Randall Jarrell, and Elizabeth Bishop and Amiri Baraka.<sup>91</sup> By the year 2000, poetry from most of the poetic movements of the last century had been heard on Pacifica stations at one time or another, including the movements of European and American modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, proletarian poetry, the objectivists, confessionalism, the Southern Agrarians, the Black Mountain school, the New York school, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Arts movement, the Umbra workshop, deep image poetry, Language poetry, new formalism, and spoken word and slam poetry.

Even this list gives only a partial view of Pacifica Radio’s poetry programming, in which some of the most frequently appearing and popular programs have been those featuring the poetry of other nations and languages and of earlier historical time periods; of prisoners, students, and unpublished local writers; and, especially, of the political poetry of liberation movements and consciousness-raising that first emerged in the sixties and seventies in the context of black nationalist, “Third World,” Asian American, Chicano, American Indian, feminist, and LGBT movements, and that continues to be heard in various forms to the present day on Pacifica stations. I do not intend to sharply delineate between aesthetics and politics, or literary and political movements here, nor do I intend to imply that all political or

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<sup>91</sup> See Rasula on the politics of anthologization and canonization during this period.

“consciousness-raising” poetry shares the same aesthetic or formal qualities. A poet like Amiri Baraka, for example—one of Pacifica’s favorite and most frequently broadcast poets—could be considered in several of these categories. Indeed, my larger point is that listening to the diverse poetries broadcast on Pacifica stations has the effect of breaking down assumptions about what “mainstream,” “avant-garde,” or “political” poetry sounds like, and who writes and who listens to it.

KPFA’s program guide for January 18–31, 1959, in which Hughes’s interview and reading are scheduled for broadcast, gives a sense of the range of poetry programming in the heart of the period I study. A cover feature by Bill Butler, the director of the Drama and Literature Department, describes or rather refuses to describe the philosophy behind their programming decisions: “Literature, to one who loves it, is a religion, and no rational man philosophizes about his religion.” Leaving philosophy behind, Butler instead highlights a new “writers’ workshop” program, in which local writer-listeners, selected on the merit of submissions sent to the station, participate in an on-air workshop led by Wallace Stegner and other guest directors.<sup>92</sup> Additional scheduled broadcasts for these two weeks include Hughes’s reading and interview, a recording of May Swenson reading at the University of California, a talk by Hungarian poet and journalist Tibor Tollas, a program of Robert Burns’s poetry in celebration of his 200th birthday, a lecture by Babette Deutsch on “Poetry in the Age of Anxiety,” and Rexroth’s weekly *Books* program. The international scope of the poetry schedule is framed in relation to a more local literary scene through the writers’ workshop and local

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<sup>92</sup> In his role as Drama and Literature Director for KPFA, Butler was committed to cultivating local, unpublished, and aspiring writers. In addition to the writers’ workshop announced in this *Folio*, he initiated a literary magazine of the air—one of Hill’s own unrealized projects—curated from writer-listeners’ submissions. These initiatives were short-lived, but listener interest and participation is evidenced by a fascinating collection of listener submissions, with occasionally extensive commentary by Butler, held at the University of Maryland Special Collections (Pacifica Records [UMD] 4:15).

venues represented, but also in the pages of the program guide itself, which includes advertisements for San Francisco literary hubs City Lights Pocket Bookshop and Cody's Books (*KPFA Folio* Jan. 18–31, 1959).<sup>93</sup>

My attention in the following two paired chapters to Pacifica Radio's connections to the San Francisco Renaissance is thus necessarily selective and narrow. It is not, however, arbitrary. By examining the mutually constructing history and relationship of Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance, these chapters argue that Bay Area poets played a crucial role in defining Pacifica Radio's pacifist, cultural, and educational mission, its broadcasting aesthetics, and its programming, helping to make the radio network a vanguard in alternative media. At the same time, I'm interested in how these poets used, represented, and thought about radio as a potential medium for poetry, and how, in turn, their poetic practices were shaped and developed by their involvement with radio. These chapters also extend my investigation into a Cold War crisis in listening, since both Pacifica Radio and many Bay Area poets from the late 1940s through the 1960s represented and responded to early Cold War American society through discourses and technologies of sound, listening, and voice. While Pacifica founder Lewis Hill fought for the citizen's literal right to hear the full diversity of political opinion and cultural production in the context of Cold War conscription, censorship, and consumerism, many San Francisco poets sought new forms of poetry and performance that would connect poetry to its perceived oral, bardic, and communitarian roots in rejection of an Eliotic poetics of impersonality and Cold War

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<sup>93</sup> Another advertisement in this *Folio* unrelated to poetry programming—a promotion for special rates for FM radios with the purchase of a KPFA subscription—points to the challenging media context in which KPFA broadcast in the 1950s. During the station's first decade of broadcasting, FM receivers were rare and FM radio stations struggled to survive against the powerful lobbying interests of the major AM networks. Although the situation had begun to improve by the late fifties, KPFA sold its own FM receivers in subscription packages in an effort to solve two problems at once: the paucity of FM receivers for sale in the area, and the need to convince listeners to pay for a signal they could pick up for free. The promotion had apparently earned KPFA at least one notable listener-subscriber: Lawrence Ferlinghetti supposedly first began subscribing to KPFA for its discounted FM receiver (Doyle 108), and sold them in his City Lights bookstore (Starr 194).

containment culture. The crisis in listening was also played out on America's airwaves, as profound changes in the technology, industry, regulation, and aesthetics of broadcasting alongside the broader social and cultural movements of the 1950s and 1960s meant that who spoke and who listened—and why, how, and through what medium—became radically undecided and fiercely debated questions.

In this chapter, I trace the shared genealogy of Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance by focusing on the history of war resistance and conscientious objection during World War II, the changing cultural landscapes of radio broadcasting and American poetry after the war, and the foundation and early broadcasting of Pacifica and station KPFA. Lewis Hill's and William Everson's experiences as conscientious objectors in Civilian Public Service camps during the war shaped their respective views on how poetry could further the embattled cause for peace. At a Fine Arts camp established by Everson in Waldport, Oregon, conscientious objectors negotiated a fraught relationship between radical pacifism, creative artistic production, individual conscience, and cooperative community that informed Everson's and Hill's evolving views on the marginalized peace movement and its viability and limitations after the war. This history provides an important reference point for thinking about the politics of art and community in San Francisco at midcentury, and the background of a counterculture which would trace its origins in part to a small group of war resisters who experimented with forms of art, collective living, sexuality, and political commitments that ran decidedly counter to the ideologies of mainstream wartime and postwar American culture.

I then turn to the founding of Pacifica Radio in the context of this history of World War II-era pacifism and Hill's critique of commercial radio and broader sense of a crisis in communication in postwar American society. In response to this crisis, Hill and the other

pacifists and poets who founded Pacifica Radio and KPFA made poetry central to the station's early, idealistic reimagining of the purpose, aesthetics, and audience of radio broadcasting. In doing so, they engaged similar issues as those debated at the Waldport camp and in pacifist periodicals about the role of cultural production and aesthetics in sustaining a more public and radicalized peace movement. The context of radio, however, and the FM radio in particular, reframed these questions in relation to radiophony's peculiar mediation of voice and listening ear, and its notions of privacy and publicity. This chapter thus establishes the poetics of Pacifica Radio under the leadership of Hill, from 1946 to his death in 1957, as the ground on which poets during these and subsequent years negotiated a relationship to the network as performers, commentators, and listeners. San Francisco Renaissance poets like Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Spicer were especially instrumental in shifting and remapping this ground; their interventions in Pacifica's early aesthetics, mission, assumptions, and reception—and their own poetic responses to a heavily mediated Cold War crisis in listening—are the subject of chapter 4.

### **Lewis Hill, William Everson, and the Poetics of War Resistance**

In the early summer of 1944, Lewis Hill—poet, lobbyist for the ACLU's National Committee on Conscientious Objectors (NCCO), and news announcer for radio station WINX in Washington, D.C.—received a letter from fellow poet and pacifist William Everson.<sup>94</sup> It had taken some time to reach him, detouring first through a Civilian Public Service (CPS) camp for conscientious objectors (COs) in Coleville, California where Hill had served for sixteen months

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<sup>94</sup> My knowledge of Everson's letter and its contents comes from Hill's reply of June 29, 1944 (Untide Records 2), discussed below, and Everson's reply to that letter of July 11, 1944 (Everson Papers 14:1).

(Lasar, *Pacifica* 15). In the letter, Everson announced the official establishment of an arts-focused initiative at a CPS camp in Waldport, Oregon, which proposed to bring together in one place the pacifist artists, writers, and musicians currently dispersed in CPS camps across the country. By the end of the war, the Waldport camp would become a locus of a remarkable amount of artistic production by COs—from book arts to music, painting, theater, and crafts—redefining the meaning and purpose of the arts for the marginalized peace movement.<sup>95</sup> Everson, unaware that Hill had been released on 4-F status for a worsening spinal arthritis condition, wrote as he had to many CO poets to ask for support and extend an invitation to transfer to join the Fine Arts group at Waldport.

In Hill's letter of reply, dated June 29, 1944, he informs Everson of his discharge and his new position with the NCCO, "exploring," as he put it, "the ineptitude of American pacifism" (Untide Records 2). Although Hill could not participate directly in Waldport's Fine Arts project, the letter expresses his knowledge of and continuing interest in the "Waldport colony" and admiration for Everson's Untide Press. Everson helped to establish Untide Press soon after arriving at the camp, and its small press publications had circulated widely both within and beyond the pacifist network.<sup>96</sup> Hill especially praises Everson's own *X War Elegies*, published by Untide the previous year: "not along ago [I] went through the volume with Richard Eberhart to our mutual satisfaction," he explains, describing it as "the ranking achievement of CPS and an ample definition of your leadership in the literary phase of war objection."

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<sup>95</sup> See McQuiddy for a rich documentary history of the Waldport Fine Arts Group. See also Wallach, and Metres (73–92), for discussions of the Waldport camp in the context of literary history. Lee Bartlett's biography of Everson also includes discussion of his years at the camp (33–79). Everson's own poetic account of Waldport appeared first as *Waldport Poems* (1944) and in revised, extended version as *Chronicle of Division* in *The Residual Years* (1948).

<sup>96</sup> Everson's *X War Elegies*, for example, was extensively reviewed by both pacifist periodicals and pamphlets such as *Pacifica Views* and *The Conscientious Objector* and nationally circulated publications such as *The Nation* and *Poetry*.

At the close of the letter, however, as Hill reflects on his fraught relationship with CPS, he casts implicit doubts on the efficacy of initiatives like Waldport's Fine Arts group for the survival of the peace movement:

During my last days in CPS—indeed during most of those days—I wrestled like everyone else with the problem of remaining or not, or at least of relating my presence in CPS to some integer of integrity. Before my discharge—it was a great surprise—I had concluded that one must either walk out cleanly or find a cove in some tributary such as yours. I had decided to follow the former course, and doubt if I would have accepted your generous suggestion at that juncture. But you're attempting a fine thing, I believe, and I wish there were some way I could participate in it more than is possible.

(Untide Records 2)

Like many COs placed in CPS camps, including Everson, Hill questioned his decision to register and serve as a CO rather than take a more absolute position of war rejection by refusing conscription in all of its forms. As the war went on, many pacifists risked imprisonment by deserting CPS camps in protest or by refusing to register for the draft. As Everson describes in his long poem *Chronicle of Division*, those COs, like himself, who remained in the camps were haunted by “the vast temptation and the obscure threat” of desertion and by the example of others who took advantage of the camp's gate, “broad for departure, / to pass if we choose” (*Residual* 151). Hill's own desire to “walk out cleanly” rather than “find a cove in some tributary” like Fine Arts points to his growing disillusionment with the radical pacifist movement and its increasingly isolated—and therefore easily contained—communities and institutions.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> It's worth pointing out that despite the moral force of his statement, Hill could hardly claim to have “walk[ed] out cleanly” from CPS; his discharge removed the need for such a dramatic action, and his work for the NCCO entangled him directly with the CPS system and its affairs for the remainder of the war.

Hill's idea for Pacifica Radio emerged in the context of this disillusionment, as he developed a vision of an alternative network for the peace movement, one that would utilize mass media outlets rather than small presses and periodicals to communicate a compelling argument for peace.

In a sense, though, Hill did participate in Waldport's experiment from afar, through his correspondence and developing friendship with Everson, and as a contributor to and reader of its publications. Moreover, the Fine Arts camp at Waldport—and especially its small presses and periodicals—contributed directly to the founding of Pacifica Radio in 1946 and the related emergence of the San Francisco Renaissance, in part because many of Waldport's COs moved to the Bay Area after the war and contributed to the founding of KPFA as well as a cooperative theater group and several small presses and little magazines. Attending to the reverberations of Waldport's Fine Arts experiment after the war in San Francisco counters Hill's early characterization of the initiative as merely "a cove in some tributary" of the CPS system. Indeed, like Hill's idea for a pacifist radio station, which he first articulated while at the Coleville camp (Lasar, *Pacifica* 6), Everson's vision for the Fine Arts group emerged in response to his own embedded critique of CPS and the marginalized peace movement, and his own struggle with the question of whether to embrace a more radical and activist pacifism. To understand these critiques, and Everson's and Hill's arguments for how poets and artists might intervene in redefining and publicizing a new movement for peace, it's important to consider the specific context of war resistance and American pacifism during World War II.

The Civilian Public Service system that structured Hill's and Everson's experience of conscientious objection was unique to WWII. Prior to the U.S.'s entry into the war, a delegation of the historic peace churches of the Brethren, Friends (Quakers), and Mennonites negotiated

with President Roosevelt and Congress a new accommodation for COs who refused military service on religious, philosophical, or political grounds in an effort to forestall harsh prison sentences such as those given to war resisters during WWI.<sup>98</sup> Under the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940, CPS camps, modeled after and often located in former Civilian Conservation Corps camps, were established to provide forms of alternative service for COs in “work of national importance.” An unprecedented number of men applied for CO status, the majority citing membership in one of the peace churches, and nearly 12,000 served in CPS camps (Land 34).<sup>99</sup> The historic peace churches managed and financed the 151 camps, while the federal government provided work tasks, supplies, supervision, and camp space (McQuiddy 24). The work ranged from forest and parks maintenance and agricultural labor to work in mental hospitals.<sup>100</sup> Although many COs were initially proud to serve in this capacity, some came to feel that their labor in CPS was more “make-work” than “work of national importance,” designed to separate and isolate them from the general population without regard for their skills or their safety, and without wages or benefits for their families (S. Taylor 57–58). Hill and Everson, among a minority of registered COs who did not cite religious affiliation, each served in CPS camps on the West Coast charged with forestry work: Hill from June 1942 to October 1943 at

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<sup>98</sup> During WWI, the first conscripted war in which conscripts could not hire substitutes to serve in their place, registered COs were given the option to serve in noncombatant roles in the military; those that refused were imprisoned in military facilities and subjected to harsh and abusive conditions. After WWII, CPS and its camps were dissolved, and new forms of alternative service remunerated by wages were made available to registered COs.

<sup>99</sup> 72,354 men applied for conscientious objector status during WWII, with an estimated 40,000 granted it by their local draft boards; about half of these served in noncombatant roles in the military (S. Taylor 34). Around 6,000 absolute resisters—those who resisted all forms of conscription, including registering for the draft—were imprisoned, constituting around one in six male federal inmates during the war years (16).

<sup>100</sup> COs placed in work as attendants in mental hospitals were shocked by the horrific conditions and practices they witnessed, and played a major role in documenting, bringing public attention to, and reforming state mental institutions (S. Taylor). Roy Kepler, discussed below, was deeply affected by his experience as a CO in a mental institute in Laurel, MD (Doyle 30–36). Kenneth Rexroth also worked as an attendant in a hospital psychiatric ward during the war, and though he did so on his own volition, he saw it as part of his contribution to alternative service and hoped it would bolster his application for 4-E CO status (Hamalian 107 and *passim*).

CPS camp #37 in Coleville, California, and Everson from March 1943 to July 1946, primarily at CPS camp #56 in Waldport, Oregon.<sup>101</sup>

Little united the nation's COs beyond the act of war refusal, a stance taken for widely divergent reasons by men from diverse religious, economic, and geographic backgrounds. As Everson puts it in *Chronicle of Division*, the only "binding belief" uniting the men in the camp was "cruxed on rejection: / *Thou shalt not kill*" (*Residual* 152). Experience in the isolated and intense community of CO camps, however, facilitated the identification of another common enemy—CPS itself—and the development of new, more radical and politicized pacifist ideologies and tactics. Radical pacifism, inspired by Gandhi's example of nonviolent resistance, emphasized pacifism as more than personal or denominational objection to war: "a way of life," as A. J. Muste argued, and a movement committed not only to the abolition of war between nations but to social justice and political change through spiritual transformation and direct action (qtd. in Lasar, *Pacifica* 13). Federal prisons and notorious CPS camps like those in Germfask, Michigan and Minersville, California served as testing grounds for nonviolent resistance to conscription, racial segregation, and labor conditions through hunger strikes, work stoppages, walkouts, and other symbolic and creative protests. As James Tracy documents, the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, antinuclear, and student movements of the 1950s through the 1970s could trace many of its leaders (such as Bayard Rustin and Dave Dellinger), institutions (such as CORE), ideologies, and tactics to the camps and prisons of WWII war resistance. Roy Kepler, an early KPFA staff member and the founder of Kepler's Books in Palo Alto, who spent

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<sup>101</sup> Although Everson would later convert to Catholicism and enter the Dominican order as Brother Antoninus, his pacifism was not originally anchored in a specific religious faith. When he applied to his local draft board for CO status, he offered a "vaguely worded argument based essentially on the combination of Western humanism and a Buddhist's sense of the sanctity of all living things" (Bartlett 33). As Bartlett notes, it was more likely his father's prominence as justice of the peace in Fresno County than the justification of his beliefs that resulted in his 4-E classification.

part of his conscripted years at both Germfask and Minersville and a mental institute in Maryland, recalls, “My own experience was one of entering the camp in a state of euphoria. . . . The biggest single mistake the government made was introducing us to each other. . . . They helped build the pacifist network” (qtd. in Land 35).<sup>102</sup>

Hill was deeply connected to the radical pacifist movement, and he and the other founders of Pacifica Radio would draw extensively on this national network in their early fundraising.<sup>103</sup> Hill held membership in, attended conferences, and read publications by major pacifist organizations including the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the War Resisters League (WRL), and the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution (CNVR).<sup>104</sup> He published poetry and editorials in pacifist publications. He counted among his friends and acquaintances the major figures of midcentury American pacifism, including Muste, Dellinger, and Rustin, all of whom would appear on Pacifica Radio stations in subsequent years. In his work for the NCCO, he traveled to CPS camps around the country and lobbied on behalf of COs who dramatically resisted the CPS system. These experiences confirmed Hill’s own disillusionment with the CPS system and leadership and his objection to conscription.

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<sup>102</sup> Kepler traveled to the Bay Area after the war, where he reconnected with a CO friend, E. John Lewis, who was involved in the launching of KPFA. Kepler first appeared on KPFA as an interviewee on Robert Schutz’s *Men and Issues* program (Doyle 80), and became a fulltime staff member in the early 1950s, hosting a public affairs program *Perspectives Abroad* and managing subscriptions (107–109). After a falling out with Hill and the station management during a period of internal strife in 1954 that saw the temporary resignation of Hill and the permanent resignations of many others, Kepler left KPFA and opened the paperback bookstore Kepler’s Books, which became known for its tax resistance, and which served as the southern leg of the alternative bookstore tripod of City Lights, Cody’s, and Kepler’s.

<sup>103</sup> Pacifist and CO Denny Wilcher took an especially active role in fundraising for Pacifica within a national pacifist network. During the war, Wilcher had spent time in a prison camp after walking out in protest of the same Coleville CPS camp Hill served in before his discharge.

<sup>104</sup> Hill was especially active in CNVR, until he became disillusioned with what he saw as the organization’s ineffective focus on dramatic protest (J. Tracy 51–52). CNVR was formed in 1946 and dissolved in 1948, after which many of its members reformed the organization into the Peacemakers.

These same experiences, however, also made Hill increasingly critical of the limitations of radical pacifism's reliance on individual acts of symbolic refusal in what he believed to be the absence of a larger, ideologically driven and genuinely public movement (Lasar, *Pacifica* 16–17). Hill was vocal in this critique, penning a public letter in 1946 with E. John Lewis—a fellow CO and one of the original Pacifica Foundation board members—that admonished COs striking at a camp in Glendora, California for overemphasizing camp conditions and personal frustrations rather than the underlying issue of conscription itself (19–20). The peace movement, they argued, lacked a coherent argument not only about why war or conscription or CPS should be resisted but “why a pacific world was valuable and, most important, achievable,” even in the face of the horrors of fascism (21). At a CNVR meeting in 1947, Hill argued that to sustain and grow “a non-violent revolutionary organization” with actual public impact, the postwar peace movement must move beyond protest to engage “key intellectuals around the country” as well as artists and cultural workers who could communicate the pacifist cause to the public imagination (qtd. in J. Tracy 52). It was long past time, he asserted elsewhere, to reject “the puerile notion of creating an awareness of crisis by entering the community from the outside at the top of one’s lungs, with a crummy propaganda sheet” (qtd. in Lasar, *Pacifica* 26). Pacifism as a way of life must be demonstrated as achievable in the present, and it was on the ground of culture that such a transformation of public consciousness would have to be pursued, and through subtler means than pamphlets.

Everson shared Hill’s concerns about the forms of publicity through which the radical pacifist movement communicated—or rather, failed to communicate—to the American public. He also shared Hill’s skepticism about some of the radical tactics being tested at CPS camps and prisons, even as he participated in strikes, work stoppages, and individual acts of refusal at

Waldport.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, like Hill, Everson's own experience as a poet, and his personal narrative of pacifist awakening through his engagement with poetry, philosophy, and comparative theology, persuaded him that the arts could and should have a more central role in the peace movement. The CPS camp at Waldport, for all its problems, appeared to Everson to offer a unique opportunity for pacifists to experiment with new modes of creative production and community that would materialize pacifism as a way of life.

The idea to transform Waldport into a specialist Fine Arts camp, modeled after other specialty "schools" being launched at CPS camps, developed from conversations between CO artists, especially on the West Coast, that took place in camp newsletters and letters. Links between the editors of Waldport's *Untide*, an irreverent mimeograph of satiric writing and poetry (named after the official camp newsletter *Tide*), and *Illiterati*, a little magazine from a nearby camp in Cascade Locks, provided the backbone for what would become Fine Arts' particular emphasis on small press and mimeograph publishing. Soon after Everson's arrival at Waldport, he and the editors of *Untide* established Untide Press to publish a small volume of his poetry. The subsequent success of Everson's *X War Elegies* established Untide's small press reputation, and it went on to publish a number of other important volumes of poetry by pacifists, including Glen Coffield, George Woodcock, and Kenneth Patchen as well as additional volumes by Everson. Everson even encouraged Hill to submit a manuscript for publication by Untide in the fall of 1944, praising the "exceptional quality" of his poetry, though no volume of Hill's poetry was ever published (Everson Papers 14:1). Hill did publish poems, however, in issues 3 and 4 of *Illiterati*.

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<sup>105</sup> For more on Everson's participation in protests at Waldport, see McQuiddy (178, 199, 224–26, 301n58).

Everson's experience with Untide Press, and his correspondence with other West Coast CO artists, caused him to envision a specialty camp for the fine arts that could play a central role in establishing a cultural wing of the radical pacifist movement. Everson's correspondence with Kemper Nomland and Kermit Sheets of *Illiterati* shows his developing idea for a fine arts camp that would be an experiment in "creative living and arts," as he described it in a letter dated September 26, 1943, with broad implications for the postwar peace movement (Untide Records 1). Everson objected to the idea of a formalized school or artists' colony, preferring a community based on "free anarchical association" centered on the arts but not limited to recognized or practicing artists. The notion that there could be free association of any kind at a conscripted labor camp is deeply counterintuitive, but at times Everson imagined that such an experiment in in creative community, as he put it in a passionately worded letter to Nomland on October 16, 1943, could "form the seed, the nucleus that may after the war, when we can make ourselves heard, become the start" of a revolutionary cultural pacifist movement (Untide Records 1). Like Hill, Everson did not believe radical pacifists had the tools to communicate with a larger American public while marginalized in camps and prisons; after the war, however, Everson hoped that the "seed" planted by COs at Waldport could grow into a public movement by demonstrating a fundamental "tie-in between aesthetic creativity and pacifism":

If we can tap that great latent human reservoir, that basic need for cultural expression that our society has so long neglected, and draw about the pacifist movement after the way the prestige that the vital creative artist gathers wherever he goes, we can foster . . . our movement. . . . Look what the Communist painters did in Mexico in the thirties—that's what I mean. The tie-in between the revolutionary pacifist concept and the revolutionary aesthetic concept, a movement bursting with the vitality of conviction.

(Untide Records 1)

Like British antiwar poets who Everson also cites in this letter, Mexican painters like Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo stand as models for how revolutionary art and revolutionary politics can work in tandem. Radical pacifism, Everson implies, needs its own cultural front.

Yet in citing Mexican communist art and British antiwar poetry, Everson notably excludes the closer-to-home example of the American “cultural front” of the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike Langston Hughes and Moses Asch, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Everson accused the American political art movements of the interwar period as producing nothing but so much sound and fury: “That’s all the American movements ever do—holler about culture and produce none.”<sup>106</sup> Everson had articulated his hostility to proletarian poetry early in his career (Metres 74–76), despite the fact that his praise for Mexican communist artists suggests that he was not, on principle, opposed to politically motivated or even communist art (though he did share most pacifists’ antipathy to communism as a political ideology). This rejection of American Popular Front art and literature was relatively typical of WWII CO poets. As Philip Metres argues, war resister poets like Everson, William Stafford, and Robert Lowell shared a “characteristic resistance to issue-oriented poetry in favor of a peace culture,” a perspective that reflected their efforts to negotiate a position apart from “issue-oriented” (i.e. proletarian) poetry that would still express a pacifist world view (19).

While objecting strongly to proletarian poetry as propaganda, Everson also increasingly sought to negotiate a position apart from the aesthetics and politics of the emerging New

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<sup>106</sup> Although Everson’s anemic view of the value of political Popular Front era poetry was once widespread among literary critics and historians, Cary Nelson and Michael Denning are just two especially prominent examples of scholars who have exposed the long-lasting impacts of this “cultural front.” As the previous chapter detailed, my own project is indebted to this revisionist work given the continued reverberations of cultural front aesthetics, politics, and social relations that can be found in Folkways Records, Pacifica Radio, and the San Francisco Renaissance.

Criticism. Although, as he confessed in a February 1946 letter to Rexroth, he had at one time “come under [the] spell” of “the enormous prestige of the intellectual critics,” citing poet-critics T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters, conversations with Rexroth had persuaded him that at the center of their analysis stood a dead object disconnected from the organic, living experience that Everson saw as the essence of humanist art: “Let in the air and those poems stand like rock figurines in the tombs around which everything else has crumbled to dust” (Rexroth Papers 6:8).

<sup>107</sup> In contrast to these relative extremes, Everson attempted to find a “third way,” what Metres describes as “an art that refuses to be propaganda yet still emerges from an ideological position” (76). He did so by asserting, as he had in his letter to Nomland, an intrinsic link between “aesthetic creativity and pacifism” (Untide Records 1). If artistic creation participated in, by imitating, the creative, organic, spiritual forces of life, then it necessarily communicated humanist and pacifist values of the sanctity of life and the indivisibility and interdependence of all living things. Overt antiwar rhetoric was therefore unnecessary and propaganda, which indicated coercion, thus deprived art of its creative origins. Instead, pacifism needed a cultural movement that could support the creation of new forms of art, consciousness, and living. Such a movement, according to Everson, fostered through a model of anarchic collectivity governed by intentional association, would serve as strong a protest against conscription as strikes or walkouts, but with the potential for a wider public impact.

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<sup>107</sup> Winters’s complicated relationship to the New Criticism reveals the value of differentiating between the different writers caught as straw men in its web; an object of study within John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941) alongside Eliot and I. A. Richards, and an active poet-scholar whose essays contributed to New Critical methods of analysis and terminology, Winters was also vocally critical of aspects of Eliot’s work and advocated for strict critical standards of moral as well as formal poetic purity. His position as a West Coast writer also distanced him geographically and philosophically from the New Critics. Everson, however, includes Winters alongside Tate and Eliot in his letter, probably because of the poet-scholar’s importance to West Coast literature. Lewis Hill had studied with Winters at Stanford, who may have shaped Hill’s interest in modernist poetry, his ethical approach to literature, and his own imagistic poetry. Winters appeared several times on KPFA during Hill’s tenure.

Everson publicly disseminated his vision of a pacifist art movement in a “prospectus” published by Untide Press after the launch of Fine Arts in 1944. Boldly asserting the “inherent sympathy between the purposes of pacifism and the purposes of art,” the prospectus claimed that the art produced at Waldport could have a “wide influence” on an American society starving for authentic, universal, humanist art (qtd. in Wallach 18). Artists would support the peace movement not only by revealing the horrors of war but by giving aesthetic form to the “ideology of pacifism, its conception of human nature, its values and attitudes.” Resisting a defining statement on what a pacifist art would or should express in terms of its content or form, Everson’s prospectus for Fine Arts nonetheless implies that explicitly antiwar content may be redundant or even counterproductive.

In 1944, Brethren leadership approved the establishment of a Fine Arts specialty camp at Waldport, with Everson as its first director. Fifty-hour work weeks laboring on behalf of the Forestry Service remained standard for all the COs at the camp, and members of Fine Arts never constituted even half of the total CO population at the camp (Wallach 15). However, Waldport’s artists, musicians, writers, printers, actors, and craftsmen made the most of limited time, resources, and sunlight on the desolate coast. While Waldport is now best known for small press and periodical publications like Untide Press, *Illiterati*, and *The Compass*, the camp emphasized interarts collaboration; members of the Fine Arts group gave musical recitals, taught art and craft classes to other COs in the camp, exhibited new painting and photography, and formed a collective theater group that wrote and performed original dramatic works.<sup>108</sup> The camp even had a small music recording room, which Glen Coffield used to record some of his poems and songs

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<sup>108</sup> Kermit Sheets, co-editor of *Illiterati* and an accomplished actor, especially embodied the interarts spirit of Waldport. After the war, he moved to San Francisco and helped co-found the Interplayers theater group and, with James Broughton, Centaur Press, which published Robert Duncan’s *Medieval Scenes* (1950). He also appeared on KPFA multiple times.

(McQuiddy 44). In addition to poets and printers like Everson, Coffield, Nomland, and Sheets, Waldport's notable Fine Arts members included book designer Adrian Wilson, painter Morris Graves, violinist Broadus Erle, sculptor Clayton James, and Martin Ponch, editor of *The Compass*. Unusually for a CPS camp, women also participated in the artistic, administrative, and social activities of Fine Arts, though their presence was often controversial, both among the conservatively religious COs of the camp and neighboring communities wary of the war resisters in their midst.<sup>109</sup>

At times, the camp appeared as a closed system in which Waldport's artists made art primarily with and for each other. As Everson described in a 1946 letter, Fine Arts operated as a place "where people, penned out of their lives, fashion another, a kind of minor civilization" (qtd. in Metres 89). Waldport's presses and little magazines, however, helped to disseminate Waldport's experiment and its aesthetics more widely within a national pacifist and poetic network. *Illiterati*, for example, solicited writing from and publicized to writers they thought may be sympathetic to their aesthetic and pacifist sensibility, including Henry Miller, e. e. cummings, and Robert Duncan (Untide Records 1–2). The editors also shared Everson's sense of an "inherent sympathy" between art and pacifism, skepticism about "issue-oriented" art, and a desire to communicate beyond the borders of a radical pacifist community. In a 1944 form letter addressed to Robert Duncan, for example, Nomland describes *Illiterati* in abstract terms as "a magazine of directed pattern in creative expression" operating under "the thesis that all organisms form an interconnected whole, and that separation is possible only on the mental or

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<sup>109</sup> Manche Langly played a particularly important and controversial role in Fine Arts. In 1942, the young, bohemian pacifist moved to Waldport, renting a cottage near the CPS camp where several CO wives and girlfriends had taken residence. Langly participated in printing and theater projects, eventually becoming the official secretary of Fine Arts. Her regular presence at the camp, however, became a source of conflict between the Fine Arts group and the more religiously conservative COs, and a liability for CPS public relations with nearby communities, and she was unceremoniously pushed out (McQuiddy). After the war, she also moved to San Francisco and helped found the Interplayers theater group with Sheets and others.

verbal level.” Nomland clarifies that while the magazine was published by COs, it “is not exclusively pacifist in material, nor in contributors, although it will be predominantly so” (Untide Records 2). Even the manifesto-like proclamation on the summer 1945 cover of issue 4 that “THE ILLITERATI PROPOSES: CREATION, EXPERIMENT, AND REVOLUTION TO BUILD A WARLESS, FREE SOCIETY” offers an expansive view of the relationship between the creative arts and pacifism, stopping short of espousing a specific subject matter or form. Poems and art published in the issue express a range of themes, subjects, and forms (albeit predominantly those indebted to modernism).

Lewis Hill’s poem, “Of a Woman Screaming in the Street,” published in this same issue of *Illiterati*, offers a window into how Hill’s pacifist aesthetics as a poet intersected with those at Waldport. The poem describes a surreal, horrifying scene, in which a woman’s wordless scream echoes across a desolate town square “like a perjured sin” (n. pag.). “We,” cast as nondescript townspeople of “sundry faces,” “only hear her,” whose scream drowns out the church bells, yet “none of us asks what she is saying,” so the cry remains incoherent, excessive noise without meaning. In the last stanza, the speaker forecasts a terrible fate for the woman at the hands of an unspecified “they”:

They will knock the beam from her exploded eye,  
 Put gas in her throat, unlock her teeth,  
 While we sit under amber lamps  
 With thoughts that roll around the orb to sleep.

Hill’s images of violent bodily dismemberment, gas, and, elsewhere in the poem, explosions strongly evoke the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust, while the allegorical representation of a society complicit in this violence because of its conformism and fear reflects Hill’s pacifist

critique of the U.S. and European citizenry during and after the war. However, the poem does not offer a clear or paraphrasable statement about the horrors of war or the need for peace; its larger purpose appears to be the more general provocation of individual culpability, responsibility, and action against mass conformism. This is especially evident when Hill's poem is compared to Kenneth Patchen's "The Stars Go to Sleep So Peacefully," published in the same issue of *Illiterati*, which employs antiwar rhetoric directly while juxtaposing images of a peaceful cosmos and a war-torn Earth: "O the soul of the world is dead . . . / Truth rots in a bloody ditch; / And love is impaled on a million bayonets" (n. pag.; ellipses in original). Hill's dystopian poem, by contrast, is significantly more abstract, with imagery that recalls surrealist and futurist avant-garde art of the early twentieth century (not least of all in its fascination with the dismembered female body).

Hill's poem does express a pacifist perspective, but it's a perspective that implies an objection to all forms of physical and mental coercion and not only to war, a radical individualism, and a belief in the personally transformative power of humanistic art. Hill thus shared the perspective of the Waldport Fine Arts group in eschewing overtly "issue-oriented" content as propagandistic and in asserting a fundamental relationship between art and pacifism. This view manifests itself not only in his poetry but also in early KPFA cultural programming under Hill's leadership, which transmitted the idea that innovative and canonical humanist music, drama, and literature are foundational to the development of an ethical individual consciousness and an ethical public.

There is nothing surprising about a little magazine, a small press, or a noncommercial, educational radio station articulating a commitment to aesthetics over propaganda. What is notable is the extent to which the suspicion of propaganda led many of the artists and writers at

Waldport to reject the possibility that art could express political content without compromising aesthetic ends—a clear rejection of Popular Front aesthetics and the editorial example of important leftist magazines like *New Masses*. The Fine Arts group even went so far as to publicly (and successfully) object to the publication of an anthology of poetry proposed by the War Resisters’ League on the grounds that it would be propagandistic and undermine their own efforts to garner artistic legitimacy, despite their calls elsewhere for more institutional support for the arts from within the peace movement (Metres). Everson’s suspicion of any poetry that appeared to him programmatic grew to include even some of his own pacifist verse. In an August 1944 letter to Kenneth Patchen, Everson objects to Patchen’s original proposed title for *An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air*, “Poems Against War,” citing the “declamatory cover” of his own *X War Elegies* as a negative example of an overt “propaganda point of view” that went against Untide Press’s publicly staked position of artistic integrity over political purpose (Untide Records 2). Notably, Untide’s final cover and book design for *An Astonished Eye* later served as inspiration for City Lights Books’ Pocket Poets series, giving vivid illustration to Waldport’s influence on the San Francisco Renaissance.

The debates within the radical pacifist movement about the relationship between aesthetics and politics would reverberate with intensity in the context of the San Francisco Renaissance and the resurgence of radical pacifism during the Vietnam War.<sup>110</sup> Robert Duncan’s well-known criticism of Denise Levertov’s anti-Vietnam War poetry, for example, echoed

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<sup>110</sup> Pacifist individuals, faith organizations, and institutions in the U.S. objected to the Korean War—the major intervening U.S. conflict—but they failed to mobilize a significant war resistance movement. Public support for organizations like the FOR dropped to their lowest-ever levels in the late 1940s and early 1950s (J. Tracy 69), and disagreement within the pacifist community about whether the U.S. or the Soviet Union was to blame for the conflict stymied organized action or even, in the case of the WRL, the release of a single public antiwar statement (Bennett 191). Radical pacifists continued to perform acts of dramatic individual resistance, such as a two-week hunger fast organized by David Dellinger, and pacifist groups organized antinuclear protests, but they were barely registered by the American public. Instead, it was in the context of the civil rights movement that radical pacifists and radical pacifist tactics and ideologies forged in the CPS camps of WWII would first make wide public impact.

WWII-era statements by pacifist artists like Everson, who demanded that freedom of organic creation be protected against the encroachment of a preformed ideological content, even if that ideological content was pacifism itself. To resist a coercive life as a pacifist stance meant to resist the coercion of ideology itself. Thus the suspicion of “issue-oriented” poetry by Everson and other Fine Arts members, or by later poets like Duncan and Jack Spicer, did not rest merely on a facile division between aesthetics and politics, or between form and content. Instead, radical pacifism itself, as a cultural and political movement, demanded vigilance against the tyranny of collective thought.

The libertarianism and anarchism of many pacifists, including Hill and Everson, hinged on this fundamental resistance to coercion and the enshrinement of a radical individualism indebted to the history and myths of American liberalism. As James Tracy argues, “For those who forged the radical pacifist movement, the inviolable constitutive unit of society was the individual. . . . In this sense, theirs was a thoroughly American radicalism” in which Thoreau was as important an influence as Ghandi (40). Radical pacifism’s “mythology of heroic personal autonomy,” with its emphasis on individual acts of conscience and resistance, instilled in pacifists like Everson and Hill “a heightened fear of native fascism,” a deep distrust of leadership even within the movement, and an antipathy to communism (Land 35). Hill, for example, advocated within the CNVR for a “libertarian revolution” that would promote above all “the restitution of the individual in a libertarian socialist society” (qtd. in J. Tracy 40). Though Hill also critiqued radical pacifism’s reliance on symbolic, isolated acts of resistance and failure to communicate to a wider public, he believed that the creation of “a pacific world in our time” must begin as a revolution in individual consciousness; as we will see, this belief profoundly shaped early Pacifica Radio’s mission and programming, and the role of poetry broadcasting on

KPFA. Everson, too, in his role as director of Fine Arts and in his wartime poetry, insisted on the inviolability of the individual, on the power of individual conscience and inward transformation to materialize a broader movement, and on anarchic free association over institutional, political, or even aesthetic affiliation. For both Hill and Everson, however, it is precisely this relationship between the individual dissenter at the heart of radical pacifism and the need for a larger vision of collective, public action that proved profoundly difficult to realize in practice. The drastic swings between idealism and deep disillusionment in the biographies and writings of both men reflect this conflict.

Everson's major poetic work about the war and his experience at the Waldport camp, *Chronicle of Division*, is suffused with disillusionment, bitterness, and isolation that provides a profound countertext to his idealistic Fine Arts letters and prospectus, despite the fact that the long poem was begun roughly simultaneously to the launch of Fine Arts. *Chronicle of Division*, the first sections of which were published as *Waldport Poems* by Untide Press in 1944, gives an account of Everson's experience at the Waldport CPS camp alongside the crumbling of his first marriage. As Metres argues, the poem challenges the utopian spirit of Everson's earlier pre-Waldport poetry by bearing witness to the personal costs of resistance and the pervasiveness of division in all aspects of society during a war supposedly supported by a unified nation. In earlier poems like "Now In These Days," written before his entry into CPS, Everson addresses a marginalized, imagined community of resisters, a masculine "we" who "outside the narrows of nationalism and its iron pride, / [r]eject the compulsion" (*Residual* 98) and find strength in "know[ing] we have not been alone" (99). In *Chronicle of Division*, by contrast, the speaker who enters the camp with such "glimmering visions" of communion with a fellowship of war resisters soon learns that the camp is designed to deprive him not only of this brotherhood, but of his own

sense of self, and thus the very grounds of his war resistance (*Residual* 152). The work thus casts doubt on one of the central premises of the Fine Arts experiment and radical pacifist ideology, expressed by Nomland as “the thesis that all organisms form an interconnected whole, and that separation is possible only on the mental or verbal level” (Untide Records 2).

If, in his planning and promotion of Fine Arts, Everson imagined an ideal in which a pacifist experiment uniting “creative art and community” might serve as “a seed state” for a larger postwar cultural pacifist movement, in *Chronicle of Division* we find a speaker convinced that the coercive environment of CPS renders communication—much less meaningful collectivity—impossible between the men in the camp. An early poem in the sequence at first frames this as the result of ideological differences between the COs.

The pacifist speaks,  
 Face to face with his own kind,  
 And seeks to fashion a common course  
 That all may mark.  
 But whatever he offers,  
 Finds already framed in another’s thought  
 A divergent approach.

(*Residual* 152)

Bringing his soapbox into the Oregon forest, “the pacifist” finds that while his fellow COs share “[t]he binding belief . . . cruxed on rejection” of war, their common dissenting stance does not result in a corresponding consensus on “a common course” of action. Even among this group of primarily Christian religious pacifists, there is no shared prophetic vision of a community of true believers, no ability to find communion in the wilderness: “What Voice shall speak from the

burning bush,” the speaker asks, “When the loaf is broken, / And brief and rebuttal countercross,  
/ And no one wins?”

In the next stanza, however, Everson indicates that the failure to “fashion a common course” may have as much to do with surveillance in the camp as with ideological differences between the COs. While “the pacifist” holds forth, another figure sits back, at once attending and not attending to his speech: “Apart on his rock, / The forester sucks his sufficient quid, / And never hears” (152–53). The forester is not a CO but a member of the Forestry Service who is there to oversee their labor and, the poem indicates, to listen in on them. When the pacifist ends his speech, “[w]hen the rebel lays down his irksome axe at last,” the forester who “never hears” the meaning of what has been said nonetheless “[h]as only to scrawl the offending name” to seal the “rebel’s” fate (153). For Everson as for Hill, one of the casualties of war is the freedom of speech; censorship, surveillance, propaganda, and conscription produce a crisis in listening in which not only does the American public (like the townspeople in Hill’s poem) fail to hear the pacifist’s antiwar cry but pacifists themselves, conscripted into CPS camps, cannot communicate freely with one another.

Everson’s depiction of the insurmountable “divisions” within the Waldport camp, however, does not dwell on this crisis produced by surveillance, conscription, and ideological and religious differences. Rather, it is the threat to individuality posed by collective, coercive, and, importantly, homosocial life that obsesses the speaker. The poet’s pre-Waldport dream of a community that would temper the isolation of war resistance transforms, in the camp, to a desire for solitude and separation:

No man is alone.

Side by side in the long room we mingle and touch,

Nudge at the table,  
 Shout on the walks,  
 Lie head to heel in the close beds.  
 Even at stool we squat in our row:  
 The private act revealed and made known to the corporate eye.

Yet after a time the mind erects its own defenses.  
 The tongue chatters,  
 The mobile mouth smiles and flouts,  
 In the steaming baths the nudists dance and wrestle with joy;  
 But behind the bone wall  
 The spirit whistles and sings to itself,  
 Keeping its inward motion and its solitary grace  
 While the bodies touch.

(155)

In *Chronicle of Division*, the once-idealized, intentional community of war resisters becomes a site of homosexual desire that the speaker perceives as threatening to his gender and sexual identity. As is apparent from this poem's litany of double entendres, the speaker cannot successfully uphold the "bone wall" between his spirit and his body, between his heterosexual identity and his homosexual desires, between his phallic stance of individual resistance and a collective life rendered throughout the poem as fluid, feminine, infantile, perverse. The "corporate eye" reminds the reader once again of the ever-present surveillance in the camp, but here that surveillance is more a threat to private individuality than to collectivity. Moreover, the

surveillant eye that publicizes “the private act” could also describe the speaker’s own, whose desiring gaze lingers on touch and body while remaining at a distance.<sup>111</sup>

If freedom of expression is one casualty of war, Everson’s poem argues that heteronormativity is another, even more destructive casualty for both soldier and CO: “The man struck from the woman— / That is the crime” (155). The central crisis in communication in *Chronicle of Division* in fact lies not between COs, or between COs and the American public, but between the speaker and his wife, whose marriage falls apart under the strain of long absence. Although the speaker blames his wife’s infidelities for the breakup, sections like the one quoted above indicate that the division has as much to do with the internal division within the speaker, and the crumbling of his own sense of masculine, heterosexual self-identity. Yet as the individual resources of conscience used to resist war are redirected in the poem to resist homosexual desire, Everson’s poem disturbingly echoes the postwar ideology that war’s “excesses” must be immediately channeled into heteronormative reproductivity for the sake and security of peace.

Near the end of the poem, set after “the Peace, / Breached in the air over Nagasaki / lays its ash on the world” (182), the speaker assumes a romantic posture, on a cliff at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, as a self divided within itself, and listening:

But the solitary self under the wind’s eye.

The self and the self,

The divisible selves,

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<sup>111</sup> The watching eye reappears throughout the long poem, including in the form of a camera lens, indicating that Everson drew more on Popular Front documentary aesthetics than he might have admitted. Indeed, a negative review of *Waldport Poems* by Americo Chiarito, a CO who also became KPFA’s first music director, critiques Everson for masking “essentially unpoetic ideas in the pseudo-poetic language of the documentary films” (Untide Records 5).

Ill-eased with each other.

There mumbles the sea.

.....

But a mnemonic speech that never comes clear.

(183)

Broken by “the years in the squalid camps” (185), the speaker turns his ear to the “mnemonic speech” of the waves in search of some reverberated memory, or understanding of what was, as a way of understanding what will be for the self and the world carved up by war. The poetic subject ultimately succeeds in reconstituting himself through this encounter with the sublime, and through the act of writing, by discovering “a possible synthesis of self” in the metaphor of the ocean (190): “the meaning of the self, / It, too, oceanic / . . . And always at flux” (189). Yet the fact that this new fluid self still takes its form as the solitary man with his inseminating pen at the edge of an incoherent feminine sea suggests that the “synthesis” remains dependent on patriarchal figures of heterosexual union that still deny and hold off the perceived threat posed by homosocial collectivity in the camps. *Chronicle of Division* strikingly includes no scenes of artistic collaboration or community in the camp; the speaker’s final quest on the shores of the Pacific Ocean seeks knowledge of what “terrible fruit” will be born from “the pregnable seed” of WWII’s horrors, not of what yield might issue from the “seed” of Waldport’s Fine Arts experiment.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> By concluding his long poem about the war with a lone figure contemplating the meaning of self, violence, and futurity on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, Everson alludes to Rexroth’s major war poem, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1944). In Rexroth’s poem, the Pacific Ocean represents the uneasy and unending flow of time, but it is also the main stage of the war’s Pacific theater. This dialectic between human death and natural continuity becomes the subject of the speaker’s meditation, set in the mountains and coastline of the Sierra Madre, where the speaker and his wife have retreated to camp and escape the fog of war. Like *Chronicle of Division*, the pacifist perspective guiding *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* positions heterosexual marriage alongside natural, geological, and spiritual forms of continuity as forces that might mediate against the destructive death drive of nationalism, history, and war.

*Chronicle of Division* thus offers a narrative of disillusionment that stands in sharp contrast to Everson's idealistic vision for the Fine Arts camp at Waldport as "a seed state" that would launch a pacifist cultural movement (Everson qtd. in Metres 90). By chronicling the poet's passage from a quest for pacifist community to a retreat into personal and spiritual concerns, the poem could be seen as paralleling Everson's biographical shift from William Everson, war resister poet, to Brother Antoninus, Catholic poet of conscience. Both Metres and Michael Davidson identify an elegiac strain in Everson's work of this period, and Metres goes so far as to claim that "the movement from the self-lacerating collective subjectivity of his early poems to the crisis poems of *Chronicle of Division* parallels the larger trajectory in CPS life from initial utopian promise to discontent and gradual dissolution" (74). Indeed, as the years dragged on while Everson remained in CPS—even beyond the end of the war as he waited for his long-deferred release—and as scandals, rivalries, and aesthetic differences rocked the Fine Arts group, Everson became less and less involved in the activities of Fine Arts and Untide Press.<sup>113</sup> Although he would still in 1946 describe Fine Arts as a "minor civilization" "fashioned, nourished, and brought to bear" in the austere conditions of the camp (qtd. in Metres 89), such comments were already retrospective and elegiac. In his poetry and spiritual life, Everson turned toward an internal and deeply personal investigation of conscience, in which, as Davidson argues, "personal testimony would have to discover the terms for its own transcendence in the act of writing" (52–53).

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<sup>113</sup> Although the Selective Service and Training Act had stipulated that COs in CPS camps should be released within six months of the end of the war, many COs were interred for much longer as political pressure demanded that troops be demobilized first, and as CPS decided to punish unruly COs, particularly those without dependents, by postponing their release. Everson was twice transferred from camps that closed before finally being released in July of 1946.

Yet it is important to recall that *Waldport Poems*, the origin of *Chronicle of Division*, was written during Everson's first six months at Waldport, according to the author's original preface, and published in 1944 during the same summer that the Fine Arts group was established, during a period of relative hope and utopian spirit about the possibilities for creative collectivity. Everson's preface to *Waldport Poems* makes his critique of CPS clear; he calls the camps "conscription camps, internment camps, labor camps" and explains that the book represents "as basic protest to the coercive life as . . . I could muster" (*Waldport Poems* n. pag). However, the preface also reaffirms his commitment to pacifism and his intention to write not only for himself but "also for The Conscripted Man, wherever he might be"—and thus to speak as and for other similarly isolated individuals. In documenting the unresolved struggle to realize a pacifist poetry of conscience, and to navigate the relationship between radical individualism and noncoercive forms of collectivity, *Chronicle of Division* raises unresolved questions about the relationship between poetry, anarchism, sexuality, and community that would prove productive sites of intervention for the postwar generation of poets who looked to Everson and Rexroth as forebears and who listened to KPFA.

Moreover, while both Everson's and Hill's experiences confirm Metres's account of a "larger trajectory in CPS life from initial utopian promise to discontent" (74), this trajectory did not necessarily mean what Metres characterizes as the gradual "dissolution" of the radical pacifist movement. In following Everson's movements and commitments after the war, and those of other Waldport artists and WWII COs, one detects not disengagement and "dissolution" but an effort to engage in different terms, on the different grounds of postwar society. Everson's significance to the defining of a San Francisco Renaissance and his continual presence in the Bay Area poetry scene even after converting to Catholicism and entering the Dominican order helped

to maintain the scene's anarcho-pacifist backbone and fostering of alternative presses, media, and communities for the arts. Untide Press, *Illiterati*, and *The Compass* ranked alongside *Circle* and *Ark* as important early publications for Bay Area writers in the 1940s, establishing a network and tradition of small, independent, and radical presses that would foster West Coast literary experimentation into the 1950s and beyond. Many of Waldport's COs, including Everson, who had spent their furloughs in San Francisco and developed friendships with Rexroth, Miller, and Patchen, moved to the Bay Area after the war. This sense of a strong West Coast network of pacifist writers made "rejection of the war spirit" central to the San Francisco literary scene in a way that it wasn't in the other parts of the country in the aftermath of a profoundly popular war, as Rexroth stated in a 1963 interview with D. G. Bridson for the BBC (Rexroth Papers 3:10). In his *Autobiographical Novel*, Rexroth argues that the "immigration of religious and anarchical pacifists" to the Bay Area after the war (an immigration that included Everson and Hill) "laid one of the foundations of the now notorious San Francisco Renaissance" (499–500).

It also laid the foundations for Pacifica Radio and station KPFA. Without the energies of this established network of pacifists, anarchists, and artists, it's hard to imagine how a noncommercial, pacifist FM radio station would have survived in the political and media climate of the immediate postwar years. In 1946, with his work for the NCCO over, Hill and his wife Joy Cole Hill moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where Hill had spent his undergraduate years at Stanford, joining the influx of former COs to a city known for its history of social and artistic experimentation, labor unionism, cooperative forms of business and living, alternative religious and political communities, and education and culture. There, Hill sought to make a reality his idea for a radio station that would educate the public in pacifist thought and forms of nonviolent conflict resolution as well as the best in contemporary music, drama, and poetry. "Peace" may

have been “breached in the air over Nagasaki,” but the birth of the atomic age in the midst of escalating tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the continuation of conscription, and fermenting racial, social, and political tension at home raised new exigent crises for the pacifist cause. But how to respond to and communicate these crises? How to make the pacifist’s voice heard in the mediatized, commercialized din of postwar American society? As Hill bitterly understood, the rhetoric of “the good war” had succeeded in painting pacifists as morally corrupt, insane outsiders, while the peace movement’s failure to respond coherently to the threat and horrors of Nazism became only more stark after the revelation of the scale of the Holocaust. The future of the movement would require a more compelling and pragmatic vision of a “pacific world,” and significant, subtle, and effective outlets for engaging and educating the public. Pacifists, Hill argued, must leave behind their soapbox speeches and “crummy propaganda sheet[s]” and enter the modern, mass media age. Hill’s experience as a part-time news announcer for *The Washington Post*’s AM station WINX had renewed his interest in a radio station that would support rather than stifle the public sphere. For in spite of radio’s apparent complicity in authoritarianism, commercialism, and militarism, it still appeared to Hill to hold out the promise of a public medium for a truly public audience.

### **Radio’s “Constant Voice”**

According to Lewis Hill, American society after the war was in the midst of an acute communication crisis. In a 1952 lecture to the Mental Health Society of Northern California titled “The Private Room” and broadcast on KPFA, Hill describes this crisis, and its wide-ranging psychological effects, through a series of extended analogies. “In the vast suburbs of the

dominant middle class,” he explains, each of us lives as if trapped in a “private room,” isolated and enthralled to commodities that act as mirrors, endlessly reflecting us back to ourselves (2). In this state, “where the individual and the electrical appliance alike are plugged into a socket of uniformity,” we are only vaguely aware of the approaching threat of an unidentified “man at the door,” who “might enter to do actual violence, to destroy everything we possess or every hope of possession, and extinguish the individual identity completely.” Our ability to respond to this threat is blunted, however, by “a general breakdown in the rules and customs of communication that might otherwise effectively link one private room with another.” You can scream if you like (or if you can even remember how), but the sound will only reverberate against the walls of your own isolated, private room.

This modern condition, Hill argues, bears a certain similarity to the experience of the commercial radio announcer. The announcer, “who like the rest of us has his private room,” is also little more than an appliance tasked with “daily entering a studio, opening his mouth before a microphone, and simulating the use of his own faculties in a communication of values he does not believe or possess” (2). Like the military conscript, the commercial radio announcer is trained to suppress individual conscience, beliefs, values, and expression to the extent that the act of speaking becomes a form of silencing, in which the announcer’s own voice is mechanized as a transmitter for the electronic voice of the sales pitch or state propaganda. For Hill, nothing illustrates this better than the test given by some networks to job applicants, in which the applicant is asked to read a text of “skillfully constructed gibberish,” rendered in perfect English but without “rational meaning,” as though it were transparently clear (2–3). Such a test, Hill argues, “symbolizes [the] job,” which on a fundamental level makes a mockery of communication:

From an ethical standpoint, the announcer does not communicate all; on the contrary, he is specifically forbidden to do so. . . . His faculties and all the human apparatus particularly his own, including his ethical consciousness, are made the tool of a value of communication which it is his duty to falsify as the product of his faculties. An ethical correction of this situation would require, either that the announcer quit his job, or that, when using the microphone, he communicates his own values out of his own interest and necessity.

(6)

Like Theodor W. Adorno, who argued that radio contributed to the “reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as an expression, the inability to communicate at all” (“On the Fetish-Character” 271), Hill believed that the silencing mechanism of radio also arrested the public’s right to hear. As Adorno put it, “If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen” (271).

Hill spoke from experience. As a news announcer and writer at WINX, where he announced the Allies’ invasion of Normandy on D-Day, the strain of repressing his own voice while speaking in the voice of the state and the advertiser convinced Hill that commercial radio contributed to the degradation of communication and individuality in American society (Lasar, *Pacifica* 25). He quit abruptly in May of 1945, after refusing to read on the air a propagandistic story about the Tule Lake Japanese American internment camp in northern California (25).<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Hill, like many pacifists, strongly objected to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the war and was likely familiar with the notorious Tule Lake camp from his experience working with CO strikers at the Minersville CPS camp, located only a few hours away. At the peak of the war, the Tule Lake internment camp incarcerated in a maximum-security facility more than 18,000 Japanese Americans—in other words, several thousand beyond the total number of COs in CPS camps around the country. Tule Lake was also known as a camp for dissenters and resisters; many of the internees had been labeled as “disloyal” by the War Relocation Association and transferred from other camps for refusing to declare loyalty to the U.S. and for other forms of protest (Zhou 105). The FOR campaigned actively against internment, and FOR members Kenneth and Marie Rexroth helped many Japanese Americans in San Francisco to escape from the West Coast (Hamalian 112–14). If the Waldport CPS camp served as

Hill's idea for a radio network that would promote "a pacific world in our time" (qtd. in Lasar, *Pacifica* 49) emerged, as we have seen, out of his embedded critique of the radical pacifist movement's struggle to communicate to an American public celebrating victory in "the good war." *Pacifica* Radio was equally shaped, however, by Hill's embedded critique of the American system of radio broadcasting, and what he saw as the collusion of private and public interests to suppress and censor independent thought and public debate.

For many U.S. listeners during the war years, radio offered a narrative of national consensus and cooperation under trusted leadership during a time of uncertainty and fear. Images of "radio's high, beaming towers radiated a masterful charisma, . . . as much beacons of safety as thought to be key targets for enemy plots" (Hullot-Kentor 11). For COs like Hill and Everson, however, radio signaled a far more sinister force as a clear enemy of peace. "The world wars on," Everson writes in *Chronicle of Division*, "But the abstract voice that spills from the box / Cannot bring it clear" (*Residual* 158). Radio's dominance as a mass medium during the 1940s gave it profound influence over American public opinion, and the radio-savvy Roosevelt administration was quick to recruit it for the war effort. The networks, fearful of threatened antitrust regulation or even a complete government takeover of the medium as had happened during WWI, were happy to comply (Hilmes, *Radio Voices* 231). With the FCC's effective ban on "editorializing" on the radio after the 1941 *Mayflower* decision, military censorship of the airwaves, and the newly created Office of War Information disseminating information and even programming to the networks, the radio industry successfully and powerfully helped to build a national consensus on military conscription and intervention before the U.S.'s entry into the

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an important reference point for the San Francisco Renaissance, Tule Lake would become a painful and politically galvanizing reference point for Japanese American poets and the emergence of an Asian American avant-garde movement in the Bay Area in the 1970s (see Yu 89–92).

war.<sup>115</sup> As Susan J. Douglas argues, “World War II was a radio war” that brought the dramatic sounds of rallies, political speeches, and, for the first time, warfare into Americans’ homes (162).<sup>116</sup> Broadcast journalism also emerged during this time, codifying an aesthetics (if not the fact) of objectivity that may have been desirable but also conveniently helped the networks mediate between the demands of advertisers and government (Douglas 161–98). Advertisers, meanwhile, capitalized on the discourse of peace, freedom, equality, and prosperity—as well as new, sophisticated market research strategies—to promote an image of postwar society tied to commodity acquisition. For Hill, the commercial networks’ unprecedented cooperation with state propaganda immediately prior to and during the US involvement in WWII offered only the most recent and egregious example of how commercial media stifled dissent and minority views, blocked public debate necessary for a functioning democracy, and facilitated the spread of propaganda on a massive scale.<sup>117</sup>

Hill’s sense of radio as the cause and the cure for a general “breakdown” in communication aligned with arguments made by other postwar commentators writing in the era where *communication* took on new connotations as a cultural buzzword and object of

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<sup>115</sup> It’s worth noting at this point, lest it appear that all left-leaning poets opposed the war, that a number of poets, especially those who had supported the New Deal and Roosevelt’s presidency, worked or wrote for the Office of War Information (OWI): Archibald MacLeish served as the OWI’s assistant director from 1942–1943, and Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, Malcolm Cowley, Louis Untermeyer, and Charles Olson all wrote or worked for the OWI (though several would later resign in protest of censorship and advertiser influence). In general, these writers also believed that supporting the Allied cause offered the opportunity not only to fight against fascism abroad but to interrogate the meaning of freedom and equality at home, including racial equality (Hilmes, *Radio Voices* 244).

<sup>116</sup> Douglas notes the extent to which the aural character of many Americans’ experience of this war has been forgotten in our own hyper-visual moment, in which collective, contemporary memory of WWII is mediated through the photographs, newsreel footage, and cinematic reenactments continually replayed in contemporary television and film (162).

<sup>117</sup> To give just one example of war propaganda programming discussed by Hilmes that resonates in the context of my discussion of WWII conscientious objection, a children’s program broadcast by NBC in 1941 entitled *From Oxford Pacifism to Fighter Pilot* billed itself as “The blazing spectacular story of one of Britain’s gallant air fighters, from pacifist beginnings to a fiery plunge from the skies” (qtd. in Hilmes, *Radio Voices* 234), narrating the move from isolationism to interventionism (and, apparently, martyrdom to the Allied cause) for young American audiences.

institutional study. In the late 1940s, new institutional discourses proliferated across U.S. society and globally in what communication theorist John Durham Peters describes as “the single grandest moment in the century’s confrontation with communication” (22). The emergence of information theory and the growth of communication studies transformed scientific, social scientific, and humanistic epistemologies by conceptualizing everything as unified by one massive communication system, from the level of the genetic code to language, social relations, technological invention, and global politics (23). Communication in this expanded sense depended upon, according to information theory, the reduction or elimination of “noise” that could produce interference in the transmission and reception of signals. All problems, then, from the scientific to the therapeutic to the strife between nations, were communication problems to be remedied and remediating through “improved technology or techniques” (29).<sup>118</sup>

Yet for all the enthusiasm for improved technics of communication as a panacea for all the world’s ills, the Cold War years are beset by continual communication crises, from breakdowns in diplomatic talks and the continual eruption of “hot wars” during the Cold War, to domestic failures to even bring into public debate, much less resolve conflict between, opposing views on politics, racial segregation, economic inequality, women’s roles, homosexuality, or other social issues. Social critics repeatedly questioned, and still question, the role of communication and media technologies in creating these crises and in forming new publics and nationalisms. Did radio, as Benedict Anderson posits, extend and expand print-capitalism’s decisive role in creating and representing the nation as an “imagined community” (54n28)? Or

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<sup>118</sup> In the “Private Room” lecture, Hill admonishes mental health professionals for their reliance on communication metaphors: “I am not expert enough to know this certainly, but I have impression that intra- and interpersonal communication have acquired some very technical meanings in psychiatry, and that the traditional problems of psycho-pathology are now more frequently viewed as specifically communicational problems—of sending messages accurately, or of receiving messages, or of organizing the significant received or sent” (6).

did it signal the end, as Jürgen Habermas argues, of “[t]he public sphere in the world of letters” and the rise of “the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” (160)? Did its very ontology as a medium lead inexorably to authoritarianism and fascism through the dissemination of an authoritative voice and the degradation of listening, as Adorno believed, or could it foster, by giving voice to, revolutionary energies, as Frantz Fanon observed in Algeria? As Peters notes, the “therapeutic project” of communication theory was driven by fears that mass media like radio and television and propaganda had created or could create a “mass society” of alienated, detached individuals, no longer capable of speaking or listening to one another, eroding the necessary conditions for democracy and the public sphere (27).

Hill’s critiques of commercial radio especially echo those of Adorno, who witnessed firsthand the institutionalization of communication during his his exile in the U.S. and work for Paul Lazarsfeld’s Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP).<sup>119</sup> In an unfinished book based on his research at the PRRP recently translated and published as *Current of Music*, Adorno argues that radio is paradigmatic of the authoritarianism of mass media, which, far from enhancing the possibilities for communication in a capitalist society, enables the standardization and commodification of culture that eviscerates the individual. Like Hill, Adorno associates radio with the “private room” of the atomized subject. “[W]hen a private person in a private room is subjected to a public utility mediated by a loudspeaker,” Adorno argues, “his response takes on aspects of a response to an authoritarian voice even if the content of that voice or the speaker to whom the individual is listening has no authoritarian features whatsoever” (*Current* 70). Yet it is precisely the “illusion of privacy and individual independence” represented by the “private room” that makes radio such an ideal vehicle for authoritarianism:

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<sup>119</sup> See Jenemann for a revisionist study of Adorno’s exile in the U.S. from 1938–1953 and his work for the PRRP (1938–1941) as well as his experience in Hollywood.

the deeper this voice is involved within his own privacy, the more it appears to pour out of the cells of his most intimate life; the more he gets the impression that his own cupboard, his own phonograph, his own bedroom speaks to him in a personal way, devoid of the intermediary stages of the printed word; the more perfectly he is ready to accept wholesale whatever he hears.

(70)

The fundamental deception of radio, according to Adorno, is its ability to hide its authoritarian structure under the guise of privacy and individual choice, as if its disembodied voice originated in the listener's own mind or, since it amounts to the same thing, his property. The "private room" thus represents both the individual's alienation under capitalism and "the illusion of privacy" that the culture industry everywhere disseminates at the same moment that it renders privacy and choice obsolete in the face of a totalizing capitalist culture. As Adorno puts it elsewhere, radio "takes on the deceptive form of a disinterested, impartial authority, which fits fascism like a glove"—and clearly not only for German or other state-owned radio industries ("Culture Industry" 129). This is the paranoid image of radio as mind control we might attach to the famous 1938 Orson Welles's broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, or, as I do in the next chapter, trace into Ginsberg's "Howl," and Moloch's urban hellscape, "crown[ed]" with radio antennae (*Howl* 21).

Why, then, did Hill and a group of pacifists and poets in San Francisco fight for a place on the dial? Hill's disillusionment with the peace movement's dated and marginalized tactics of publicity offers one motivation, but doesn't answer the question of why he turned to the medium of radio in particular. Early Pacifica documents and later accounts point often to radio's dominance as a public medium, suggesting that radio's complicity in the communication crisis

made it all the more powerful as a tool to intervene in it. Eleanor McKinney—a radio journalist who played a crucial role in the founding of Pacifica, served as KPFA’s first program director, and spent the majority of her career at Pacifica stations KPFA and WBAI—traces Hill’s idea for a radio station in this way:

[Hill] was intensely concerned with two contemporary problems: communication, and the strife between individuals and between nations which plague modern society. He believed these two problems were fundamentally one. The most potent communicative vehicles of modern time . . . radio broadcasting, had never been used in serious service of these problems. Aware that the arts—musical, literary and dramatic—are a bridge of communication between all men, Lewis Hill believed that radio could become the medium for the expression of these, and at the same time for the exploration of insights into the resolution of conflicts between individuals and nations.

(“KPFA History,” Pacifica Radio Sampler vol. 1)<sup>120</sup>

McKinney echoes Pacifica’s founding documents—unsurprisingly, as she likely contributed to them—which emphasize repeatedly the need for new communicative media that would advance the cause of peace through artistic expression and educated debate. Hill’s belief that the arts could serve as a humanistic “bridge of communication” intrinsically linked to the cause of peace reflects the pacifist aesthetic developed at Waldport. Hill’s interest in radio, however, shows his desire for a powerful public and publicizing media that, transformed in the service rather than obstruction of communication, would effectively disseminate the “benevolent propaganda of preventing further warfare through the free and uncensored interchange of ideas of all

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<sup>120</sup> The Pacifica Radio Sampler—an unpublished, bound collection of institutional papers assembled in 1984 by Vera S. Hopkins and held by the Bancroft Library—has no continuous pagination, though some of the enclosed documents have internal pagination. To reduce confusion, I refer to documents from this collection by their title only and the Sampler volume number.

civilizations in politics, philosophy, and the arts” (Hill qtd. in Land 41).<sup>121</sup> Aligning “propaganda” with “the free and uncensored interchange of ideas” appears a contradiction in terms, but it reflects Hill’s idealistic conviction that a functioning public sphere, aided by communication media and the arts, would ultimately produce a consensus for peace.

Clearly, radio’s dominance as a public medium motivated the early Pacificans—a striking point when considering the small, local FM station they finally established in Berkeley. However, it was also as a technology for voice and ear that radio appeared as an especially appropriate medium for their “benevolent propaganda.” Given the centrality of music to radio broadcasting on most stations today as well as on KPFA from its first broadcast, the association of radio with the unaccompanied human voice (and its technological displacement) is strikingly persistent in radio literature. Early Pacifica documents, like the 1948 fundraising prospectus, emphasize this disembodied, pervasive, “constant voice” of radio as grounds for its value to the peace movement:

The individual forms his understanding and judgment of the world and other men in his everyday environment—his city, neighborhood and home. Only by entering his environment as a constant voice can any concept enter his consciousness. Only by answering to the mounting urgency for new educational weapons can men and women dedicated to peace seize the initiative or intervene in the struggle for social progress.

(“K-P-F-A: A Prospectus” iv, Pacifica Records [UMD] 8:6)

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<sup>121</sup> Adorno was also concerned with the question of whether radio could provide a new medium for art, and for music in particular, but his answer was resoundingly in the negative; in his view, the very structure of radiophony transforms music into a commodity fetish and produces a “regression of listening” that renders aesthetic judgment meaningless. See, especially, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” and *Current of Music*.

In addition to ironically adopting the rhetoric of war (“educational weapons”) in the promotion of a pacifist cause, the prospectus locates radio’s power in its ability to disseminate a voice that will penetrate not only the individual’s “private room” but the depths of his mind. I’ll return to the private male individual at the center of this model of radiophony and its implications for Hill’s and KPFA’s reimagining of the listening subject, but for now we might simply note the gender anxieties that always lie just below the surface of such standard descriptions of radio’s persuasive power (even in the context of a document that also strives in places for gender inclusivity). Like Adorno, Hill seized on how radio could transform a public voice into an intimate, private, internal address, which, in its “nightly solicitude toward your internal organs” lays “claim on your attention and faith which few of your closest friends would venture” (“The Theory” 20). Yet for Hill, while commercial radio had betrayed that attention and trust, it was precisely radio’s “peculiar intimacy” (19) and even authoritarianism that made it a potentially powerful tool for educating a public in ideals and methods of peace. After all, the “constant voice” that speaks here is not a person but a “concept,” the “benevolent propaganda” of the peace movement.

If radio was a technology for the amplification and dissemination of the spoken word, it was equally a technology for listening, and the early Pacificans proposed the cultivation of participatory radio listening as a corrective to the medium’s authoritative structure. For Hill, the inability to quite literally hear the full spectrum of opinion and culture eroded the individual’s capacity to develop an ethical and civic consciousness, and to negotiate, mediate, and resolve conflict. As he argued in a 1952 KPFA panel discussion on McCarthyism, the “privilege of hearing is a precedent condition to making up one’s mind wisely in a democracy. It is indispensable for a citizen to act” (qtd. in Land 52). While Adorno argued that in a culture where

**“nobody can any longer speak . . . certainly nobody can any longer listen,”** Hill and the early Pacificans believed that listening, and its associated technologies, could intervene in the communication crisis. After all, listening could be a strategic tactic for dialogue, diplomacy, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. Might radio, then, become a prosthesis for the ear?

In the context of the Cold War, such figures of listening and deafness abounded in public discourse to describe the diplomatic breakdown between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The title of a 1953 article by Robert Redfield in *The Saturday Review*—“Does America Need a Hearing Aid?”—gives just one example of this rhetoric of listening in the Cold War U.S. Redfield critiques American society in general and the Voice of America program in particular for broadcasting American exceptionalism without reciprocally listening to other nations and peoples. Figuratively equating deafness with isolation and an inability to communicate, Redfield reiterates ableist assumptions about disability and ignores the productive ways deaf and hearing-impaired culture offer insight into the phenomenology and rhetoric of listening. The metaphor of the “hearing aid,” and subsequent references in the article to and analogies of radio and radar, are nonetheless interesting for the implication that listening is always technologically and discursively embedded. That Hill and other members of the newly formed Broadcasting Foundation of America (BFA) included this article in a 1957 grant application for an international tape exchange radio project indicates that they took literally the urgent need for Americans to listen to the voices and cultures of the rest of the world, and particularly the Soviet world, to promote global “conversation” in the service of peace (“A Proposal for a Conversation,” *Pacifica Records* [WI HS] 20).

Listening was not only part of the rhetoric of the Cold War, as sound and communication technologies were conscripted for the purposes of military and ideological warfare. Aural

technologies were understood to be central to disseminating, detecting, receiving, and interrupting communication systems, from the expansion of the Voice of America (VOA) program, which broadcast propaganda internationally by way of news journalism and the “best” of American culture—jazz and literature—to the creation of the secret Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) by the U.S. Navy to listen in on Soviet submarine activity. The founding of Pacifica Radio and KPFA is situated within this Cold War context and crisis in listening.<sup>122</sup> Through cultural and public affairs programming, and through the hi-fidelity medium of FM, KPFA would seek to cultivate and put on the air intentional, participatory, rational-critical, and learned methods of listening as central to the nonviolent resolution of conflict.

To intervene in the crisis in listening, however, KPFA would have to reinvent what that “constant voice” would say and sound like, who its listening public would be, and how that audience would attend to it. *KPFA Folio*, the program guide sent to subscribers, published a short cover essay in 1954 that described their alternative approach to the voice of broadcasting. “As the disembodied voice can assert with awesome authority,” the essay reads, “it can also suggest, imply, evoke, start a mind in motion with a destination still to be discovered . . . except as the listener would reach his own conclusion” (*KPFA Folio* Jan. 24–Feb. 6, 1954). To do so, Hill argued, radio would need writers, musicians, and sound artists who could use the medium in the creation of new, authentic forms of artistic communication—such as, in his opinion, had never been attempted before.<sup>123</sup> Poetry, and the influence of individual poets on KPFA’s overall

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<sup>122</sup> Pacifica Radio occasionally shared and produced programming for the VOA, providing further evidence of its efforts to intervene in global crisis through benevolent propaganda and mass media.

<sup>123</sup> Educational broadcasters, Hill argued, had equally failed to make radio into an artistic medium. “There is no evidence that these [university] stations and their organizations (NAEB, etc.) even understand the basic functional obstacles to development of new art forms,” he wrote in a letter in 1951 (qtd. in Land 64). Moreover, he argued, “[t]he real poets and musicians” aren’t found in the universities but must be sought elsewhere and brought to the medium of radio by other means. It’s worth asking whether KPFA, especially during Hill’s tenure, escaped these critiques of university stations.

programming and broadcasting aesthetics, would play a crucial role in developing and interrogating Pacifica's "constant voice" and its reimagination of radio listening. But it did so against the backdrop of a major sea change in broadcasting in the U.S., in which who spoke and who listened—and why, how, and through what medium—became undecided and fiercely debated questions.

### **KPFA Goes Live**

In Kenneth Rexroth's autobiography, first dictated onto tapes and broadcast on KPFA and WBAI as part of his weekly radio program, Rexroth gives an account of a visit Lewis Hill made in the late 1940s to the Libertarian Circle, an anarchist discussion group that Rexroth organized.<sup>124</sup> "I'll never forget the night that Lew Hill . . . showed up unannounced at a large meeting," he recalls, describing Hill as "a tall thin man with a long dead white face and a soft, propulsive manner of speaking":

He presented what was really a very simple thesis. There had been a great structural change in society, and the days of street meetings and little pamphlets were over. New, far more effective means of communication were available. It was comparatively easy and inexpensive to set up a cooperatively run listener-supported FM radio station whose

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<sup>124</sup> Linda Hamalian describes Rexroth's famous Libertarian Circle: "The goals of this group, in Rexroth's words, were to 'refound the radical movement after its destruction by the Bolsheviks and ideologists from Marx to Malatesta.' At 'educational' meetings held every Wednesday, the group would discuss a single topic or author based on a reading list that Rexroth had developed. It included 'the Andalusian Agricultural Communes, the Shop Stewards movement in revolutionary Germany, communalist groups in the United States, the Kronstadt revolt, Nestor Makhno, and his anarchist society and army in the Russian Civil War, the I.W.W., Mutualist Anarchism in America'" (149).

signal would cover at least the entire Bay area, and which could be supported by subscriptions without any commercials.

Unfortunately, this was presented not simply, but in the mystifying argot of a sociology professor. It was difficult enough for the younger college educated people to follow. For the elderly Jews, Italians, and Spanish—who after all had been reading revolutionary theory all their lives—it was totally incomprehensible. . . . Perhaps it was rude of me, but I had to act as his interpreter.

*(Autobiographical Novel 519)*<sup>125</sup>

Rexroth's account is characteristically self-aggrandizing, and anachronistic or misleading in parts: the model of listener sponsorship was settled upon only after KPFA went on the air and KPFA was never run as a cooperative, though the community-based co-op movement in the Bay did influence Hill (Lasar, *Pacifica* 32). Rexroth also downplays, to comic effect, the intellectual might of the Libertarian Circle's regular Wednesday night attendees, many of whom would have been known to his readers and radio listeners. In addition to the "elderly" anarchists well-read in radical theory, the "younger college educated people" included poets like William Everson, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Richard Moore, as well as Muriel Rukeyser and Thomas Parkinson—most of whom also attended Rexroth's weekly Friday evening poetry salons. Hill's pitch must have made some impression on those gathered; as Rexroth accurately notes, "many of the people in [KPFA's] administration had been members of our Circle," and many more would appear on the air as guests or featured readers. Indeed, several in attendance that night were

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<sup>125</sup> Many others described Hill as an incredibly abstract, intellectual thinker and speaker. According to James Tracy, "Hill . . . gained a reputation as an incisive and sometimes caustic intellectual. He was known also for often speaking in cryptic terms. One C.O. recalls being asked by Bayard Rustin: 'Hey, do you happen to know Lew Hill? . . . They say you can't understand what he's talking about'" (49). Rexroth does not provide a date for this visit, but it likely occurred in 1948, after *Pacifica's* first application for an AM station in Richmond had been declined and fundraising for a FM station in Berkeley had begun.

already acquainted with Hill and his idea for a pacifist radio station. Richard Moore and Eleanor McKinney, regular attendees of the Libertarian Circle and Friday evening poetry salon, were among the founders of the Pacifica Radio Foundation in 1946 and first staff members of KPFA, and likely invited Hill to make his fundraising pitch. And Rexroth, as I discuss in the next chapter, would himself become a crucial and constant voice on KPFA.

Rexroth accurately describes Hill's belief that "a great structural change in society" had transformed the meaning and media of communication for pacifists and anarchists, but it took some time for Pacifica's founders to understand the implications of more subtle changes overtaking the culture industries, including FM radio. The nonprofit Pacifica Foundation was officially incorporated in the summer of 1946 by a group of five former COs and radio broadcasters, with Hill as their appointed Chairman and with the mission, according to the Articles of Incorporation, to establish "new channels of education" to support "the cause of peace" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 1:1).<sup>126</sup> As in Everson's prospectus for the Fine Arts camp at Waldport, Pacifica's original Articles of Incorporation emphasize an intrinsic link between art and pacifism by putting the cultivation of "the creative skills and energies of the communities" through writing workshops, scholarships, the production of original radio dramas, and studio access for musicians ahead of the mission to "engage in any activity that shall contribute to a lasting understanding between nations and between individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors."

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<sup>126</sup> The official incorporators of Pacifica Foundation were Hill, Homer Sisson, John Waldron, H. Don Kirschner, and William Triest (Hopkins, "Some Basic History of Pacifica," Pacifica Radio Sampler 1). Of these, Hill, Sisson, and Kirschner were all former COs, and Triest, though not a CO himself, was the brother of Frank Triest, a CO, activist, and close friend of Kenneth Rexroth (Hopkins, "Summary of a Conversation with Bill Triest," Pacifica Radio Sampler 1). Only Waldron, a prominent radio broadcaster, had no connection to the peace movement, and William Triest later recalled that he primarily signed on to give the Foundation radio credibility but otherwise played a small role (*ibid.*). Generally speaking, the incorporators held roles more as advisors and signatories than active founders. Eleanor McKinney, Richard Moore, and E. John Lewis are some of the others who played especially central roles in actually putting Pacifica on the air.

To that end, the Pacifica Foundation drafted its first “Radio Prospectus” for potential donors, proposing the establishment of a 1,000 watt AM station in Richmond, California, about five miles north of Berkeley, an ethnically diverse, working-class community that was experiencing rapid growth after the war. Richmond appeared to Hill as a microcosm of postwar American society and a testing ground for his pacifist ideals. The 1946 prospectus imagined a popular AM station that would attract listeners with a wide range of popular and ethnic music, an emphasis on local issues and programming, and fewer commercials. By making the station indispensable to listeners through its entertainment, the station could then educate them in nonviolent tactics of conflict resolution to be used in their everyday lives and promote understanding and communication between individuals and groups, including those within their own city (Lasar, *Pacifica* 44–45). The success of a station in a city like Richmond, where class, labor, racial, and generational conflicts were ripening, and where veterans were seeking reentry into “peacetime” society, would, Hill hoped, provide a blueprint for other radio stations and media outlets around the country, giving rise to a vital peace movement embedded in the everyday lives of the general population.<sup>127</sup>

Under pressure from local NBC and CBS affiliates, the FCC declined Pacifica’s application for the Richmond station on the grounds of potential signal interference. With no viable AM channels left in the area, Hill and Pacifica quickly turned to the relatively new medium of FM and applied for a license for a station in Berkeley. Although FM radio had been invented in the 1930s, a long-protracted congressional battle over spectrum allocation for FM

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<sup>127</sup> In fundraising letters to fellow pacifists, such as George Hartman, Hill made a passionate claim that “the Good Fight must be carried into this medium” (i.e. radio), where its “profound experimental significance” would inspire “individuals and groups all over the country” (Pacifica Records [UMD] 2:18). Hill also imagined that the Pacifica Foundation would launch supplementary projects in other media, including public TV stations, a press, a bookstore, and a magazine modeled on the BBC’s *Listener*.

and TV, and the reluctance of the powerful AM network conglomerates to accept an altered industry landscape without reassurance of their continued dominance, had delayed for decades the more public arrival of FM broadcasting (Keith and Sterling 55–60). With issues of spectrum allocation finally resolved in 1945 (though hardly in FM’s favor, which was forced to move further up the dial due to exaggerated fears over signal interference with TV), FM appeared to many to hold out a glimmer of promise for a higher quality, more independent radio after the war. FM was undeniably a better medium for broadcast sound, eliminating static and electrical interference, offering a broader frequency range, and transmitting sounds with striking clarity. As Pacifica’s 1948 prospectus for the Berkeley station confidently projected, “In the radio industry it has been an accepted fact for some time that FM is destined to replace AM as the chief method of aural broadcasting. KPFA and other independent stations can bank on a sound economic future if their operations can be sustained until this future arrives” (“K-P-F-A: A Prospectus” 18, Pacifica Records [UMD] 8:6).

Pacifica’s founders were right about the future dominance of FM, but this future took much longer to arrive than they could have imagined. In fact, after an initial flurry of new FM licenses were issued in the late forties, FM radio actually declined in the fifties as television’s near-immediate popularity relegated radio to the shadows, the process for license applications stalled, and the manufacturing of new FM receivers stagnated. Perhaps most destructive for FM’s viability was Congress’s decision to allow “simulcasting” of identical content on both AM and FM stations, which permitted the major networks to gobble up much of the FM spectrum. It was not until the late 1950s that things started to look up for FM broadcasters; in the mid-sixties, after the FCC banned simulcasting and the major networks had moved almost entirely to TV, FM began its long-belated rise to radio dominance. Pacifica Radio is usually associated with what

Douglas calls the “FM revolution” of underground, minority, and community radio in the 1960s and 1970s, but its status also had to do with its reputation as an early adopter and experimenter in the medium. The late forties proved, at any rate, an auspicious moment to launch an independent radio station, especially one that, though not at first officially noncommercial, certainly emphasized its independence from advertiser control.<sup>128</sup>

Berkeley was a practical choice for the location of KPFA, since it was one of the few communities in the area with a reasonable enough concentration of FM receivers to make launching a FM station there at all feasible (Lasar, *Pacifica* 60). The university city also, as Lasar notes, more closely reflected the values and interests of Pacifica’s founders and their already existing sense of community. As McKinney recalled, starting KPFA “was like creating a place where we could be with people like ourselves,” by which she meant pacifists, poets, artists, and intellectuals (qtd. in Lasar, *Pacifica* 62). The university community offered a wellspring of potential listeners and local, largely free talent and expertise from which to develop programming. The move, however, from an AM station in the diverse, working-class city of Richmond to an FM station in the upper-middle-class, highly educated city of Berkeley indicated a significant compromise to Hill’s dream of a more public form of communication for the peace movement. From a focus on “the average man” and a community in need of methods of conflict resolution, the new 1948 prospectus shifted its emphasis to the “individual,” to leaders of science and society, and to the university community (Lasar, *Pacifica* 61). Lasar rightly points out that the decision to broadcast from Berkeley opened KPFA to the kind of “ivory towerism” and marginalization that Hill had objected to in the peace movement. Like Everson’s Fine Arts

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<sup>128</sup> It’s disputed when KPFA’s leadership came up with the idea of listener sponsorship. The 1946 and 1948 prospectuses, however, both state that revenue from advertisers would be an important part of their operations budget once the stations have been established.

project in CPS, KPFA came to envision itself as an experiment in creative cultural production and intentional community that while limited in signal range, available FM receivers, and wider public interest, might nonetheless serve as a kind of “seed” for a larger media revolution. Yet in doing so it risked becoming, to borrow Hill’s own phrase, a “cove in some tributary” of American radio.

The FCC approved Pacifica’s application for a FM station in Berkeley, and on the afternoon of April 15, 1949, station KPFA made its first official broadcast on FM channel 261, beginning with a brief announcement by Hill and the first installment of a folk music program produced by Richard Moore (Lasar, *Pacifica* 64). Although Pacifica had not raised enough funds for a transmitter of sufficient strength, the station decided to go on the air anyway at a lower wattage for a trial period they termed “KPFA Interim,” hopeful that once on the air they would be able to raise the additional funds needed to operate at full power. After a few months on the air, KPFA’s leadership decided to make the station’s de facto noncommercial status official. They decided to experiment with a subscription model, in which the station would meet its operating costs from the regular subscriptions of a small percentage of listeners, who would show their support for the station and its continued noncommercial status by regularly paying for a signal they could receive for free.<sup>129</sup> Hill hypothesized that a minority of listeners could be persuaded to subscribe regularly to a station if they felt its programming was unique and superior to that offered on commercial stations, and that a radio station could be sustained by the subscriptions of a mere two percent of its projected listening audience (*Voluntary Listener-*

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<sup>129</sup> Pacifica is widely acknowledged as the first listener-sponsored network in the U.S., but there are precedents for this approach in American broadcasting history. Hilmes notes that “public subscription” was considered in radio’s early days as a possible alternative to commercial, educational, and governmental models of financing, citing in particular a plan forwarded in the 1920s by the Radio Music Fund Committee in New York City to fund a series of programs on WEAJ through audience subscription (*Radio Voices* 9).

*Sponsorship*).<sup>130</sup> Listener sponsorship also held out the promise of KPFA's complete independence from commercial and government money, which must have been attractive to the pacifist, anarchist, and libertarian leanings of the station's staff and supporters. It was more a theory than a practical solution during KPFA Interim, however; the low-wattage signal strength and the expense and rarity of FM receivers meant that relatively few Berkeley residents, not to mention the greater Bay Area, could hear the station. Several early subscribers, for example, paid more for the idea of KPFA than for its actual signal, which they couldn't pick up (Lasar, *Pacifica* 65).

In spite of these technical and financial challenges, for the next sixteen months, KPFA broadcast a daily program of classical and folk music, drama, readings from literature, children's programming, and public affairs roundtables, commentaries, and interviews. Public affairs programs took up subjects of local, national, and international concern, especially those of pressing interest to the station's founders, such as "Should the University of California Faculty Sign the Loyalty Oath?"; "How Can War with Russia Be Prevented?"; "Is Radio Meeting Its Responsibilities?"; and "The Dilemma of America's Racial Antagonisms" (on which Bayard Rustin appeared as a panelist) ("Report to the Executive and Advisory Members of Pacifica Foundation," *Pacifica Radio Sampler* vol. 1). Jaime de Angulo hosted a beloved children's program of indigenous tales. Poets appeared on the air in various roles: Robert Duncan and George Leite (the editor of *Circle*) appeared on a roundtable discussing "Ezra Pound, Poetry and Politics," while Muriel Rukeyser and Richard Moore discussed "The Sacco-Vanzetti Case"

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<sup>130</sup> Hill's "two percent" theory, as Lasar notes, echoed pacifist arguments like that of Albert Einstein, who in 1930 stated that "Even if only two percent of those assigned to perform military service should announce their refusal to fight . . . governments would be powerless" (qtd. in Lasar, *Pacifica* 70).

(ibid.).<sup>131</sup> Jack Spicer, as I discuss in detail in the next chapter, soon joined Moore's *Folk Music Series* as a producer of a weekly program on American ballads featuring local musicians and record collectors. Additional literary programming included a series for local book clubs done in cooperation with the Great Books Foundation, readings from canonical literature and poetry, and a Friday evening "poetry reading" by a contemporary poet, often from existing commercial recordings.

The station's mounting debts forced KPFA Interim off the air in August of 1950, but a successful listener-led subscription drive put the station back up by the next summer, with a new, more powerful transmitter and a small but committed audience of listeners willing to pay to keep their beloved local, noncommercial station on the air (Lasar, *Pacifica* 66). In 1952, Hill secured *Pacifica*'s first grant from the Ford Foundation Fund for Adult Education of \$150,000, which carried the station through the worst of FM's drought years and helped establish the institution as a "philanthropic stew" of grants, donations, and listener subscriptions (67).<sup>132</sup> In addition to the challenges of listener sponsorship and FM, KPFA barely weathered several major internal crises in the fifties over issues of management, programming, and personality clashes between Hill, his adherents, and other station staff that presaged *Pacifica*'s perpetually rocky future. Still, the station grew, attracting listeners, volunteers, announcers, guest speakers, musicians, dramatists, and poets to its daily mix of quality music, drama, literature, commentary, and enlightened debate without commercials.

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<sup>131</sup> The program on "Ezra Pound, Poetry and Politics," likely concerned the controversial award of the Bollingen Prize to Pound in 1948.

<sup>132</sup> In fact, despite Hill's lofty theory, listener subscriptions have never wholly sustained *Pacifica* or its stations, though they remain central to the network's ever-precarious survival.

KPFA attributed its modest success and listener support in a hostile media environment to its unique and total reconceptualization of the purpose, content, and aesthetics of radio broadcasting. In other words, it tried to transform radio from an authoritarian, capitalist machine for the spread of propaganda into a public forum that would intervene in the postwar crisis in listening. In the station's early years, this largely meant a rejection of anything that sounded like commercial radio. If commercial radio avoided all forms of controversy in the pursuit of a bland "objectivity" that would offend neither listeners, advertisers, nor government censors, KPFA would explicitly seek to broadcast minority opinions, debates on subjects of contemporary controversy, and cultural programs that challenged social mores and popular tastes. If commercial radio played a narrow repertoire of prerecorded crooners, popular jazz, and "light" classical music, KPFA's musical programming consisted of less well-known "serious" and contemporary classical compositions, folk music with an ethnographic aura, educated musical commentary, and live sessions with local musicians, all of which made use of FM's superior sound quality. Live broadcasts were especially important to the early station; unlike live programs on commercial radio that might advertise the ability to bring a live concert from an expensive, exclusive theater to a national audience, KPFA used live programming as a way to increase community representation and involvement on the station.

KPFA's anticommercialism extended to its overall aesthetics of broadcasting and announcing. Commercial networks favored a fast-paced, professional style with seamless transitions between commercials, and programs held to a tight schedule and punctuated by station branding and jingles. In contrast, as McKinney later recalled, KPFA's early listeners "enjoyed the absence of radio's conventions":

There were no fanfares, no themes, no organ strings. Duration of programs was designed to fulfill natural content—not to be chopped off in regular segments by the stop watch. So that programs could begin at scheduled times, the spaces between the regular endings were filled with bits of prose or poetry, or simply by silence when the mood or impact would have been jarred by a sudden shift to another subject.

(“About Pacifica Radio” 12)

The gaps in the schedule, called “Miscellany” on program guides, lent experimental space for announcers to insert readings of their own interest—from short poems to readings from Jonathan Swift, Henry David Thoreau, Consumer Reports, and the theosophical publication *MANAS* (Hopkins, “Summary of a Conversation with Bill Triest,” Pacifica Radio Sampler vol. 1).<sup>133</sup> The rejection of the temporality of commercial radio made an especially strong impression on early station staff and listeners. William Triest states that they went so far as to remove all the clocks from the studio and suspend broadcasting daily from 6:00 to 7:30pm so that staff and listeners could enjoy an uninterrupted dinner (Josephson, “Pacifica Is 25”).

While some listeners complained regularly about these aspects of KPFA, the uniqueness of KPFA’s public affairs and cultural programming impressed many who tuned in. In a direct intervention into what Hill perceived as radio’s failure to serve as a public forum, KPFA early on declared its commitment to representing minority views from all points on the political spectrum. In doing so, the station offered a profoundly different model of consensus building than the “objective” perspective and sanitized debates of commercial radio’s limited public affairs

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<sup>133</sup> The practice of filling programming gaps with readings from literature goes back to the earliest days of radio, when announcers often read poems between programs (Wheeler 49). The popularity of *MANAS* among KPFA announcers points to the influence of theosophy on the station and the San Francisco Renaissance. Lasar documents the many familial, personal, or intellectual connections of station staff to the spiritual movement and the teachings of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (*Pacifica* 29–30). Henry Geiger, a CO who had served in CPS and the founder of *MANAS* in 1948, was a friend and correspondent of Hill’s (30).

programming. Roundtable and panel discussions and interviews dominated KPFA's early public affairs programming, developing an overall emphasis on dialogue between individuals expressing their own differing opinions and perspectives. Dialogue, as Lasar emphasizes, was especially central to the early station's public affairs programming, as it represented not only the marketplace of ideas but a pacifist strategy of nonviolent resolution of conflict through direct communication and cultivated practices of listening to others. Thus while panelists' views often diverged from those of station staff, the latter did not discard their individual anarcho-pacifist beliefs and educational mission in favor of a bland "balance" of opposing views. As Lasar describes, "Anyone capable of coherently representing a political point of view—from far left to far right—could speak. Once seated in Studio A, however, they would be asked pacifist/anarchist questions" (*Pacifica* 106).

KPFA's pacifist model of producing consensus or nonviolent resolution through dialogue depended on program participants, hosts, and announcers who spoke freely of their own opinions, not as mouthpieces for the network, advertiser, or perceived social norms. The station thus consciously worked to intervene in the purpose and even the sound of radio's "constant voice." A 1951 *Folio*, for example, featured a short cover essay titled "The Man at the Microphone," which stated: "As in ordinary conversation, actual communication can take place only when the persons involved speak as themselves" (*KPFA Folio* Oct. 21–Nov. 3, 1951). Ironically, volunteers and early staff broadcasters had to be taught how to perform this "authentic" voice; in McKinney's words, "it was literally necessary to train announcers to speak like themselves—and not like an imitation of dulcetly-sincere announcer being sincere!" ("KPFA History," *Pacifica Radio Sampler* vol. 1).

This direct address marked KPFA's major intervention in American broadcasting. For while commercial networks used their programming to assemble and sell a "mass" audience to advertisers for profit, the nation's first listener-sponsored station sought to engage its listeners in conversation as individuals, with individual interests, values, and opinions. In promotional materials, on-air addresses to listeners, internal Foundation and station documents, and program guides, KPFA repeatedly describe their model of radio as a "conversation" between an individual broadcaster and an individual listener. A 1952 *Folio* cover feature titled "Ideas and Intentions" is typical:

Broadcasting . . . finds its truest analogy in direct personal communication and must comply with the restraints, candor, respect, and individual commitment common to all productive human relations. The proper purpose of an individual before a microphone (for whatever purpose) is to communicate to a single person the content of his own interests and concerns.

(*KPFA Folio* Mar. 9–22, 1952)<sup>134</sup>

Here again we see KPFA's and Hill's typical focus on radio's "peculiar intimacy" and on the integrity and responsibility of the voice, which speaks to "communicate *to a single person*." It's worth pausing to highlight the oddity of this analogy, however. The idea that radio is like or should be like an unmediated conversation between two individuals seems bizarre given the fundamental structure of the medium, which disseminates a single voice remotely to innumerable receivers and listeners who, for their part, cannot respond directly. Even more strangely, notions of plurality enter into this model not through the concept of an audience or listening public but,

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<sup>134</sup> According to William Triest in conversation with Vera Hopkins, Hill wrote almost all of the cover features for the *Folio* in the early years, though Moore and McKinney may have also contributed a few ("Summary of a Conversation," *Pacifica Radio Sampler* 1).

as described in this essay, through the range of individual views broadcast on the station: “In varying art forms and wide-ranging discussion of facts and issues, the station or network must reflect an amalgam of true and differing interests.” Reflective of the anarcho-pacifism of many of its staff and listeners, KPFA thus promoted a form of broadcasting that would emphasize above all the sanctity and freedom of the individual.

Regular commentary programs became one staple of KPFA programming that displayed this commitment to putting individuals who spoke blatantly as themselves and of their own ideas and beliefs behind the microphone. Hill set the tone in regular news commentaries by offering his personal views on current events and issues. In a transcript of a 1949 commentary printed in *The Exacting Ear*, for example, Hill discusses several recent news stories about individuals publicly refusing war, conscription, and collaboration with the FBI. Emphasizing his first-person perspective throughout, Hill explains that he draws hope from these examples because they recall to him “the responsibility of the individual” and “the extraordinary relevance of personal principles in matters of public destiny” (249). While addressing his listener directly and individually with the use of the second-person pronoun, Hill stops short of advocating similar forms of resistance from the audience. Instead, he concludes with a vague call for the now generalized “individual” to realize “that the reality of society lies in his own inward nature, and that the change in society can only be the product of his own inward transformation” (250). We might hear in this commentary echoes of the peace movement’s focus on spiritual conviction and personal responsibility over coerced forms of action. Moreover, by crafting a radio voice that would present ideas as individual convictions rather than packaged ideological statements, Hill resisted content that might appear coercive or propagandistic. With the rise of McCarthyism, the

civil rights movement, the student and free speech movement, and the Vietnam War, however, Pacifica stations would become known for their tone of more overt protest and dissent.

KPFA's most well-known commentators in the fifties were those cultural critics and thinkers whose weekly programs tested the meaning of responsibility and whose eccentricities and bluntly stated opinions garnered followers and detractors, redefining the sound of the radio "personality." Pauline Kael's movie reviews lambasted Berkeley elitism and promoted a subjective yet intellectual form of film criticism; Alan Watts's *Way Beyond the West* translated Buddhism and Zen philosophy for primarily white middle-class Berkeleyites for decades; and science fiction writer Anthony Boucher's *Golden Voices* showcased his passion for opera. Rexroth used his half-hour of tape to review a wide and idiosyncratic range of texts; offer his opinions on politics, religion, literature, philosophy, and science; and gossip about political and literary figures. These commentators, and programming directors like McKinney, Virginia Maynard, and Alan Rich, helped to craft what Lasar describes as KPFA's "hybrid highbrow" aesthetic. In Lasar's assessment, KPFA redefined highbrow culture not around a traditional canon of reified works but around new, flexible notions of authenticity that were locally indebted to the strong influence of Popular Front culture, especially in the Bay Area, to the Berkeley folk music movement, and to the San Francisco Renaissance. In Lasar's words, "on the same daily schedule the station's music deejays broadcast Leadbelly and Liszt, Schubert and sea chanties. . . . In addition, a unique kind of radio intellectual appeared . . . who offered a critical endorsement of popular culture, or even took a hand in its production" ("Hybrid Highbrow" 51). Much like Folkways Records, Pacifica Radio's KPFA disseminated a democratic, progressive, and global approach to musical and literary listening while rejecting anything that smacked too sharply of commercialism or tradition for tradition's sake.

In the next chapter, I'll explore the nuances of this cultural aesthetic as it was shaped by poets like Rexroth, Spicer, and Ginsberg, all of whom challenged even as they contributed to KPFA's redefinition of highbrow culture, authenticity, radio listening, and, of course, poetry broadcasting in ways not fully captured by Lasar's rubric. To better understand their interventions, however, it's important to establish the specific and central part poetry played in Hill's dream of a "pacific world" and for a new model of radiophony. To do so, I turn now to a close analysis of a series of experimental poetry programs produced by Hill in the mid-1950s, recordings of which have been preserved in the Pacifica Radio Archives, to gain insight into how Hill conceptualized the significance of poetry's sounding to a crisis in listening in radio and Cold War American society both within and beyond the context of KPFA.

### **"Experiments in the Broadcasting of Poetry"**

In the *KPFA Folio* for March 23–April 5, 1952, a cover feature essay titled "Briefly, On the Spoken Word," considers what radio's "constant voice" sounds like, what it has to do with the power and art of human speech, and how the spoken word of poetry might transform it. "One might expect that on the radio we would be reminded again and again of the inherent dignity, beauty and power of human speech," but, the writer argues, in fact it has reduced the diversity of human speech to the "personality" of certain radio "stars" and a very limited range of carefully controlled styles: "one for news, one for grreat [sic] composers, and, of course, one for the commercial." In addition to the extreme reduction of the variety and range of the human voice to a set of "official" vocal styles, their codification contributes to the more general eradication of the individual by commercial radio and, by extension, by consumer culture: "A separation

enforced in the person between himself and what he says can produce only a mechanical mouthing of syllables, no matter how smoothly they tumble forth.” Like Hill’s description of the test given by the networks to potential announcers in “The Private Room,” this essay (likely also authored by Hill) highlights the mechanization of the announcer’s voice, indicating that the critique is not so much of a particular style but the fundamental communicative silence that lies behind coerced speech acts. In contrast, the *Folio* essay predictably argues that speakers who develop “a direct and controlling relationship” to the content of their address, no matter its subject, will restore to radio “the enormous flexibility and power of speech.”

The essay also claims that commercial radio has had a profoundly negative impact not only on the voice that speaks but on the ear that listens. The writer laments that “[o]ur heritage of spoken word, particularly in poetry, story telling and drama, is fast leaving us,” and with it, learned aural practices:

We can say that the public does not have “an ear for verse,” but the fact is that one seldom hears verse spoken or read. And there is no reason to believe that the ear is no longer capable of receiving and distinguishing subtleties, shifts of tone and richnesses of sound in the spoken word or line. True, most of what we hear is “flat,” it has the monotony of a code, but the instrument for hearing is there, and, given the experience, it will respond.

(*KPFA Folio* Mar. 23–Apr. 5, 1952)

Commercial radio, it appears, is not solely to blame for the degradation of the art of the spoken word, though its marginalization or neglect of poetry in the standard broadcasting schedule has contributed to the absence of spoken verse from American cultural life. Here, however, the author also subtly points the finger at poets and literary critics, who, he implies, have kept poetry

bound to the page or read aloud only in the “flat,” “monotonous,” mechanized voice of a codified reading style. By extension, this essay suggests, poets too must return to their work an authentic, motivated desire to communicate an individual truth to a listener or a reader. This authentic poetry, if broadcast widely, could provide a powerful intervention not only into poetics or radio but practices of listening—practices, Hill articulates elsewhere, that might be cultivated to end global conflict. Hill’s sense that the public had lost its “ear for verse” was not only a typical lament in his historical moment (as well as ours), but linked to his larger sense of a crisis in listening.

In this *Folio* essay, KPFA echoes arguments made by many San Francisco poets. Jack Spicer, for example, argued in a 1949 essay that the New Critics had “removed [the poem] from its main source of interest—the human voice” by promoting a “denuded” page-bound poem (“Poet and the Poem” 230). “We must become singers, become entertainers,” Spicer directs poets, “Poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it.” Interestingly, Hill’s own preferences for the dense, formal lyrics of modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens and contemporary poets such as Yvor Winters, Richard Eberhart, and Robert Lowell meant that KPFA was somewhat slow to catch on to the palace revolution in spoken verse taking place around the station and even in its own studios. Early poetry programming included local poets to be sure—often those with personal connections to Richard Moore—but within the context of a literary schedule centered on drama, readings from modernist poetry, lectures on literary criticism by university professors, and discussions of canonical “great books.” Scheduled for broadcast in the same 1952 *Folio* as the essay on the spoken word, for example, are programs of recorded poetry by Randall Jarrell, Winfield Townley Scott, Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein; a series of readings from

*Huckleberry Finn*; BBC adaptations of *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*; and a San Francisco Interplayers production of a Luigi Pirandello play. Despite the limited representation of local poets, KPFA's programming in these early days revealed a novel commitment to putting poetry, even and especially difficult poetry, on the air.

Hill's interest in poetry broadcasting extended beyond KPFA, as he sought to bring not only new kinds of poetry to the airwaves but new methods of presentation that might help restore the public's "ear for verse." In 1954, Hill applied for and received a grant of \$9,970 from the Rockefeller Foundation for a proposed "Experiment in the Broadcasting of Poetry," which he conducted on behalf of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) after temporarily resigning from KPFA due to interpersonal conflicts at the station.<sup>135</sup> According to Hill's final grant report submitted in January 1955, the project aimed to establish "a gross proof of something held in doubt—that new and effective ways of employing radio for the communication of poetry are possible" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3). To those ends, Hill produced and recorded a series of eight radio programs on Wallace Stevens and Robert Lowell, and planned additional programs on Marianne Moore and Richard Eberhart. Several of the programs resulting from this "experiment" were broadcast on KPFA in March of 1955. Hill also solicited written feedback on the tapes from poets, literary critics, and radio industry insiders, including Louise Bogan, Josephine Miles, R. P. Blackmur, NBC executive Judith Waller, and Frederick C. Packard, Jr., producer of *The Poets Speaks* on WBGH-FM in Boston (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3).

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<sup>135</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation made several significant grants to Hill and to the San Francisco Poetry Center in the 1950s. Hill's correspondence and papers also reveal a long series of conversations and proposals to John Marshall of the Rockefeller Foundation for a literary magazine, literary radio programming, and an international tape exchange going back at least to 1951 and continuing to Hill's death in 1957 (Pacifica Records [WI HS]). For more on KPFA's internal crisis of leadership of 1952–1954, which also saw the resignation of Richard Moore, see Lasar, *Pacifica* (133–59).

The recordings of Hill's "Experiment in the Broadcasting of Poetry" that have been preserved by the Pacifica Radio Archives, and the corresponding grant documents archived with the Pacifica Foundation Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society, offer insight into Hill's imagination of how spoken and broadcast poetry could transform radio, individual consciousness, and Cold War American society in the midst of a crisis in listening. They're also fun and fascinating to hear, and strikingly unlike the usual ways that poetry has been and still is presented in mainstream media on radio, audio recordings, television, and print journalism—and even on Pacifica Radio itself. None of the programs, taped or planned, features the poet's own voice (even when such recordings were available to Hill); none of them engages poetry "experts" as interpreters (despite Hill's close connections with literary critics and scholars); and none appears to be concerned with publicity for the poet. Instead, Hill's poetry programs employ the resources of radio drama and literary analysis to explore the root question of how an "average reader"—and we will want to ask who that "average reader" is—might or should experience modern poetry.

Employing a quasi-scientific method for the project, Hill developed five different approaches of increasing complexity for presenting poetry on the radio, all of which he applied to each poet for the purposes of comparison. In the first two approaches, he recorded relatively standard half-hour readings of a selection of the poet's work, the first with minimal commentary and the second with more discursive interpretation. The remaining programs all focused on the same single poem, which was subjected to three different interpretative and dramatic treatments: 1) a lecture that would approximate "the formal, objective, discursive approach normally associated with classrooms, but ranging here . . . to colloquial comment on the problems of the 'average reader'"; 2) a "quasi-dramatic" production of a reader's "wholly subjective" response to

the poem; and 3) a presentation of the poem through “the mingling of discursive and theatrical methods” in “characterization and dialogue,” representing the complex mental processes of poet and reader (“Report and Proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation,” Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3). These abstract descriptions do little to capture the oddity and ingenuity of the taped programs, especially those that engage the full dramatic possibilities of radio to represent the mental and interpretative processes of an imagined reader of Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West” and Robert Lowell’s “At the Indian Killer’s Grave.”

Hill’s largely reader-centered or, more accurately, listener-centered approach to broadcasting poetry is motivated by his concern for and even anxiety about the “average listener,” who, he assumes, is largely skeptical about and perhaps even maintains “an habitual resistance” to poetry (“Report,” Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3).<sup>136</sup> In an effort to reach this listener, Hill brings skepticism about poetry and poetry criticism into the programs themselves. “A Word by Wallace Stevens: An Essay for Radio,” for example, opens with this introduction by Hill, playing the role of a pompous literary critic:

This is an essay. A formal essay. And what is more it’s a *literary* essay. All literary essays as you know are very difficult. But the present one is especially so, for it’s about *poetry*, and what is more, *modern* poetry. All modern poetry, as you know, is somewhat obscure and boring. For my part I rather dislike poetry. . . . I tell you certainly these precious modern poets will make a fool of you, unless you give as good as you take. And for my part, I flatter myself that I’m way ahead of them.

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<sup>136</sup> Josephine Miles questioned Hill’s assumption about his audience’s resistance to poetry in her response to the series, noting, “You are now creating your own fictions of response to the poems, and they are largely ones of unease, which you believe people feel” (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3). She suggests focusing instead on “the fiction of the poem itself: dramatize the creation, that is the created situation, not the hypothetical response.” The novelty of Hill’s programs, however, are exactly the primacy they give to the reader-listener over the poem, even if the imagined response is not always as nuanced as it might be.

(Hill, "A Word by Wallace Stevens"<sup>137</sup>)

The program that follows is not, in fact, an essay, but a dramatic dialogue about Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" between a paternalistic, elitist male literary critic (played by Hill) and an unsophisticated, reluctant female reader (played by Virginia Maynard). As the reader despairs at making any sense of the difficult poem, she finds herself distracted by a plate of chocolate creams, a constantly ringing phone, and the condescending comments of the critic (who admits to constructing the whole scene as an "illusion" for his invisible radio addressee). The drama ultimately centers on the critic's close analysis of the word *mimic*, which, against the repeated skepticism of the reader, draws on etymology and formal analysis to offer an interpretation of its significance in the poem.

The majority of the discussion between critic and reader, however, concerns the legitimacy of methods of literary interpretation in general and New Critical methods in particular. The critic's argument is thus as much about providing evidence for and explicating the hermeneutics of close reading and the intentional fallacy as it is about the poem. By illustrating the ways in which the simple word *hello*, repeated by Maynard's character each time she answers the phone, communicates etymological and tonal meanings beyond her intentions, the critic succeeds in persuading her that such forms of analysis have value and, moreover, application to her own life. Yet the satiric tone of the entire program also leaves space for the listener at home—addressed directly by the program as more in the know than the naïve reader—to maintain his skepticism toward literary criticism even as he may accept some of its methods, and to position himself at a distance from both the critic and the feminized naïve reader.

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<sup>137</sup> As elsewhere, I am responsible for the transcription and any errors therein, here and throughout this section. I use italics to represent vocal emphasis present in the original recording.

The “average listener” addressed and represented in this program is thus a contradictory figure. On the one hand, he has enough knowledge of poetry and the discipline of literary criticism to appreciate the satire and be at least somewhat interested in the analysis offered; on the other hand, he does not have so much knowledge that he can’t identify with the reader’s struggle with poetic difficulty or gain something from the argument for close reading. Moreover, unlike the listener to a poetry reading, who can fade in and out of attention and still come away with a sense of what was read, the listener to Hill’s program must maintain attention to follow the narrative and the arguments; he may even need his own copy of the poem at hand to understand the discussion, since the poem is not read in its entirety until the end of the program.

The “average listener” emerges, then, as a fairly specific type, and I have used the masculine pronoun intentionally here to draw attention to Hill’s implicit gendering of the listener in these programs. Of course, Hill and most other early KPFA announcers of any gender followed 1950s cultural norms by using masculine pronouns for the universal singular. Hill’s solicitation of feedback from several women and Maynard’s important role as the drama director at the station suggest that he did consider women to be part of poetry’s and radio’s imagined audiences. Yet it is still worth pausing over the rhetorical gendering of certain forms of reading as “feminine” and others as “masculine” in the programs, which follow the influence of modernist poets like Pound and Eliot whose denigration of Victorian poetry as feminizing and infantilizing furthered their claim for a new, phallic poetry—a rhetoric that had material effects for women and queer writers and readers. Such tropes also pervaded public discourse on radio and industry programming decisions, and Hill perpetuated them to defend his new approaches to poetry broadcasting. For example, in a letter from December 1953 to fellow broadcaster George Probst of the *University of Chicago Round Table*, with whom Hill established the Broadcasting

Foundation of America (BFA) and planned an international literary tape exchange program, Hill critiqued the BBC's approach to poetry broadcasting as "foppish," "an exercise of effete sensibility," and "dilettant[ish]," characterized by a "suffocating gentility," "fainting sensibilities," and "affective chatter" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3). "We do not want any little cries," Hill asserted, "or beating booming trochaics, aspirated through delicate teeth, with only the little cry's echo left behind. These meaningless academic twitchings are symptomatic of what is wrong. Their value is limited to the relief of middle-class ladies of the Browning Circle." In his Rockefeller-funded "experiments" in poetry broadcasting, and through his influence over poetry programming on KPFA, Hill attempted to reach a new, intellectual, and culturally highbrow but nonspecialist audience for poetry by crafting an aesthetic and method coded male, and in opposition to a middlebrow enjoyment of poetry or of commercial radio fare coded as feminine and infantile.<sup>138</sup>

In his report to the Rockefeller Foundation, Hill takes care to delineate his intended audience as separate from both the assumed specialist audience for poetry of poets and literary critics and from the mass or general audience addressed by commercial radio. His experiments, he explains in his report to the Rockefeller Foundation, are meant to "awaken interest in a peripheral audience" or a "minority audience" with a potential but unrealized interest in modern poetry ("Report," Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3).<sup>139</sup> "Any responsible presentation of a significant

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<sup>138</sup> In addition to the BBC, Hill's approach also responded to a long tradition of poetry programming on U.S. radio, much of which explicitly addressed a middle-class, female, and/or child audience. See McCoy for a useful overview of poetry broadcasting in the U.S. from the 1920s to the early 2000s. Mike Chasar analyzes two Depression-era popular poetry programs—Ted Malone's *Between the Bookends* and Tony Wons's *R Yuh Listenin'?*—and their reception in the chapter "Invisible Audiences" in *Everyday Reading* (80–122).

<sup>139</sup> There is some evidence that a potential audience for modern poetry did exist among KPFA's listenership; after another of Hill's series of "experiments" in poetry broadcasting aired in the spring of 1957, several listeners wrote to express their gratitude. Listeners Wally and Ginny Craig, for example, write in a postcard to the station dated May 30, 1957, "Your first program on contemporary poetry struck us as superb. And we are not presently readers of

poem will require close attention from the listener,” Hill explains, “for this reason a minority audience must be assumed.” Invoking the existence and importance of a “minority” but nonspecialist audience interested in “significant” culture and literature, the responsibility of the broadcaster, the participatory possibilities of radio listening, and the implicit failure of commercial radio to communicate art, Hill’s “experiment in the broadcasting of poetry” under the auspices of the NAEB and the Rockefeller Foundation begins to sound a lot like the larger Pacifica Radio experiment.

The programs that address and provide dramatic approaches to Robert Lowell’s “At the Indian Killer’s Grave” are most interesting in this context, because they reveal Hill’s strategies for attracting this “peripheral audience” to an intellectual, ethical, and “masculine” relationship to a particular kind of modern lyric poetry, and for implicitly pacifist ends. Though neither the programs themselves nor the Rockefeller report provides a rationale for the specific authors or poems chosen beyond highlighting instructive formal differences, Hill’s decision to include a series of programs on Lowell can hardly have been a purely formal choice. Lowell had taken a public stance of war refusal during WWII, for which he was imprisoned. Perhaps even more importantly, Lowell’s status as a critically acclaimed and Pulitzer Prize–winning poet—for *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), in which “At the Indian Killer’s Grave” was first published—meant that he was in a position to bring the kind of respect and attention to the pacifist cause that Hill (and Everson) believed poets and artists could do.<sup>140</sup>

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poetry! So this was revelatory to us, and will possibly aid in opening for us the door to the art” (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 39).

<sup>140</sup> Rexroth objected strongly to the decision to devote a series of programs to Lowell in a 1955 letter to Hill lambasting Lowell as “a fraud both as a poet . . . and as a CO” (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 1). Some of Lowell’s contemporaries and subsequent biographers discounted his war resistance as a form of psychological disturbance rather than serious pacifist commitment, but Metres, among other more recent scholars, have argued for the rational and poetic bases—and the philosophical and political limits—of Lowell’s war rejection (Metres 27–50).

“At the Indian Killer’s Grave” is also interesting to read within a pacifist context. The poem is typical of Lowell’s early lyrics in its Catholic imagery, formalism, and pattern of tensions influenced by his study with New Critics such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. To the extent that the poem expresses a pacifist perspective, it does so, as in Everson’s pre-Waldport verse, through an ethical investigation of the speaker’s complicity in a long history of violence and a quest for spiritual transcendence. For Lowell as for Everson, this involves an investigation of genealogy, though while Everson looks often in his early poems to the violent Anglo-Saxon roots of the English language, Lowell is characteristically concerned with his familial Puritan inheritance and complicity in the genocidal violence at the founding of the American nation. “At the Indian Killer’s Grave” is not a poem of overt war resistance like Patchen’s *An Astonished Eye Looks Out on the Air*, or even of the more subjective pacifist perspective offered by Everson’s *Chronicle of Division* or Rexroth’s *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. Nonetheless, the poem is informed by the pacifist Catholic beliefs that inform Lowell’s work of this period, evident in its admonishment of colonial violence, its atonement for the sins of inheritance, and its turn to the figure of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor for the miraculous transubstantiation of the divine in a fallen world.

Hill’s radio programs on Lowell, however, do not provide any of this context about the poet’s biography, his war resistance, the poem’s critical reception, or its pacifist perspective. Instead, they dramatize how the experience of reading poetry can produce the kind of ethical, public-oriented, liberal humanist subject that Hill believed necessary for developing public resistance to propaganda and state violence. A program titled “Section of a Soliloquy” indicates this perhaps most directly: the half-hour psychodrama features a reader’s mind conversing with itself in response to having just read Lowell’s poem for the first time. The characters in this

drama include a narrator, played by Richard Moore, and two voices dramatizing a single split subject; I will describe these characters as the Ego and the Superego, played by Hill and KPFA staff member Charles Levy, respectively. Their internal dialogue delves into a subjective, ethical interrogation of the reader's own personal, family, and national identity that parallels rather than explicates Lowell's poem and its content. As is characteristic of Hill's Rockefeller poetry programs, the poem "At the Indian Killer's Grave" is not read in its entirety until the end of the program, when the character of the reader returns to the text that prompted his reverie.

After a brief introduction by Moore, "Section of a Soliloquy" begins with the voice of the Ego, played by Hill, who starts to mull over the content of Lowell's poem by filtering it through a set of subjective concerns and comic self-conscious descriptions of what it's like to be a brain: "Real fancy Boston brain, that's what I mean. Me and the old mother tissue. . . . All that ripe mother membrane folded around and tucked in everywhere" (Hill, "Section of a Soliloquy"). Like Lowell himself, Hill's imagined reader is identified as a descendent of a Boston Brahmin family. The Superego, who acts throughout the program as the Ego's antagonist, quick to mock his textbook psychoanalytic obsessions with mother and with sex, soon intervenes in his ramblings with a stack of "files" intended to help them prepare to process the poem. The files initially prompt the Ego to "warm up" through the recitation of some memorized lines by Eliot, e. e. cummings, Hart Crane, and George Herbert, but Levy's Superego soon traps the Ego into confrontation with a set of repressed personal files concerning a previous suicide attempt. The Ego initially resists what Moore's narrator describes as "the transfer of anxiety" from the reader's own repressed trauma onto Lowell's poem, but the Superego persists by dragging him into a new set of confrontations with files on the "triumphs" of their Puritan colonial ancestors over Native Americans in Massachusetts. At this point, the relationship between the dialogue and

Lowell's poem becomes more apparent, and the Superego even explicates allusions in the poem to King Philip and the Biblical word *raca*.

One might expect that "Section of a Soliloquy" would then continue to explicate "At the Indian Killer's Grave," but instead, the program quickly moves beyond interpretation to the poem's implications for contemporary, 1950s American foreign and domestic policy. Hill's Ego, at first resistant and then horrified to confront the genocidal violence of his ancestors, refuses to accept the guilt demanded of him by the Superego, insisting that "those were the days of superstition" and "I can't help what they did," and concedes only that a belated apology may be in order. Levy, however, forces the contemporary relevance by baiting the Ego into voicing his xenophobia and anticommunist paranoia. The Ego at first rejects the Superego's suggestions that we need to "get rid of . . . all the riffraff funning around here, millions of 'em," but eventually takes the hook:

[Ego:] My good man, it is rather the spies among us, agents of an alien power, conspiring to destroy our way of life, and seize our hallowed country, sir.

[Superego:] Now you've got it! Hold that.

[Ego:] It is these whose evil designs serve a foreign tyrant that should be wiped out!

[Superego:] Preach to me, tubby, attaboy!

[Ego:] The masses of this fair land, whom destiny has appointed to freedom, must scourge the traitors, march on the dark strongholds of tyranny, and strike them down! An enemy of freedom is lower than a beast, sir! Exterminate them, and free the earth!

[Superego:] [chuckles] Indians all over the place!

We've departed now, as Moore's narrator will note, from Lowell's poem and its reckoning with ancestral and national guilt. Yet in making the link between American colonial violence and the

anticommunist crusades of the 1950s—for the radio in 1954 no less—Hill’s program emphasizes his belief in poetry’s power to engage an individual’s ethical consciousness while also launching a strong political critique of the violent, genocidal, and colonial dimensions of the U.S. involvement in the Cold War. While the character of the Ego never accepts guilt for past and present sins, and moreover comes to doubt the narratives provided by the Superego as misleading, the supposedly “absurd” effect, according to Moore’s narrator, of the reader’s subjective approach to Lowell’s poem nonetheless provokes a confrontation with the complicity of the individual in the violence of colonialism, racism, capitalism, anticommunism, and xenophobia. In this narrative, where the repression of this complicity (rendered both personal and national) nearly resulted in the death of the subject by suicide, literature is represented as serving a psychoanalytic and ethical function. As the Superego suggests, glossing the appearance of the Virgin in the last stanza of Lowell’s poem in nonreligious terms as a figure for spring, rebirth, and creativity, poetry prepares the mind for the kind of creative impulse that might create a new, fully aware ethical consciousness.

Is Moore’s narrator correct, however, that the reader’s subjective attempt “to become the poet, as though the poem were about to be written by the reader,” is ultimately “absurd, and has nothing to do with the poem as the poet actually conceived of it”? Certainly the reader’s interpretation of the figure of the Virgin through a secular lens, the connections to contemporary anticommunist crusades, and references to an attempted suicide clearly depart from what can be reasonably assumed about Lowell’s intention in “At the Indian Killer’s Grave”—even if Lowell’s speaker and Hill’s narrator share certain character traits. The narrator’s claim that the program presents not Lowell’s intention but one reader’s creative “writing” of the poem through reading, however, also reveals Hill’s larger purpose: to educate listeners both in skills of literary

interpretation and in how to apply the difficult questions posed by modern poetry to the development of their own subjectivity. Reading poetry, Moore's narrator asserts, is often a deeply subjective process, but one that, while diverging from the question of poetic intention, is positively productive of a certain kind of ethical and implicitly pacifist subjectivity. Yet, he concludes, "What is lacking here . . . is the experience and attitudes of several thousand mentalities making up the several thousand poems and fragments of poems which Mr. Lowell's poem imparts and receives according to the reader." "Such is the destiny of a very good poem," he argues, "to become the creation of innumerably different minds."

As is typical of Hill's individualism, however, the rich dialogism that takes place within the individual or between him and his radio receiver has an ambiguous relationship to actual dialogue that might take place between these "innumerably different minds."<sup>141</sup> At one point, Moore's narrator calls into question the mind's ability to communicate with itself, and employs a cryptic radio metaphor to describe mental processes of thought:

You will have noticed that this role, read by Mr. Hill, is a complete abstraction. Now that is the principle novelty of our program, to which we call attention. The forebrain, of course, does not converse with itself like a radio actor; on the other hand, it is rather like these sounds as they pass between the transmitter and your loudspeaker. In that state, we call them waves, which as you know, do not exist, but stand for something intangible that does.

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<sup>141</sup> I should acknowledge here that one of Hill's other programs about "At the Indian Killer's Grave," titled "The Trouble with Being Alive," does dramatize a conversation between two friends about the poem as they pass an evening at a local pub. The focus, however, is again is on the emergence of a certain kind of individual subjectivity. In this case, the kind of consensus produced by a literary discussion among friends leads to the emergence of a rational, public-oriented, decidedly pacifist subject. The emphasis on secular rationality is especially pronounced in this program, in which the two characters discuss their discomfort with the Catholic imagery at the end of Lowell's poem, and resolve it by reinterpreting the Annunciation imagery as a "call for all this to happen inside yourself," i.e. a call for inner, subjective transformation.

Electromagnetic radio waves do exist and are not, in fact, complete abstractions or merely something “intangible” (unless the narrator merely means that they are invisible to the human eye), as Hill was no doubt well aware. At any rate, the apparent point of the analogy is that the brain communicates through electric signals and receivers that could be compared to the way a radio transmitter communicates. If this radio metaphor seems like an odd analogy for the dialogic character drama we’ve just heard, since actual radio receivers never respond, it nonetheless represents Hill’s rethinking of radiophony as similar to a certain model of literary reception, in which innumerable receivers or reader-listeners transform the information they receive and respond, in a sense, through their own internal process of subject formation.

Hill’s “experiments” in poetry broadcasting focus on the inward transformation of the individual furthered by an engagement with poetry, dialogic models of radiophony and reading, and a pacifism associated with a peace culture and consciousness rather than dramatic acts of refusal. They thus correspond with Hill’s larger Pacifica project, while claiming a special role for poetry in the future of broadcasting and the peace movement. From my vantage point, though, it’s interesting to imagine what these programs would have sounded like if Hill had chosen to attend instead to the poets writing around him, and to an experimental poetry only just emerging that would take up some of the same concepts, figures, and crises. For if the American public had lost their “ear for verse” and developed a skepticism about the opaque academicism of modern poetry, Lowell hardly seems the poet to start a revolution in poetic listening. After all, many readers heard something of “the monotony of a code” behind Lowell’s masterfully sonorous early lyrics—or, as Jed Rasula would put it, a technically perfect and well-amplified “voice-over” (40).

In contrast, San Francisco in the mid-1950s was emerging as a center for a revolution in poetic speech and poetic listening, and it is these poets who ultimately defined Pacifica's "constant voice" as the voice of the counterculture through their own experiments in poetry broadcasting. Whereas Hill turned to literary reception as a model for rethinking radio reception and communication, many of the poets who would become associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and the New American poetry turned to modern communication media like the radio, the telephone, and the typewriter to figure new conceptions of compositional process, orality, and communication. Earlier in this chapter, I cited Adorno's critique of radio's "illusion of closeness," which drew a contrast between radio and print media, arguing that radio foregoes "the intermediary, objectivating stage of printing which helps to clarify the difference between fiction and reality" (*Current* 47). Postwar experimental poetry, in contrast, argued just the opposite, for a poetry that would dispense with or shortcut the intermediary, mediating stages of print, and communicate directly, one-to-one, with the individual reader:

actual poetry . . . [is] the living speech of person to person

(Rexroth, "Unacknowledged Legislators" 16)

a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader

(Olson 16)

the poem [is put] squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.

(O'Hara 354–55)

The poems above our heads, without tongues, are tired of talking to each other over the gabble of our beliefs, our literary personalities, our attempts to project their silent conversation to an audience. When we give tongue we amplify. We are telephone switchboards deluded into becoming hi-fi sets.

(Spicer, *My Vocabulary* 209)

Hill's impossible dream of radiophony as an unmediated conversation between two individuals thus corresponded to a parallel dream in postwar American poetry. Yet as Spicer perhaps more than any other postwar poet understood, the poetic fascination with electronic media may have had less to do with the immediacy of these electrical apparatuses than with their *illusion of immediacy*, their almost mystical ability to overcome their own mediation even when, as in radio, the sense of intimate, private, direct address depended upon the distance in both space and time of a speaker addressing an undetermined and unknown plurality of reader-listeners.

Hill, though, would not live long enough to see the full impact of these local poets or this new experimental poetry on his station and model of broadcasting. Frustrated and stressed by internal conflicts at the station, battling constant pain from spinal arthritis with a growing dependency on cortisone injections, and suffering from depression, Hill became less and less involved with the daily life of the station in the mid-1950s (Lasar, *Pacifica* 160–61). In his last weeks and months, he organized and moderated a roundtable discussion for KPFA on *The "Howl" Controversy*, concerning the book's obscenity trial, and produced a series on *Contemporary American Poetry* about Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, W. S. Merwin, and Richard Eberhart, with the final program

scheduled for broadcast on July 30. On August 1, 1957, he committed suicide, leaving behind an unfinished novel, a collection of unpublished poems, the fledgling Broadcasting Foundation of America (BFA) that he had helped found, and a community of friends in the Bay Area and beyond devastated and shocked by the loss. How could someone who had devoted his whole life to the end of violence and the sanctity of human life take his own? Hill's suicide devastated and profoundly disillusioned the Bay Area literary and arts community. Yet Pacifica Radio continued to grow with a new station just launched in Los Angeles, new leadership at KPFA, and an increasing prominence on station KPFA of what now, after the *Howl* trial, was nationally recognized and sensationalized as the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat movement.

### **Listening Publics**

In "The Private Room," Hill theorized that postwar society suffered from "a general breakdown in the rules and customs of communication that might otherwise effectively link one private room with another" (2). Through Pacifica Radio and KPFA, he and the other founders revived an idealistic belief that radio could be that communicative link: an educational, independent medium for the reproduction of the public sphere. And like the Habermasian public sphere, though in rejection of Habermas's periodization and blanket critique of mass media like radio, Pacifica's model pointed to the significance of the arts, and literature in particular, in producing civically minded subjects, or what Habermas called the "public-oriented subjectivity" of the bourgeois public sphere. For Hill and many other early KPFA staff and participants, their anarchist and pacifist critiques of liberalism and capitalism did not challenge their basic belief in liberalism's central institution, the public sphere. In fact, public rational critical debate, literary

culture, and independent media were seen as essential to and naturally productive of a vital peace movement because of the public sphere's model of consensus among private, free, rational individuals. The "inherent sympathy" between art and pacifism advocated at Waldport was linked, in the context of early Pacifica Radio, to a new form of radio rooted in an older form of print culture. What interests me here, though, is the extent to which Hill's dream for radio still assumes the intractability, indeed perhaps even the desirability, of "the private room." It is as though Hill called for a telephone to end the communication crisis, instead of a battering ram that would knock down the walls that contain and atomize individuals under capitalism. And in place of the telephone, KPFA placed a one-way FM radio receiver.

KPFA posited, though, that their central intervention in radio was to transform that one-way receiver into an avenue for conversation between an individual speaker and an individual listener. Who were these individual, private listeners, then, who tuned in to KPFA's "amalgam of . . . differing interests" (*KPFA Folio* Mar. 9–22, 1952)? How did they listen? In concluding, I'd like to briefly consider how KPFA's various constructions of the listener as an individual, conversing with a radio set in a private room, contrasts with the actual experiences of early Berkeley listeners as individuals and as a listening public. For KPFA's part, radio reimagined as conversation demanded not only responsible, authentic speakers but listeners who engaged with what they heard in participatory, dialogic, and intentional ways. A very early *Folio* from fall of 1949 proudly reports on a recent call-in from a listener: "On 'INSIDE KPFA' recently a listener humorously complained that the trouble with KPFA is—one really has to listen. He explained that many of the programs require the full attention and participation of the listener" (*KPFA Folio* Oct. 23–Nov. 5, [1949]). In a report to the Ford Foundation, Hill explains that from the beginning, KPFA conceived of their audience as "an individual, whose intention was to listen"

and who “was assumed to have an alertness, an intelligence, an interest, and an attention-span” similar to the broadcasters themselves (*Voluntary Listener-Sponsorship* 44). That individual, Hill explains, is not expected to listen all the time: “It was, in fact, a hopeful assumption that the radio would be turned off, or to another frequency, when KPFA’s particular program had less than a compelling value for the audience of one.” Listener sponsorship allowed KPFA to encourage this kind of listening, and to even promote programs on other stations that might be of interest to that “audience of one.”

KPFA’s rhetorical reimagining of listening must also be considered in the context of the station’s FM signal, which literally altered the sensory experience of radio listening. Although the station’s overall broadcasting aesthetics framed a nonprofessional sound as authentic, it did so through the significantly higher sound quality of FM. In 1953, at a low point for the FM industry, KPFA began broadcasting a few select music programs in stereo sound and added a monthly “test” for stereo equipment onto their schedule, speculating that the growing interest in “hi-fi” equipment might increase demand for FM receivers. KPFA’s more eclectic offerings included programs of thunderstorms and sound montages, interestingly echoing the promotional tactics of early FM proponents from the 1930s, who conducted demonstrations of the technology’s superior quality by broadcasting the crystal-clear sounds of matches being lit and paper crumbling (Keith and Sterling 21–22). The superior sound quality of FM was especially important to the station’s classical music programming, which took advantage of the broader frequency range to encourage close, participatory listening attentive to complex compositions. Like Folkways Records, though, which framed its low-fi albums as more authentic and less commercialized than hi-fi stereo recordings, KPFA expressed its own ambivalence about the association of higher sound quality with highbrow, elitist, and conspicuous

consumption by simultaneously promoting “an informal atmosphere of communication” (Hill, *Voluntary Listener-Sponsorship* 50).

The station also encouraged its listeners to participate by “talking back” in various ways. These included, of course, communicating by way of regular subscription, but also through letters and phone calls as well as more novel forms like volunteering, organizing listening groups or subscription drives, or appearing on the air themselves. *Folio* essays throughout the fifties frequently addressed this participatory role of the listener in the station’s day-to-day activities with titles like “On Hearing the Listener,” “On Listener Participation,” “The Bashful Ones” (a reference to listeners’ reluctance to talk back), and “Listener—Station—Participant.” In practice, KPFA consistently throughout its history has blurred the line between “Listener—Station—Participant,” as the station’s tiny budget means that much if not most of its programming, publicity, subscription management, and technical support has come from the volunteered labor of its listeners. Rexroth, for example, like most of KPFA’s regular commentators, was never paid for his weekly program beyond his tape machine and a supply of tape. Thus a great deal of the station’s programming, from a live performance by folk musician Dave Fredrickson to a poetry reading by Lawrence Ferlinghetti to roundtables on public affairs issues really could be understood as “not a talk at, but a talk between listeners” (*KPFA Folio* July 27–Aug. 9, 1952).

KPFA’s insistence that its new approach to broadcasting could produce a “conversation” between the local station and its listeners, bypassing the medium’s authoritative structure, did in a certain sense become a reality. Yet the insistent focus on the individual broadcaster and “the audience of one” betrayed an ambivalence about the emergence of a community of listeners that might conceive of themselves as such and organize collectively in relation to the station or around a shared ideology. The station’s anticommercial and anarcho-pacifist ethos certainly

encouraged a hostility toward anything like the idea of a “mass” audience, but more striking is how the same station and network that in the late sixties and seventies would be at the vanguard of community radio, parsing its programming schedule around the representative demands of different community groups and identities (though not without significant struggle), first articulated its individualism in opposition to the idea of a community radio station. Certainly Hill and the rest of the early KPFA staff recognized and spoke of the Berkeley community as the base for their audience, but this community was understood to be a preexisting given rather than a collective that might come into being in relation to the station. The station was not ultimately run as a cooperative, of which there were many examples in Berkeley, and its hierarchical administrative structure, the source of so much conflict within Pacifica, reflected two aspects of its ideological underpinnings. On the one hand, the anarchist, libertarian, pacifist beliefs with which it was founded nurtured a deep desire to defend the individual’s rights from the encroachment of the majority as much as from authoritarian leadership. On the other hand, the station’s stated educational mission meant that it often assumed a didactic and paternalistic tone toward its audience, in contradiction to its rhetoric of respect for the listener and its feedback loop of “listener—station—participant.” Leaving aside for a moment the pedagogic rhetoric of Pacifica’s prospectuses, its reliance on funding from the Ford Foundation Fund for Adult Education, and its association with the NAEB, one need simply point out that a station that relies heavily on university professors for its programming can’t help but assume a professorial tone.

Thus KPFA’s invitation to listeners to “talk back” to the station did not extend to giving subscribers a more institutionalized role in the station’s programming or decision-making. When, in the early 1960s, a listener publicly admonished Pacifica for rejecting subscribers’ requests for representation in the network’s administrative and decision-making bodies as in a cooperative,

acting Pacifica president Trevor Thomas went on the air to defend the station's hierarchical structure of leadership. Cooperatives, he argued, did not actually reflect a community and therefore were limited in their enactment of decision-making by representative democracy; "KPFA," he argued, "is even less of a community" ("Report to the Subscriber," Pacifica Records [WI HS] 3:6). As KPFA's signal range grew in power over the years to eventually encompass the entire San Francisco and East Bay area, it indeed becomes difficult to reasonably speak of KPFA's audience as an intentional community in the sense that that term usually signifies. Instead, for the early staff and volunteers at KPFA, the term community usually referred not to a listening community but to what Pacifica's resident historian Vera Hopkins nostalgically described in a 1965 "Background for Directors of Pacifica Foundation" as the "ideal community" formed at the station and made up of a group of individuals who "felt interdependent, sustained by a purpose to which all were committed, and under leadership that inspired devotion" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 1:1).<sup>142</sup>

KPFA's listeners, however, from the very beginning thought of themselves not only as individual listener-subscribers or even participants but as part of an intentional community, a specific listening public, that was coming into being through and in relation to KPFA's reformation of radiophony and radio listening. While KPFA encouraged listeners to exercise their agency in tuning in and out of specific programs, many listeners responded to the station more as an idea than as the source of a particular program, exercising at times an extreme form of loyalty. A very early internal report from KPFA Interim states that the station quickly "generated an intense loyalty in the . . . nucleus of its audience" and that the overwhelming

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<sup>142</sup> Hopkins's description of early KPFA certainly does sound ideal, and no doubt reflected less the reality of early KPFA, which saw its own share of internal conflict, than her own perspective on the station's conflicts in the 1960s, as what Hopkins labeled "special interest groups," and others might have termed "liberation movements," fought for access to the station's airwaves and administration and a different model of community radio.

positive letters and calls from listeners “dealt not with some particular broadcast but with the whole idea of the station and its total schedule” (“Report to the Executive,” *Pacifica Radio Sampler* vol. 1). In the early 1960s, one KPFA listener described his love for his station in familial terms: “It is not just another broadcast station; it is part of the family. Its troubles are my own. Each electron tube failure—each tape machine which acts up—is a mutual catastrophe. While we may have our differences, they are purely within the family” (“The KPFA Listener Speaks,” *Pacifica Records* [WI HS] 3:6).

Since many listeners did know the station’s broadcasters and guests as friends and neighbors, especially in the station’s early days, listening to radio took on an intimate, local character that had become rare in the network-dominated AM spectrum. Neither Hill nor Adorno in their critiques of commercial radio’s coercive structure accounted for or foresaw this kind of radio, with its power to publicize specific, local, niche communities over the indiscriminating airwaves, and which soon would proliferate for a brief moment on independent, community, minority, and freeform stations on the FM band. KPFA’s listeners also frequently left their private rooms to engage together in collective actions—from the first group of listeners that organized a subscription drive after KPFA Interim went off the air; to the subscriber groups that gathered first to listen together and later to make collective demands and even organize strikes on their station; to the listeners who would assemble at protests at People’s Park, in front of the San Francisco courthouse, or on the University of California campus in full knowledge that their local FM station would not only report on such events but promote them, participate in them, and solicit grassroots, participatory reporting from listeners on site.

Somehow, almost in spite of itself, the arbitrary range of KPFA’s FM signal area did describe something like a commons for a public, or for numerous publics, to emerge as imagined

communities. This included the San Francisco poetry community, whose coherence as a literary and social scene came into being in the fifties in part through institutions like KPFA and programs like Rexroth's *Books* that publicized its poems and poetics, its established figures and rebellious newcomers, its readings in university halls and in jazz clubs and bookstores, and its gossip. These poets also helped shape KPFA's "voice," both its early "hybrid highbrow" and its sixties countercultural aesthetic. At the same time, they negotiated in their own work and performances a new poetic relationship to publicity, to reception, to the relationship between consensus and dissensus, and to the media and mediating forces that make a poem.

In this chapter, I have constructed a narrative of Pacifica's early broadcasting model through its founding station leadership and documentation, in which broadcasting spoken poems and developing a readership for poetry was seen as central to the pacifist cause and the reconstitution of the liberal public sphere. It is possible, though, to trace another narrative of poetry broadcasting on early KPFA that examines the varied aesthetics and aims of poet broadcasters in addition to station leadership and staff. Because KPFA's broadcasting model depended on the participation of local writers and musicians, and because the station valued the autonomy of the broadcaster who often went live on the air, poets such as Spicer, Rexroth, and Ferlinghetti who produced programs were given a remarkable amount of creative freedom. This allowed for the flourishing of experimental poetry alongside more educational and highbrow programming. In the next chapter, I turn to this history, and the San Francisco Renaissance poets who helped to bring a distinct and iconoclastic West Coast poetics, canon, and model of publishing and reception onto KPFA. In a sense, though, they did so surreptitiously, outside of the schedule of literary programming dominated by modernist voices, radio dramas from the BBC Third Programme, readings and discussions from the canonical "Great Books" program,

and poetry recordings from the Library of Congress. By including poetry on programs ostensibly about local cultural events, folk music, book reviewing, commentary, and even public affairs; and by performing new, often unpublished works during the station's experimental late-night schedule of "music, imagery, and . . . speculations cantilevered into the night" (*KPFA Folio* Aug. 23–Sept. 5, 1953); these writers may have reinforced some listeners' perceptions that Beat poetry was "out there" in terms of prevailing literary standards. But their experiments in poetry broadcasting ironically also enabled the reception of that poetry as part of the everyday lives and cultural, social, and political values and commitments of KPFA's devoted listeners. As a result, San Francisco poets on KPFA created new contexts for the poetic spoken word, new forms of publication, and new modes of reception that would profoundly influence the aesthetics of Pacifica Radio and the cultural reception and countercultural legacy of the San Francisco Renaissance.

## Chapter 4

### “The Poet Is a Counterpunching Radio”: KPFA and the San Francisco Renaissance

The story of the San Francisco Renaissance is one of the most frequently told and mythologized literary histories of the twentieth century. It is a history that can be evoked in a montage of names, events, and flashpoints: the self-termed “Berkeley Renaissance” of Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer in the late 1940s; Allen Ginsberg’s first performance of “Howl” at the Six Gallery reading in 1955; the 1956 publication of *Howl and Other Poems* by City Lights and its subsequent seizure and obscenity trial; the 1957 “San Francisco issue” of *Evergreen Review*; the publication of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* that same year; the 1960 appearance of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* anthology; the high-profile features and attacks on “the Beat generation” in *The New York Times*, *Life*, and *Playboy*; the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference; and the death of Spicer that same summer. The cartography of the San Francisco Renaissance weaves from backyard cottages in Berkeley to the bars, coffee shops, paperback bookstores, and jazz clubs of North Beach, with outposts, perhaps, in Big Sur and Bolinas. Yet for all its association with specific locales (now tourist destinations) in the San Francisco Bay Area, the story of the Renaissance is punctuated by arrivals and departures—from the mass arrival to the city of veterans and conscientious objectors after World War II, to the transient restlessness of *On the Road* or Ginsberg’s *Fall of America*, to the national and transnational circuits of travel, texts, and tropes associated with the Beat movement.<sup>143</sup> We may

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<sup>143</sup> See Grace and Skerl. In addition to the dramatic entrances and exits of the East Coast Beats in San Francisco, we might note here Blaser’s and Spicer’s departures and returns in the early 1950s; the 1950s arrivals of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, Joanne Kyger, and Robert Creeley; of Snyder’s, Whalen’s, and Kyger’s years in Japan; significant visits by East Coast poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley; and Welch disappearing into the Sierra Nevada.

think also of the scores of young people who flocked to the city in hopes of joining the counterculture, City Lights paperbacks stuffed in their jeans, FM radios tuned to KPFA.<sup>144</sup>

Before it was enshrined in literary histories and collective memory, the story of the San Francisco Renaissance emerged simultaneously within the so-called movement itself, giving rise to competing origin stories, public adherents as well as detractors (such as Kenneth Rexroth, who was both), and glossy magazine copy. As Michael Davidson argues in his landmark study *The San Francisco Renaissance*, these “enabling fictions of origins often obscure creative dissension and opposition that are part of any literary movement” (1). Rather than reject such “fictions” in pursuit of some truer origin story, Davidson compellingly shows how the romantic and contested “mythic forms” (1) of “place, politics, and poetics” (6) in San Francisco poetry at midcentury enabled the flourishing of new aesthetic and social experiments within the context of Cold War American society. It is not that these poets were united by a coherent aesthetic, social, or political project, as is obvious from examining the strikingly different poems and often conflicted social relations of writers like Spicer, Duncan, Ginsberg, Rexroth, Helen Adam, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, Joanne Kyger, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. Rather, it is that “creative dissension and opposition” among San Francisco poets helped produce the sense of an artistic community, one whose internal rejection of consensus mirrored their rejection of the consensus-driven, conformist postwar climate of the 1950s. Davidson does identify recurrent strands in San Francisco Renaissance poetry of this period—the myth of the West, the emphasis on performance and community, and the impulses toward elegy and utopianism, and sacramentalism and spirituality—but in doing so he reveals the ground on which

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<sup>144</sup> We could easily turn to KPFA for a paradigmatic montage of Beat and San Francisco Renaissance lore. In 1979, for example, on the occasion of the station’s thirtieth anniversary, KPFA broadcast a two-part program on *The Beat Poets of San Francisco*—a fast-moving montage of spoken poetry, interviews, and music that describe a San Francisco scene of jazz poets, beatniks, drugged-out youngsters, and state censors.

uncertainty, dissension, and difference played itself out in the movement, and in postwar poetry more broadly.

KPFA and the Pacifica Radio network helped to create and disseminate the “enabling fiction” of a poetic renaissance in San Francisco in the 1950s and early 1960s, first and foremost for poets themselves, who tuned in and appeared on the station to hear their own, often dispersed communities and divergent poetic aesthetics echoed back as an emerging literary and cultural movement. Kenneth Rexroth’s weekly book review program offered one such outlet for KPFA listeners. In addition to giving his opinion on an impressively wide range of books in almost any subject or genre, Rexroth frequently used his half-hour of tape to launch personal and aesthetic attacks on writers like Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Duncan (all writers he had at one point praised). Yet even the most libelous of these only furthered a public imagination of the San Francisco Renaissance as an avant-garde literary scene far outside the walls of mannered academic poetry, where social, sexual, and aesthetic relations intertwined in dramatic affairs, bitter arguments, drunken scenes, and artistic conflicts. After all, to be interested in such attacks—or to be offended by them—meant to know the individuals involved and to be (or to project oneself as) part of the scene. All of this may appear non- or extra-literary, but the sociality of an avant-garde narrating its own mythic self-awareness is part of what KPFA put on the air. Moreover, this sociality was part of the poetry itself, as poets like Spicer, Ginsberg, Duncan, Whalen, and Kyger, much like their New York school counterparts and the early twentieth-century avant-garde, contested the border between life and literature in their poetry and performances by representing, distorting, imagining, and responding to their sense of literary community.

KPFA also broadcast poems, and a lot of them. Considering the tendency then as now to characterize the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance as primarily a social or broadly

cultural rather than literary movement, it's important to note that KPFA kept listeners attuned to new work and up-and-coming names in poetry. Studio-recorded readings and interviews with local and visiting poets appeared weekly and sometimes even daily on the published schedule. Commercial albums featuring San Francisco poets were broadcast in their entirety, as were taped poetry readings from the University of California and the San Francisco State Poetry Center. KPFA also recorded and produced program series about local poetry festivals, including landmark literary events like the 1964 Negro Writers Conference in Asilomar, California; the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Festival; and the 1968 San Francisco Rolling Renaissance festival. KPFA thus played a crucial role in the dissemination and reception of postwar poetry to Bay Area audiences. After the Pacifica network expanded to Los Angeles (KPFK) in 1957 and New York (WBAI) in 1960, this aural network expanded significantly while still maintaining its credibility as a viable alternative to mainstream media and publication contexts.

Pacifica listeners and historians have often recalled KPFA's close association with the freewheeling poetry of the Beats. Matthew Lasar describes KPFA during this period as "a voice for the San Francisco Renaissance" (73). Jeff Land notes that throughout the fifties "broadcasts of the austere and formal experiments of . . . modernists much admired by Hill gave way to the polymorphous cultural eruption of the Beats, where jazz, poetry, and sound effects filled the airwaves, producing an unprecedented aural environment" (99).<sup>145</sup> What caused this shift in KPFA's programming and cultural aesthetic? How did KPFA transition from a highbrow outlet known for broadcasting modernist poetry and drama alongside classical music, educational programming, and enlightened philosophical and political debate to an innovative outlet for the "unprecedented aural environment" of "jazz, poetry and sound effects" associated with the

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<sup>145</sup> Other scholars of radio history that highlight KPFA's association with the Beats include Ledbetter (126) and Walker (48).

barbaric howls and yawps of Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso? In other words, how do we get from the KPFA that broadcast Hill's "experiments" in representing the subjective experience of reading a Robert Lowell poem through techniques of radio drama, to the KPFA that ten years later broadcast a recording taped in Alan Watts's houseboat of Ginsberg, Watts, Gary Snyder, and Timothy Leary talking about their experiments with LSD and poetry (Watts et al.)?

The answers to these questions are complicated, and do not represent a linear progression from one aesthetic to another. Most of the San Francisco poets that I discuss in this chapter first came to KPFA during Hill's tenure, including Jack Spicer, who produced programming for the station during its very first year of broadcasting. Meanwhile, the establishment of a network of independent publishing and performing venues in the Bay Area helped to grow the literary scene in connection with KPFA. It took KPFA some time, though, to recognize the significance of the poetry being performed in its backyard and even in its own studios. Listeners' demands for more local poetry programming were crucially important in increasing the audibility of these poets on KPFA. As one listener asked in a 1955 postcard to the station, "What have you in mind that you don't record at least some of the Poetry Readings in San Francisco and in Berkeley. The last one in S.F. had over 200 people there! Where was KPFA?" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 20).<sup>146</sup> The censorship challenges that Pacifica faced from the FCC over its poetry programming also had an amplifying effect. These factors coincided with major changes to KPFA's leadership, politics,

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<sup>146</sup> An October 1955 article on the local poetry scene published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* appears to have especially encouraged listeners to write to the station. As one listener writes, "How about all of the Local poets that were described as being so vital in Sunday's Chronicle. . . . One should be able to hear these people or some of them on K.P.F.A. How come we don't?" (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 20). Another anonymous listener provides a suggested list of poets: "why don't you have Lawrence Ferlinghetti again, and a repeat on Denise Levertov. . . . I have NEVER heard Wm. Margolis read on your broadcasts (and I am a faithful listener, nor have I ever hear [sic] David Palmer or Charlene Palmer, or Wm. Emerson, or Kenneth Patchen, (I hear Rexroth Lively show why not more poets?)" (ibid.). Of course, many listeners also wrote to complain about the contemporary poetry that KPFA did broadcast.

and listenership that were linked to a perceived new crisis in listening instigated by McCarthyism, the Cold War, fifties consumer culture, and the widely declared death of radio in the wake of television's ascendancy as the dominant form of American mass media.

If it took a while for KPFA leadership to recognize the local experimental literary scene, the significance of KPFA was not lost on poets who lived in or visited the Bay in the 1950s and 1960s. KPFA's unique form of listener-sponsored radio offered a valuable context that situated the public, oral, and social performance of poetry within a larger progressive and creative local soundscape. In a 1961 essay, the Berkeley scholar and poet Thomas Parkinson attributed the emergence of the San Francisco Renaissance to the public performance *and* public broadcasting of poetry: **"Through the poetry readings in Berkeley and San Francisco and—when it began operation in 1949—over KPFA, a fairly large audience was created that accepted and took interest in poetry readings"** (283). Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy J. Peters, in their capacious, anecdotal reference work on *Literary San Francisco* (1980), describe KPFA's significance in broader terms as "an intellectual center perhaps of more temporary influence than the university itself" (159). According to Ferlinghetti and Peters, the cultural, pacifist, and anarchist context created on and by KPFA attracted "[p]ractically every important writer in the Bay Area," appealing especially to those seeking intellectual and artistic community beyond the confines of the university.

For Pacifica, the broadcasting of local experimental poetry on its Berkeley station helped to shape a new stage in the network's history, one defined by an increasingly overt oppositional stance vis à vis dominant American Cold War culture and politics and an increasingly vocal advocacy for freedom of speech in broadcasting. While founder Lewis Hill always envisioned Pacifica as a champion for the free exchange of ideas and the First Amendment, early KPFA

under his leadership maintained notions of maturity, responsibility, and balance that for the most part aligned with the FCC's broadcasting standards. Poets and writers, however, repeatedly challenged the station on the meaning and limits of these terms, from Spicer's invention of profane folk lyrics on his folk music program to Ginsberg's recording of a censored version of "Howl" for broadcast in 1956. Ultimately, the broadcasting of poetry forced Pacifica at first reluctantly and then decidedly into battle with the FCC, Congress, and American cultural norms regarding obscenity and censorship.

This chapter therefore builds on and extends the historical narrative begun in chapter 3 but with an increased emphasis on poets' roles on KPFA as producers, guests, and listeners. While the previous chapter considered the poetics of Pacifica Radio under the leadership of Lewis Hill, this one takes up the tumultuous (re)definition of Pacifica's "voice" and reception by San Francisco poets. Rather than attempt a comprehensive account of the myriad ways that the San Francisco Renaissance was broadcast and heard, or poets' diverse responses to radio as a medium for poetry, I focus on the radio days of three poets—Jack Spicer, Kenneth Rexroth, and Allen Ginsberg—each of whom developed a relationship to the station during its first decade on the air. Their involvement with KPFA was significantly varied and extended beyond their roles as poets: Spicer hosted a short-lived early folk music program; Rexroth, by contrast, was one of KPFA's defining voices as its resident book reviewer; while Ginsberg, who never produced regular programming and lived mostly far from KPFA's signal range, would become one of the Pacifica network's most frequent guests and beloved poets. In their poetry, these writers also responded variously to radio as a medium for the circulation of spoken poetry, as a dominant feature of the American soundscape and a disseminator of mass culture, and as a figure for poetic process and reception. All three, however, contested McCarthy-era censorship, Cold War

containment culture, and the literary aesthetics of New Criticism in their work and radio appearances.

Jack Spicer's 1949–1950 KPFA program on American folk ballads brought local folk-singers and musicians, record collectors, folk music enthusiasts, and poets to the station for a "folk music free-for-all" (*KPFA Interim Folio* July 3–16, 1949). Through his radio show, Spicer reflected and mocked an emerging postwar approach to folk singing and listening that would see these as performative, subjective forms through which to reinvent the self by becoming a vessel for the ghostly, scratchy, static-filled voices of a lost, mythic past. I therefore situate Spicer and early KPFA in the same milieu as Folkways Records and Harry Smith. By doing so, I draw connections between Spicer's radio work and his radiophonic (or, to pun on Spicer's training as a linguist, *radiophonemic*) poetics, which figure the poet as a radio set through which spectral messages are transmitted to make the poem, often by relaying and rewriting folk songs. Spicer's poetry, however, consistently jams the signal, amplifies interference, and disrupts the communication technologies of the voice, the poem, and the radio set.

Kenneth Rexroth, in his long-running *Books* program, gave voice to many of the foundational beliefs, values, and desires of Pacifica's founders as they were articulated in response to a perceived postwar crisis in listening. He also gave voice to the San Francisco Renaissance, publicizing its poets and poetics in the Bay Area much as he did nationally and internationally through his print criticism, though with different local aims and effects. In this chapter, I thus consider Rexroth less through his role as poet than in his influential roles as a public intellectual and ambivalent spokesperson for the San Francisco Renaissance. Rexroth helped to create the Renaissance as a public phenomenon and movement, while at the same time negotiating a public role for the poet that opposed the example of the New Critics. In this way,

he influenced the younger poets who emulated or defined themselves against this role in their desire for a new, public poetry. Listening to Rexroth's KPFA program, and its reception among an emerging aural public, however, exposes the contradictions at the heart of the broadcasting model of early Pacifica Radio, the poetics of the San Francisco Renaissance, and the public persona of Rexroth in their linked efforts to recover unmediated, direct, reciprocal forms of authentic speech and participatory listening.

This desire for authentic speech and participatory listening also motivates Allen Ginsberg's poetry of this period, and in the final section of this chapter I analyze the aural poetics of "Howl" in relation to two significant recordings broadcast on KPFA. The first, a recording of Ginsberg reading a censored version of "Howl" made in the fall of 1956 at KPFA's studios, documents Ginsberg's ambivalence about the distancing technologies of sound recording and radio broadcasting for transmitting an embodied, vocalized lyric to a receptive, intimate audience. In his performance for an invisible, future audience, Ginsberg amplifies the structuring technics of absence, silence, and even censorship within "Howl." KPFA first broadcast this tape in December 1956 before Ginsberg's book and publisher were embroiled in the high-profile censorship case. It was rebroadcast in the summer of 1957 as a prologue to a live panel discussion, moderated by Lewis Hill, on the obscenity charge. Although Hill and KPFA used the case as an opportunity to publicly contest literary censorship and to defend the right to freedom of expression in an extension of the station's core values, the broadcasts ultimately drew attention to KPFA's own censorship of the poem, raising fundamental questions about Pacifica's ability to intervene in the crisis in listening through the regulated medium of radio. They also presaged Pacifica's increasingly activist role in combatting the censorship and content regulation

of broadcasting media over the subsequent three decades, and the network's repeated efforts to put "Howl" on the air.

Each of these poets saw their work and its reception shaped by the cultural and political contexts of KPFA and its listening public, while they, in turn, challenged and shifted those contexts. In the case studies that follow, I attend especially to how each poet raised and reframed foundational questions central to the oral poetics movement of the San Francisco Renaissance and to the public media experiment of Pacifica Radio. What is the relationship between public and private and between the individual, the community, and the "mass" public? What can the human voice communicate and how is it mediated, commoditized, and received? How do culturally and technologically mediated practices of listening create forms of subjectivity, attachments to known and imagined others, and relationships to the past? And how can the poet be heard in the din of radio's "constant voice"?

### **"Most Educational Folk-Song Program West of the Pecos"**

Jack Spicer's early poem "An Apocalypse for Three Voices" describes a revelation of the end of times, when the dead rise and humanity is brought to spiritual judgment. "I dreamt the ocean died," the speaker recounts, "the final waves . . . crowded with escaping ghosts" (*My Vocabulary* 10). It's a terrifying vision, but one that quickly becomes an Orphic farce as the ghosts trade ocean waves for radio waves and swap the medium of the dream for the newspaper comic *Dick Tracy*. These ghosts, it seems, are hip to the propagandistic power of mass media and popular culture, which they use to publicize their messages of impending doom. The poetic

speaker, meanwhile, finds himself in a radio broadcasting booth, as if St. John of Patmos were a disc jockey spinning all the biggest hits:

Or say I turn the records in a great  
 Electric station, our reception famed  
 As far as May or Babylon and back again.  
 My great turntable is inevitable; it whirls  
 Around, around, a convoluting day  
 A night of static sleeplessness; it plays  
 Requested favorites, universal things,  
 And millions listen, hear some tenor sing,  
 It's a long, long way  
 From Babylon in May  
 To this November.

(11–12)

Unlike Spicer's actual radio show, which he produced for KPFA from 1949 to 1950, this is no amateur folk music session on your public FM station but a slick, commercial hit machine with "millions" of listeners tuning in for "requested favorites, universal things" (11). With almost godlike power, the DJ controls the airwaves and the masses from his invisible studio, keeping the "inevitable" turntable spinning for what might be eternity. But the ghosts in the machine, the spirits in the aether, requisition the frequency to transmit their own chorus. Don't adjust your radio dial, listeners, your reception is fine:

But listen to the chorus

When we dead—

Those flat and tuneless voices

When we dead—

The aching chorus is broken

When we dead awaken

We will do the singing.

We will do the singing.

Their flat electric voices

Fill the sky.

(12)

Ghostly voices that “fill the sky” like radio waves, an electric relay station that connects and disseminates them, and a radio set or listener that receives these unearthly messages only at great cost (the poet-prophet-DJ finds himself condemned by a court of the damned at the end of the poem): these images call to mind Spicer’s poetics of dictation as described in his lectures and enacted in later books like *After Lorca* (1957), *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* (1962), and *Language* (1965). “An Apocalypse for Three Voices” was composed in the late forties, well before Spicer articulated his theory of dictation, and during the formative period from 1946 to 1950 that Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Robin Blaser collectively mythologized as the Berkeley Renaissance.<sup>147</sup> The poem nevertheless puts into motion tropes of radio and reception that become central to Spicer’s later work. Radio’s transmission of a constant, authoritarian, disembodied voice through the invisible air to speak and sing through our furniture becomes, in Spicer’s work, a powerful figure for a mediumistic poetics, in which the poet operates as a

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<sup>147</sup> Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian date the composition of “An Apocalypse for Three Voices” to the “Berkeley Renaissance” years between 1945 and 1950 in their edition of Spicer’s collected poems, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*. The poem was first published in a posthumous selection of Spicer’s early verse edited by Donald Allen, *One Night Stand and Other Poems* (1980).

receiver and a conduit for the transmission of poetry from some otherworldly, unknowable, alien “Outside.”

“An Apocalypse for Three Voices” also imagines poetry as a kind of mass entertainment, or, perhaps equally, as a form capable of disrupting, inhabiting, and producing interference in the apparatus of mass entertainment. In 1949, during the same period when Spicer wrote this poem and hosted his radio show, he published an essay in *Occident Magazine* that called on poets to “become singers, become entertainers”—in other words, to leave the page for the stage, the phonograph record, and the radio (“Poet and the Poem” 230). Spicer rejects the New Critics’ fetish of the well-wrought urn of the page-bound poem, “removed from its main source of interest—the human voice” and isolated in “the dull horror of naked, pure poetry.” Instead, he argues, “Poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it.” The essay’s opening rhetorical question, “Who is listening to us?” (229), becomes a plea for a vocalized and sung Orphic poetry that will “move[ ] impossible audiences” (230). Although Spicer would later distance himself from the popular “entertainment” of Beat poetry readings, this early essay allies him with the New American poetry’s emphasis on speech, music, performance, and an embodied relationship to audience. Yet even here one can see the young poet working out a complex relationship between an idealized, “pure,” but inert poetry and a living, flawed, singular performance that hinges on the significance of its reception.

In “The Poet and the Poem,” Spicer instructs his poet-readers to reject the dull seriousness of the New Critics and follow instead the example of “golden age” celebrity radio entertainers. “There is more Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than R. P. Blackmur,” he asserts; “we have more to learn from George M. Cohan than from John Crowe Ransom” (230). Cohan and Tucker are strange idols to choose as models for a new poetry, though, considering that Cohan

died in 1942 and Tucker was already in her sixties in 1949.<sup>148</sup> Instead, in the late 1940s and 1950s, as we saw in the previous chapter, radio was undergoing a major sea change in the U.S., one that would significantly alter the aural and social experience of broadcast sound during the two decades in which Spicer wrote most of his poetry, from 1945 until his death in 1965. If Spicer dreamed of spinning records in “a great electric station” for the receptive ears of a mass public, his actual experience as a radio producer for KPFA tapped into the vanguard of a vastly different model of radiophony, one aimed at using the medium of FM to communicate to the “individual listener” who represented a select and intentional “minority audience.” In his work and life, Spicer moved between similarly polarized notions of publicity and reception, from his claim that poets should “become singers, become entertainers” to engage and restore large audiences for poetry to his refusal to let the majority of his work circulate beyond a select coterie of poets in the Bay Area. By confounding neat divisions between privacy and publicity, intimacy and enmity, presence and absence, and sound and silence, Spicer demands a rethinking of the poetics and technics of reception.

Spicer was likely aware of the Pacifica Radio project well before KPFA went on the air. A regular participant in Rexroth’s Libertarian Circle from 1946 on, Spicer may even have been present at the meeting where Lewis Hill pitched his idea for a pacifist, alternative radio station to San Francisco’s anarchists and poets. Spicer’s friendship with Richard Moore brought him to

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<sup>148</sup> Spicer’s allusions to Cohan and Tucker point to his interest in a tradition of humor and parody in American popular music that was heavily circulated on record and radio between the wars. It’s also notable, for reasons that will become clearer below, that Tucker and Cohan each started their musical comedy careers as children on the vaudeville stage, where they occasionally performed in blackface. Spicer’s own textual performances of what could be described as blackface in “The Unvert Manifesto” (*My Vocabulary* 74–94) and poems like “Imaginary Elegies,” are inseparable from his interest in American folk music, parody, and the radio culture of the thirties and early forties, which obsessively replayed vaudeville’s catalog of racial, ethnic, gender, and queer stereotypes as vocal effects. Critics have so far not been very adept at dealing with this problematic aspect of Spicer’s work. Maria Damon addresses it in her alignment (attributed to Spicer) of “camp” as a self-loathing gay cultural practice analogous to blackface minstrelsy, but in my view underhistoricizes and undertheorizes both cultural practices and their meaning within the postwar culture in which Spicer lived and worked (*Dark End* 164–66).

KPFA as one of the first local poets to appear on its airwaves. Moore—a poet, dancer, pacifist, and fellow folk music enthusiast—attended Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous Berkeley lectures along with Spicer and Duncan and occasionally hosted the Libertarian Circle with Eleanor McKinney, to whom he was married at the time. He and McKinney were also among the founders and original staff members of KPFA (Moore). When KPFA first went on the air on April 15, 1949, Moore was the producer of the folk music program that followed immediately after Hill’s initial announcement (Lasar 64). That same spring, Moore interviewed Spicer on the air about a contemporary poetry festival held at the San Francisco Museum of Art, at which the twenty-four year-old poet would read from his first “Imaginary Elegies” and “Psychoanalysis: An Elegy” alongside Robert Duncan, William Everson, Madeline Gleason, and Muriel Rukeyser, among other performers (Bartlett 95).<sup>149</sup> According to a feature on Spicer that appeared in the January 1950 KPFA program guide, it was during this early interview that Spicer “mentioned his interest in [folk] ballads,” and was thereafter “trapped into giving a ballad program on KPFA” (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jan. 15–28, 1950).

Spicer became a regular program producer for Moore’s *Folk Music Series* during the provisional year known as KPFA Interim, lending his voice to the machine that would later signify as the central figure of his poetics of dictation. The *Folk Music Series* began as a fifteen-minute daily program of recorded folk music with a special half-hour Saturday program featuring folk singing by local musicians and commentary by university musicologists, record collectors, and local enthusiasts, including Spicer. By the fall of 1949, Spicer was broadcasting his own program on every Tuesday evening at 7:30, featuring musicians James Herndon and

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<sup>149</sup> Gleason and the San Francisco Poetry Guild organized several of these poetry festivals in the late 1940s, which are widely recognized as important precedents for the large group readings associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and common in the Bay Area from the mid-1950s on.

Dave Fredrickson as well as other drop-in guests.<sup>150</sup> Spicer's show, slated to focus on Anglo-American folk ballads and local musicians, brought listeners a wild, spontaneous half hour of folk singing (including by the tone-deaf Spicer), poetry, and expert and mock-expert commentary until the summer of 1950. According to Spicer's biographers and Herndon, the program was eventually forced off the air because of Spicer's gleeful flaunting of station guidelines regarding profanity (Ellingham and Killian 30; Herndon, Letter 375). Other factors may also have contributed to the program's demise: by the end of August 1950, KPFA Interim had gone off the air to concentrate on fundraising, and Spicer had left for Minneapolis after refusing to sign the University of California loyalty oath.<sup>151</sup> Although Spicer did not resume his close ties to the station when he returned to Berkeley in 1952, KPFA broadcast many of his recorded poetry readings, workshops, and lectures in subsequent years.

For most readers and critics of Spicer's work, the fact that he hosted a radio program on KPFA is an interesting biographical footnote that does relatively little to explicate the complex, meaningfully unstable and intentionally deformed figure of the radio across his work. This is compounded by the relative lack of substantive information about the program; to my

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<sup>150</sup> Spicer, Herndon, and Fredrickson knew each other from their student days at UC-Berkeley in the late 1940s. Fredrickson, a Berkeley native who studied anthropology and who would later become a professor of archaeology at Sonoma State University, continued singing folk music and even recorded an album for Folkways Records, *Songs of the West* (1961). Herndon left Berkeley for Europe in the early 1950s but returned in 1957 with his wife Fran, where they reconnected with Spicer. Fran Herndon, an artist, developed a close friendship and collaborated with Spicer on numerous publishing projects, including co-editing *J* magazine. James Herndon gives a narrative of that friendship in *Everything as Expected*.

<sup>151</sup> In order to provide rough dates for Spicer's program, I've compared KPFA program guides to published accounts based on oral history. Spicer is first named as a participant in the *Folk Music Series* in the *Folio* schedule for June 25, 1949, though that entry indicates that he had already appeared previously on the series (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jun. 19–July 2, 1949). His name thereafter appears weekly until his last listed appearance on June 27, 1950 (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jun. 18–July 1, 1950). Since the *Folio* schedule was printed well in advance of broadcast, and therefore would not have reflected last-minute schedule changes (of which there were many in KPFA's early history), it is hard to identify the exact dates for Spicer's first and last programs. Nonetheless, it is safe to conjecture that Spicer was on the air for around one full year; Killian and Ellingham's assertion that the program aired for forty weeks is also plausible (*Poet Be Like God* 30). Spicer departed for the University of Minnesota sometime before the start of the fall semester; KPFA went off the air on August 6, 1950 and did not return until May 1951.

knowledge, no recordings or transcripts of the live program exist, accounts by contemporaries are few, and letters reportedly sent by listeners to the station do not appear in the dispersed archival collections of Pacifica that I accessed. Scholars that do mention Spicer's radio show tend to highlight its cancellation, drawing a portrait of the poet as *l'enfant terrible* of Berkeley. By all accounts the program did fly in the face of KPFA's and its small Berkeley audience's pretensions to authenticity, seriousness, and cultural elitism. Yet KPFA tolerated and even celebrated Spicer's weekly antics for nearly the entirety of its provisional year, and in a primetime slot at that. Why? What did the program sound like? How did it fit in KPFA's early broadcasting schedule and ethos? And what *are* we to make of a poet who famously declared that "the poet is a radio" actually broadcasting on the radio (*My Vocabulary* 374)?

"Most Educational Folk-Song Program West of the Pecos" Jack called it over the air," Herndon recalls, in an informal account of his early friendship with Spicer written at the request of Robin Blaser and published in the appendix to *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1989).<sup>152</sup> Since this document offers the most well-known and full description of Spicer's radio program from Herndon's perspective as a frequent participant, I quote and discuss it at length. According to this account, Spicer established a weekly "ritual" for Herndon and Fredrickson:

That afternoon we always went over to Dave Fredericksons [sic] and Dave and I (although both of us always told each other that we would resist Jack this time) drank the red wine which Jack always insisted on bringing (and bought, so you can see it was important) and got drunk, which was where he wanted us,

Drunk, we would then do what Jack wanted us to do, which was to join his view of "folk-songs" a view which wasn't ours at all. Jack wanted "American" 20th century

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<sup>152</sup> Herndon wrote the account at the request of Robin Blaser. The original copy can be found in the Jack Spicer Papers (29:3).

versions of songs—we had learned our songs from records, from books like Randolphs North Carolina collections (which Berg gave Dave, which was a fine book, which Jack hated—“of course its a good book,” he’d tell Dave, all the time persuading drunken Dave to make terrible changes in some revered “authentic” version, so it would go along with a statement Jack planned to make to the effect that Dave had learned it on the Santa Monica pier from an old bus-driver fishing for shinters) or from Child Ballads, or from the radio. (Only after reading *Lorca* could I understand why Jack wanted to do this.)

(Naturally, Randolph *is* American, but not American enough. Jack wanted associations, *not* authenticity, at least not in the sense of the folk-song purists.) If he had to make up the history on the spot, that was OK with him. As always . . .

(Letter 375; ellipses, emphasis, and errors in original)

Spicer’s ballad program—iconoclastic, resolutely inauthentic, and soaked in alcohol—took aim directly at KPFA’s educational mission (“Most Educational Folk-Song Program”) and the ethnomusicologists and amateur “folk-song purists” that sought the origins for an American folk culture isolated from commercial culture. Vance Randolph, named in Herndon’s account, represents one such “folk-song purist”; his field recordings of Ozark folk music in the early 1940s were commissioned by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress and became the foundation for the important anthology *Ozark Folk Songs*. Therefore, much like Langston Hughes, Spicer’s genuine interest in American folk music rejected the associated quest for authenticity.<sup>153</sup> Yet by Herndon’s own account, his and Fredrickson’s folk song repertoire also came from a hodgepodge of sources that included Child Ballads, *Ozark Folk Songs*, records

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<sup>153</sup> Perhaps it would be more accurate to say of Spicer, whose longtime interest in quest narratives culminated in the poetic work *The Holy Grail* (1964), that he retained a fascination with the quest while discarding the grail.

(likely both commercial and field recordings), and radio. What, then, distinguished Spicer's "view of 'folk-songs'" from that of his guileless collaborators?

Herndon states that Spicer's approach was notable for his interest in "'American' 20th century versions of songs" and "associations, *not* authenticity." Spicer's "view of 'folk-songs,'" like his view of poetry, insisted on a resolutely contemporary filtering of the artifacts of the past as material for creative composition in the present, and a metonymic and collagist approach to their presentation. As Stephen Fredman has shown, this approach has much in common with that of Harry Smith, arguably the most influential postwar folk music collector, and one of Spicer's occasional on-air guests. Smith's landmark Folkways *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952) was assembled in part from records he collected while living in the Bay Area in the late 1940s, where he moved in a circle of experimental painters, filmmakers, and poets that included Duncan and Spicer. Smith relocated to New York City in the early fifties, where he developed close relationships with Moses Asch, Allen Ginsberg, and Ed Sanders (Fredman 56, 76, 94).<sup>154</sup> Smith's visionary, avant-garde, subversive, and assemblage approach to the American folk tradition in the *Anthology*, which he described as "a collage" and "an art object" (qtd. in Fredman 57), resonates with Spicer's associative approach to American folk ballads on his program and in his poetry. Herndon's remark that even Randolph's collection of *Ozark Folk Songs* were "not American enough" for Spicer indicates it is precisely the inauthentic, the hybrid, the associative, and the profane that defined his American folk aesthetic. Like Smith, Spicer was also drawn to

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<sup>154</sup> See Sanders (9); Killian, "Jack Spicer's Secret" (par. 10); and Fredman (94) for discussions of Spicer's relationship with Smith. Ellingham and Killian also document Spicer's own avid record collecting while in Minnesota: "Every Saturday morning, Mary [Rice] and Jack haunted a record shop where he spent a dollar on three 78s, by his favorite radio comedians and crooners" (*Poet Be Like God* 36).

the haunting mythos of what Greil Marcus (riffing on a phrase of Kenneth Rexroth's) describes as the "old, weird America."<sup>155</sup>

Herndon states that it was Spicer's "terrible changes" to the lyrics of beloved traditional folk songs that caused all the trouble with KPFA's listeners. Here Spicer went further than Smith, rewriting traditional songs with new, bawdier lyrics that he passed off as the authentic contemporary folk expression of the masses, mocking the liberal romanticization of "people's songs." According to Herndon, KPFA listeners swallowed Spicer's bastardizations of folk songs naively and happily—at least initially:

So we went on awhile making up phony takes of "oral tradition" and singing fake verses composed by Jack (singing them the while, horribly) but it wasn't good enough. Letters came in by the hundreds to the station about how great the program was. So we had to go into profanity. Dave was very stubborn and moral about this, but Jack kept at him and his great triumph was the night Dave, in a burst of wild anger on the program sang or yelled Skip, Skip you son of a bitch! instead of the usual refrain for Skip to My Lou. That tore it. Up til then, our profanity had delighted the Berkeley hills audience and students—being profane they thought it more "authentic" and "real" I guess; after the Skip incident, we got all unfavorable complaining letters on account of the fact that Skip was a childs [sic] song and we were desecrating it. Jack was delighted. The station & Richard Moore in particular issued an ultimatum about profanity, and Jack got to confer with them and talk about narrow-minded Stalinists and fake liberals and so on and quit after issuing

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<sup>155</sup> Rexroth's phrase is "the old free America," which he used in an essay about the neglected significance of Carl Sandburg to the counterculture of the 1960s: "It is through [folk] songs that Sandburg first made popular that the old free America in which he grew up was to transmit, as through the narrow channels of hundreds of capillaries, its value system, its life blood, to a generation that ignores him or looks on him like a joke" ("From a Very Good Man"). Marcus credits this as the source for his own evocative description of "the territory that opens up out of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*": "The old, weird America is what one finds here—not Rexroth's rebuke to his readers, but an inheritance Smith's listeners might prefer to claim had reached them by mistake" (89).

several ultimatums of his own—all impossible. We quit too—Jack was certainly tired of the whole thing anyway.

(Letter 375)<sup>156</sup>

Considering the FCC's broad mandate to regulate broadcasting and penalize "obscene, indecent, or profane" content, a live program that regularly tested those limits would have likely alarmed station management, already operating under a provisional license, and would have been reasonable grounds for cancellation.<sup>157</sup> At any rate, by the summer of 1950 Spicer and KPFA were already on their way out, and any ultimatum issued by the poet to the station (hardly a hotbed for Stalinists) would have come on the heels of Spicer's protest against the anticommunist panic of the University of California loyalty oath and his plans for self-imposed exile at the University of Minnesota.

Spicer's motivations on his folk music show weren't only to *épater la bourgeoisie* of Berkeley, however. Rewritten folk songs and "phony takes of 'oral tradition'" appear across Spicer's poetry. As Herndon belatedly realized ("Only after reading *Lorca* could I understand"), Spicer's insistence on "associations, *not* authenticity" was linked to his developing concepts of poetic correspondence and the serial poem that he first explored in *After Lorca*, through its mix of "good" and "bad" translations, original poems, and epistolary correspondence with the dead

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<sup>156</sup> Sam Hardin's account of Spicer's program corroborates Herndon's: "He'd talk about a song, tracing a line from a poem that first appears in say, 1500, and then picking it up again in 1900 and comparing the difference. And sometimes Jack would sing—and he was the worst singer in the world. You'd be tuning into the program and you'd hear him, [imitates horrible tuneless voice]—every Saturday night. . . . He'd get Jim and Dave drunk before the program and then once the show began they'd use 'language,' that's what Jack wanted" (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God* 30; brackets in original).

<sup>157</sup> The FCC was granted regulatory powers over broadcasting content at the time of its creation in 1934, with the power to penalize and forbid obscenity and indecency but with relatively undefined standards for judging these. From 1960 on, after Congress granted the FCC the power to revoke licenses for indecent content, those standards became more contested and, in the 1980s, much more restrictive as courts upheld the FCC's power to limit First Amendment rights on the air. As I discuss near the end of this chapter, Pacifica Radio played an especially important role in this regulatory history.

poet. Moreover, just as Spicer's poetry evidences a sincere investment in the art of forgery—the “fake out” of *Billy the Kid* (*My Vocabulary* 185)—his insistence on profanity in his radio program registers something more than a desire to make fools of the audience or the station censors. Spicer's antagonism toward his audience and the KPFA staff is in tune with his later poetry, where lyric address becomes admonition, and where public readings become occasions for scandalous attacks on peers, punctuated by derogatory epithets and obscene statements that also punctured poets' idealization of the community-building sociality of readings.<sup>158</sup> This is the poet, too, who opened his book *Admonitions* with the assertion, “It is precisely because the obscenity is unnecessary that I use it, as I could have used any disturbance” (*My Vocabulary* 157), and who claimed in his lectures that rigorous self-censorship by the poet is necessary to receive the dictated poem (*House 7*). Much more could be written about the shifting and multivalent significations of the key terms *obscenity* and *censorship* in Spicer's work, but suffice it to say that for an openly gay man writing, publishing, and broadcasting at midcentury, *obscenity* is a term as loaded as the gun of Billy the Kid (“Your gun, Billy, / And your fresh / Face” [*My Vocabulary* 188]).

Before turning away from Spicer's radio program to his poetry, though, I want to challenge some of the prevailing assumptions about its reception by reconsidering it in the context of the *Folk Music Series*, KPFA's developing broadcasting ethos, and the meaning of American folk music at the turn of the decade. It is certainly conceivable that some Berkeley listeners believed Spicer's profane lyrics to be authentic; respected folk music collectors like the

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<sup>158</sup> The most infamous example of Spicer's antagonism toward his audience is his performance of the poem “For Joe” at an event organized by Duncan in honor of the visiting Denise Levertov, which inspired Levertov's counter-poem “Hypocrite Woman.” See Ellingham and Killian for an account of this event (*Poet Be Like God* 123–27). For nuanced analysis of the poem “For Joe” and its performance, see Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance* (172–73) and Katz (68–71).

Lomaxes often interpreted profanity and sexual explicitness in lyrics as indicators of a song's noncommercial authenticity. Yet KPFA's promotion of Spicer's program provides evidence that the station and much of its Berkeley listenership were more in the know than Herndon and subsequent critics have assumed. Early descriptions of Spicer's ballad program in KPFA program guides and internal documents make no claims for the program's scholarly credibility, celebrating instead its improvisational, playful performance of folk songs as representative of a contemporary, youthful folk spirit. A promotional feature on Spicer that appeared in the *Folio* in January 1950, for example, provides biographical information about Spicer (likely provided by the poet) and a description of his program, which "combines the singing and guitar playing of local folk music enthusiasts with Jack Spicer's comments" (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jan. 15–28, 1950). "In spite of Spicer's inability to carry a tune," the essay goes on, "he has been interested in folk songs since early adolescence and has a large and inaccurate memory of their lyrics."<sup>159</sup> Far from frowning on the "inaccuracies" of Spicer's lyrics, or naively assuming that his altered lyrics were, as Herndon speculated, "more 'authentic' and 'real,'" the *Folio* author addresses an audience assumed to be in on the joke and far from fastidious about the purity of origins (or purity of voice) of the tunes they heard.

The program guides also distinguish Spicer's program from others in the *Folk Music Series* that took a more obviously scholarly or folklorist approach, such as broadcast commentaries by university musicologist Vincent Duckles, recordings from the Library of

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<sup>159</sup> Spicer apparently had no more reverence for authenticity, tradition, or social mores in his adolescent folk music enthusiasms than he did on KPFA. In "Jack Spicer's Secret," Killian describes Spicer's adolescent friendship with Allen Sherman, the creator of the game show *I've Got a Secret* who also recorded the 1963 hit single "A Letter from Camp/Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah" on an album of folk song parodies. In 1942, the two boys were suspended for "marching through the locker room of Fairfax High" while "singing the Nazi anthem, 'Deutschland Uber Alles' to the tune of Bizet's 'Habanera,' from Carmen" (par. 14). As Killian indexes, the intersections of Jewish humor, anti-Semitic jokes (frequent in Spicer's work), camp, parody, popular culture, and Cold War obsessions with secrecy are dizzying here.

Congress's collection, or original field recordings made by Sam Eskin, "KPFA's wandering folk music consultant" (*KPFA Interim Folio* July 3–16, 1949).<sup>160</sup> An early description of the series distinguishes the daily broadcasts of recorded music—a "review of traditional Anglo-American folk songs, ballads, work-songs, and spirituals"—from Spicer's weekly "folk music free-for-all," "open to any collector or singer of folk music with sufficient enthusiasm and ability" (*KPFA Interim Folio* June 19–July 2, 1949). In a 1949 internal report produced for the Pacifica Foundation board, KPFA management also highlighted the diversity of the series, noting especially Spicer's and Eskin's contributions and praising the series as "perhaps as extensive a review of authentic (and occasionally questionable) folk music as was ever broadcast" ("Report to the Executive and Advisory Members of Pacifica Foundation," Pacifica Radio Sampler vol. 1). Far from pursuing a rigid, narrow definition of folk music or culture, KPFA documents from this period affirm that the station was characteristically interested in a plurality of perspectives and in the promotion of radio as an experimental medium for local musicians and writers, however "occasionally questionable" their folk songs.

While tolerating a broad and often contradictory notion of what constituted folk music, KPFA did emphasize authenticity as the most important criteria for determining what to air. In the *Folio* immediately following the one with a feature on Spicer, the cover essay poses a question that must have beguiled listeners who tuned into the daily mix of traditional English ballads, blues, cowboy songs, spirituals, and free-form singing: "Folk Music, Quid Est?" "No clear explanation has ever been given of why KPFA is especially interested in folk music," the

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<sup>160</sup> Sam Eskin is yet another figure that links Folkways and KPFA; an amateur folklorist who traveled across the U.S. and the world to record indigenous folk music and tales, Eskin played his recordings on early KPFA, released the record *Sea Shanties and Loggers' Songs* with Folkways in 1951, and contributed to nineteen other albums produced by the collaborative Cook Laboratories/Folkways Records label. Like Spicer, Eskin had a special interest in bawdy folk songs (Smolek et al.).

essay begins, implicitly conceding that folk music might not have been an apparent choice for a highbrow FM station in a university town that otherwise emphasized classical music and opera and resolutely shunned popular music (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jan. 29–Feb. 11, 1950). No clear explanation is apparently forthcoming in this feature, either, which reports on the bafflement of the staff. After cataloging a few standard, loose definitions of folk music centered on criteria of amateurism, spontaneity, simplicity, and nativism, the preponderance of exceptions require the writers to turn to a negative definition of folk music as anything that is not produced for commercial sale (even if, as the writers acknowledge, some folk songs have circulated commercially). Unsurprisingly for a noncommercial FM radio station, KPFA elevates folk music as noncommercial cultural artifacts that offer a significant alternative to a debased mass culture:

in an age of violent extremes the commercial music industry is a categorical extreme, and of folk music one can say—it is not that. The phony, the commercially banal, the commercially standard, have no place in folk music.

. . . The staff members discussing this problem found that they share a peculiarly emotional wish to get at the indigenous in their own culture and the archetypal in human life. Admitting that the canons of folk music are shaky, still it is preponderantly honest and usually basic on its subject. If it is one of the things that are real, honest, basic—that is reason enough.

For the station's earliest staff and many of its listeners, folk music—like *Pacifica* itself—appeared to offer a form of honest, uncorrupted, direct communication that could affectively bind its listeners around shared values, a shared culture, and shared sensory practices and experiences.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> KPFA's interest in "the folk" was not confined to music. On the popular children's program *Indian Tales*, which also aired on KPFA Interim, Jaime de Angulo told indigenous folk stories based on his study of the language and

Matthew Lasar interprets KPFA's inclusion of folk music in its daily schedule as a reflection of what he describes as the "hybrid highbrow" aesthetic of the station and its highly educated, upper-middle-class, liberal Berkeley audience.<sup>162</sup> Pacifica's arrival onto Berkeley's airwaves was generally received by the local press not as a radical experiment in anarcho-pacifist radio but as an elitist, highbrow, heady alternative to the commercial networks. Without wholly rejecting this characterization, Lasar argues that definitions of highbrow culture were in flux for KPFA's listeners, who had been steeped in the cultural and aesthetic values of the Popular Front era and thus "had inherited a deep appreciation not only for Mozart string quartets but for what they saw as the 'authentic' cultural expressions of the economically disinherited," especially associated with folk music (*Pacifica* 85). In tracing the "hybrid highbrow" aesthetic of KPFA to the "cultural front" of the thirties and early forties, however, Lasar, much like KPFA itself, notably leaves the question of politics behind. During the Popular Front era, as I discussed in chapter 2 in relation to Langston Hughes's poetry and Folkways Records, an appreciation of "the 'authentic' cultural expressions of the economically disinherited" was allied to a critique of unregulated capitalism and support for labor unionism and the socialist government programs of the New Deal. For both Pacifica's anarcho-pacifist founders and KPFA's early liberal audience

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culture of the Pit River Indians. De Angulo (1887–1950)—an anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, linguist, one-time rancher, storyteller, and artist—also knew and influenced a number of writers of the twentieth century, including Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, and Mabel Dodge Luhan. He was an important mentor to Duncan, who lived with him as his typist in his last years, and was admired by Allen Ginsberg. Spicer also knew him, though Duncan recalls that Spicer dismissed de Angulo for his views on linguistics ("World of Jaime de Angulo" 230). *Indian Tales* is one of the most fondly remembered programs from KPFA's first year, and recordings have been rebroadcast frequently on Pacifica stations, most recently in a 2013 podcast from the Pacifica Radio Archives' *From the Vault* series (De Angulo).

<sup>162</sup> As Lasar documents, KPFA's first listeners had significantly more education and income than the average Bay Area resident, and, while generally left-liberal in their political orientation, expressed a conservative "cautious" desire to "not . . . overtly disturb the status quo" (*Pacifica* 86). In 1956, self-reporting from KPFA listeners to a station survey revealed that 82 percent of respondents had an undergraduate degree and more than 70 percent had some graduate education; as Lasar puts it, "It would be an understatement to describe KPFA's first audience as very educated" (85).

(situated in the increasingly anticommunist climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s), authenticity became a value in it of itself, associated more with self-expression than with specific collective or political aims.

This sounds like the KPFA that Spicer's program was determined to overturn by mocking listeners' "emotional wish to get at the indigenous" and the "real, honest, basic" authentic origins of American culture (*KPFA Interim Folio* Jan. 29–Feb. 11, 1950). Instead, Spicer surreptitiously disseminated his own view of "American" folk music as a constructed avant-garde assemblage of theft, forgery, trickery, and lies. Yet in doing so, Spicer, like Harry Smith, contributed to a wider reassessment of the meaning of cultural authenticity for the defining of an American folk tradition and the besieged postwar liberal left that I discussed in reference to the context in which Folkways Records, also founded in the uncertain climate of the late 1940s, pressed its iconic records. While I will not repeat that discussion here, it is important to situate Spicer's show, and KPFA's folk music programming in general, at this historical juncture where the parallel interwar activities of folklorist study and politically motivated folk singing associated with the Popular Front faced the increasingly hostile and repressive environment of post-WWII anticommunism, paving the way for the spectral, depoliticized "return" of the folk revival.

In the 1940s, as Robert Cantwell argues, folk music's associations with folklorist scholarship and leftist ideology gradually gave way to new experiences of folk music as a "way of life" rooted in performance and impersonation (117–52). If Paul Robeson exemplified the cultural and political currency of folk music during the Popular Front era—and, in his highly publicized blacklisting and appearance in front of HUAC, folk music's suppression under McCarthyism—Cantwell identifies Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie as especially instrumental to the postwar redefinition of folk music for the embattled left. Guthrie and Seeger, both of whom

were active in the labor movement, maintained their ties to the left into the 1940s through their association with the People's Songs organization and their support of Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign, though these positions became more and more difficult to hold after Wallace's defeat and the growing anticommunist panic. According to Cantwell, these artists sounded a new direction for folk music, one that transformed the folk song into a sonic "memory theater" (205), on whose stage—a minstrel stage, to be sure—played a set of cryptic "icons, symbols, and signs, all of them politically eloquent but ideologically mute" (117). Through Guthrie's evocation of a mythic, pastoral American past and Seeger's performance of folk singing as personally and socially transforming, the broken props of an earlier folksong movement were transferred to a new generation of predominantly white youth who used them to construct alternative, countercultural identities in opposition to mass culture, conformism, censorship, and racial segregation. For these youths, the singing of folk songs represented "the effacement of a received social identity" in the creation of a new, authentic "imaginary self" (120). As I argued in reference to Folkways Records, the circulation of sonic authenticity also had everything to do with sound recording technology, and with the representation of the "old, weird sounds" and recording styles of early twentieth-century race, hillbilly, and ethnic records on the new medium of the LP.

While the chilling effect of the wartime recording bans and anticommunist purges on the folksong movement and many of its most prominent performers should not be understated, the persistent enthusiasm on KPFA—and Folkways Records—for folk music serves as a reminder that repression was never total.<sup>163</sup> In San Francisco in particular, the strong history of labor

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<sup>163</sup> KPFA, for example, defiantly championed Paul Robeson's cause in the 1950s and offered a rare media outlet to the blacklisted singer and civil rights activist who in turn solidified the station's progressive capital among left-leaning listeners.

activism, anarchism, intentional communities, and artistic experimentation enabled the survival of movements and affiliations that were aggressively hounded or rendered invisible in much of the country. Understanding this context provides credence to KPFA's claims to the uniqueness of its noncommercial programming, since folk music of the kind they broadcast would not have been played on commercial AM networks. Early folk music programming on KPFA thus reflected the complexities of their historical moment, disseminating both earlier but still locally valued scholarly and progressive representations of folk music alongside an emerging, creative, performative, nonscholarly, and de-ideologized view of folk music as mystic and mythic Americana. Spicer contributed in his own minor way to the latter by professing an American folk tradition defined by "associations, *not* authenticity"—by creative and scandalous rewritings and lyrical forgeries, by a constructed mythos of American history and regionalism, and by what Fredman describes as a drunken Dionysian "derangement" open to that which lies beyond the known (97).

In my view, Spicer's short-lived KPFA radio show should be considered a notably early precursor to the programs and commentators that defined KPFA's experimental sound in the mid-to-late 1950s and the 1960s. These included the influential live folk music program *Midnight Special* and Henry Jacobs's eclectic *Music and Folklore*, the latter of which broadcast original tape collages, *musique concrète*, global ethnic music, parodies of folk songs, fake interviews with fictional musicians, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's performance of original "want ads."<sup>164</sup> Programs like these subsequently paved the way for sixties' innovative freeform DJs like

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<sup>164</sup> Lasar focuses on *Midnight Special* in his discussion of folk music programming on KPFA. Beginning in the mid-fifties, *Midnight Special* producers Barry Olivier and Gertrude ("Gert") Chiarito broadcast live performances by singers such as Pete Seeger, John Fogarty, and the young Jerry Garcia (Lasar, *Pacifica* 99–100). Recordings of Ferlinghetti reading "want ads" on *Music and Folklore* in 1957 were rediscovered in 1999 at Henry Jacobs's former Mill Valley home by Jack Dangers from the electronic music group Meat Beat Manifesto, who sampled them on the album *At the Center* (2005) (Dangers n. pag.). Folkways Records released some of Jacobs's KPFA experiments on an album titled *Radio Programme, No. 1: Henry Jacobs' "Music and Folklore"* (1955).

Bob Fass and Steve Post on WBAI in New York. In this broader Pacifica context, Spicer's program appears less like an outlier than an early innovator in what would become a defining aspect of Pacifica's countercultural sound—perhaps best illustrated by Bob Dylan's appearances on Fass's *Radio Unnameable* for late-night, under-the-influence, censor-taunting live sessions of creatively rewritten songs from Harry Smith's *Anthology*.

I have focused on Spicer's role as program producer for the *Folk Music Series*, but if he were only known for his tiny part in Pacifica's history he would hardly warrant so much attention. What relevance, then, does Spicer's radio program have for thinking about his poetry? Certainly I will not hazard a causal narrative whereby Spicer's experience at KPFA leads directly to his development of radio as a figure for poetic composition. The radio of Spicer's poetry and lectures is decidedly not KPFA's or Lewis Hill's radio: it impedes rather than facilitates communication; it overwhelms with static the messages it is meant to transmit (which are themselves garbled, alien, and possibly lies); it confounds and mocks the possibility of direct speech and unmediated listening. In a series of three lectures given in Vancouver in June 1965, Spicer explained his poetics of dictation through this radio analogy, in which the poet operates as a receiver through which messages are transmitted from an ethereal "Outside." "The point," he claims, "is that you're not the thing which is broadcasting. You're the receiver. If you're good enough, you can get so much out of yourself that you're almost as empty as a radio tube or a transistor or whatever you're using, and the message comes through" (*House 77*). It doesn't matter if the message is important or meaningful or evil or nonsense. What matters—at least at this moment in Spicer's protean description—is that the poet try to relay it without interference and as instantaneously as possible. Spicer often referenced Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, in which Orpheus receives his poetry via a car radio that sends messages only for him, as a model for this

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kind of poetic transmission. As he writes in *Language*, “Cocteau used a car radio on account of NO SPEED LIMIT. In any case, the messages penetrate the radio and render it (and the radio) ultimately useless” (*My Vocabulary* 376).

The notion that the messages harm the receiver highlights the way that Spicer also deforms the figure of the radio across his work to get at a more paradoxical and subversive poetic practice than dictation would seem to imply. Elsewhere in the lectures, he raises doubts about whether static and signal interference are even avoidable for the poet, putting pressure on the earlier analogy: “But as far as the radio sets are concerned, it’s not a good analogy now because even the worst transistor is built pretty good. . . . And I would think that we probably always will be crystal sets, at best” (*House* 17). Poetry therefore isn’t, as one audience member at the lecture conjectures, a question of “good hi-fi sets or bad hi-fi sets” tuned to the static-free sounds of FM, but of the limited reception capabilities of the earliest, simplest kinds of crystal sets, popular in the first decades of the twentieth century among amateur ham operators, children with do-it-yourself kits, and—appropriately for a mediumistic poetry indebted to William Butler Yeats, William Blake, and Cocteau—spiritualists claiming to transmit the faint voices of the dead.<sup>165</sup>

Clearly, Spicer did not have his local noncommercial FM station in mind. Although, if we recall that KPFA Interim listeners sometimes struggled to pick up the station’s low-wattage signal on specialized receivers tuned to a relatively unpopulated frequency range, and that they

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<sup>165</sup> Peter Gizzi points to the preponderance of radio metaphors in the 1930s resurgence of public and scientific interest in telepathy as a potential source for Spicer, citing the example of Upton Sinclair’s *Mental Radio* (1930) (Afterword 188). Gizzi also contextualizes Spicer’s figure of the poet as radio in relation to “golden age” serial radio drama and variety shows. He neglects, however, the more immediate media context of postwar radio. In claiming that Spicer’s *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* presages the ways “‘the aether’ was already becoming increasingly regulated and controlled” (189), Gizzi simplifies the realities of the radio industry in the fifties and sixties. The relatively brief opening-up of the airwaves, especially on the FM band, to independent broadcasters made radio temporarily a less homogeneous soundscape than it had been during the “golden age” and potentially more analogous to the “city of chattering human beings” described in *Heads of the Town* (*My Vocabulary* 307).

often endured outages, “dead air,” and technical problems, the parallels with early radio may not be so far-fetched. Nonetheless, it seems important to restate the obvious: Spicer’s radio is not a real radio but a metaphor for a theory and practice of poetry, and one in a series of figures for poetic transmission employed by Spicer that include spirit mediums, letters, post offices, telegrams, telephones, switchboards, juke boxes, tape recorders, loudspeakers, and computers. In other words, Spicer’s radio is figural and spectral in more than one sense, and open to manipulation and revision by the poet and by his readers for various purposes that need not be bound by the technics of radio transmission or the details of biography. Yet it is precisely Spicer’s resurrection of earlier, phantasmal experiences of radio listening, where eerie disembodied voices could barely be distinguished from the static out of which they arose, that enables his work to haunt and turn inside out the preconceptions of a public long accustomed to the ubiquitous, naturalized, and increasingly high-fidelity sounds transmitted into their homes, workplaces, and cars. Like Adorno in “Radio Physiognomics,” Spicer personifies radio’s proper voice and “face” in ways that challenge its reception, and that offer an important counterpoint to Pacifica’s founders’ idealistic belief that radio could facilitate responsible, authentic, one-to-one conversation and rational-critical public debate in part by disavowing its own mediating structure. In contrast, Spicer’s poetry performs how acts of speaking and listening are always crossed through by imitation and impersonation, bodily inhabitation, sonic interference, censorship, and the determining structures of language itself.

The folk song turns out to be an especially useful form for this operation in Spicer’s poems and recorded performances: “a machine to catch ghosts” and a technology for resurrecting, transmitting, and remastering the “flat electric voices” of the dead (*My Vocabulary* 290, 12). Stephen Fredman, in his study of assemblage as a visionary, erotic, and contextual

practice in postwar literature and art, suggests that Spicer's interest in folk songs may derive from the anonymity of their authorship, which provides a useful model and means for "effacing the poet's ego" (94). As folk lyrics and tropes migrate across centuries and continents and through the bodies of various performers, they are recycled and adapted in ways analogous to a poetics that likewise seeks mystical correspondences across place, time, and language through the decontextualized arrangement of singular objects. Like the quotation, the fairy tale, the legend, and the pop cultural reference, the folk song functions in Spicer's poetry as part of "the furniture in the room" that the poet collects for the Outside to rearrange into a new composition (*House* 9). As Fredman argues, in developing a compositional method of gathering and assembling contingent and regional instances of language as "real objects"—much as an artist like Jess would intuitively assemble clippings and images into a visual collage, or Harry Smith would repurpose old 78s into an aural memory theater—Spicer seeks in his poems to channel a mystical force beyond the poet's consciousness that would reveal a more permanent or transcendent "real" (96–97). "[T]he goal," Fredman asserts, "is to reveal correspondences among objects while performing a Zen disappearing act" (97).

Yet in the context of a poetic oeuvre in which "correspondence" is repeatedly intercepted, misdirected, or orphaned in dead letter offices, it is clear that something beyond the well-made collage or "disappearing act" is at work in Spicer's poetry. As the analogy of the poet as crystal radio set illustrates, the message is obstructed at least as often as it gets through. Or, as Spicer puts it in mock-Poundian fashion in "A Textbook of Poetry" from *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*: "It does not have to fit together. Like the pieces of a totally unfinished jigsaw puzzle my grandmother left in the bedroom when she died in the living room. The pieces of the poetry or of this love. . . . As if my grandmother had chewed on her jigsaw puzzle before she died" (306).

Before we get caught in the wires that connect disappearance, correspondence, death, ingestion, and a puzzle so deformed that it's never meant to be put together, let's look more closely at an instance where Spicer masticates the lyrics to an "'American' 20th century" folk song. In the fourth poem from "The Book of Galahad" section of *The Holy Grail*, Spicer creates an assemblage of lines and sources that reveal correspondences between Arthurian legend, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Woody Guthrie's "The Ranger's Command":

To drink that hard liquor from the cold bitter cup.  
 I'll tell you the story. Galahad, bastard son of Elaine  
 Was the only one allowed to find it. Found it in such a way that  
     the dead stayed dead, the waste land stayed a waste land.  
     There were no shoots from the briars or elm trees.  
 I'll teach you to love the Ranger Command  
 To hold a six-shooter and never to run  
 The brier and elm, not being human endure  
 The long walk down somebody's half-dream. Terrible.

(*My Vocabulary* 351)

Like Eliot, Spicer constructs a poem of fragments in his own twist on a poetics of impersonality that defiantly seeks not to shore against the ruins but to keep the ruin ruined: "the waste land stayed a waste land." Even Galahad's discovery of the grail precipitates a kind of reverse resurrection trick whereby "the dead stayed dead" and the Western "six-shooter" substitutes for the life-renewing "shoots from the briars or elm trees." Appropriating lyrics from Woody Guthrie's cowboy ballad "The Ranger's Command," first recorded in 1944 for Asch Records (Moses Asch's pre-Folkways label), Spicer recasts Sir Galahad—illegitimate son of Lancelot and

Elaine of Corbenic, holy knight and discoverer of the grail—as a cattle ranger and the grail as his “cold bitter cup” of liquor. He also characteristically and subtly modifies one of Guthrie’s lines—“I’ll teach you the law of the Ranger Command”—by substituting “to love” for Guthrie’s “the law of.” In the substitutive logic of Spicer’s translations, quotations, allusions, and transmissions, *love* is a word that frequently arrives to jam or reroute the message. Here, it may foreground the homosocial love that binds these fraternal orders as an alternative to both the reproductive, restorative logic of the Fisher King and the chaste purity of Galahad in grail legend.<sup>166</sup> Certainly the grail quest, already completed by the poem’s third line, appears less important than this love. (The final lines of the poem undercut even this version of the tale by drawing attention to the poet’s coercion of the “brier and trees” into unwilling set pieces for his maudlin, “terrible” “half-dream” of a poem.)

Listening to Guthrie’s “The Ranger’s Command” introduces more interference into Spicer’s poem. Guthrie’s song, which derives from earlier ballads like “The Fair Lady of the Plains,” “The Cow Girl,” and “Death of a Maiden Fair” (documented in Randolph’s *Ozark Folk Songs* among other places), narrates the story of a cowboy who meets “a fair maiden whose name I don’t know” and asks her to join his “cold roundup / and drink that hard liquor from the cold bitter cup.” The maiden agrees, and the two head out with the rest of the rangers, but they are attacked in the middle of the night by a band of cattle rustlers. The woman is the first to rise, ready for a fight:

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<sup>166</sup> Spicer offers his own interpretation of “The Book of Galahad” series as a critique of purity in the second Vancouver lecture. Galahad, he argues, is “almost as sterilized as a space man and finally disappears, just like the spacemen will, off, you know, to some place, leaving us there. . . . And myself, I have a prejudice against purity and against Galahad” (*House* 64–65). He also draws attention to the correspondence made in his series between Galahad and Whitman, associating Whitman’s claim to understand America from an eastern vantage point (“the paradox of being able to contemplate America as America from the farthest point on Long Island Sound”) with Galahad’s claim on the grail from a position of purity. Given that Spicer often articulated a desire to transmit “pure poetry” from Outside, including in the Vancouver lectures, this discussion usefully undermines and complicates his poetics of dictation.

She 'rose from her warm bed with a gun in each hand,  
 Said, Come all of you cowboys and fight for your land,  
 Come all of you cowboys and don't ever run  
 As long as there's bullets in both of your guns.

The anonymous heroine of “The Ranger’s Command”—a “fair maiden” with both guns loaded—unsettles gender norms in a performance aimed at rousing the men to reclaim their masculinity through violent action.<sup>167</sup> Considering that the singer of the tale is identified as a man who must ventriloquize a woman’s voice in the lyrics, the song offers several layers of gendered performance and impersonation. Recontextualized in Spicer’s poem and in *The Holy Grail* series, the ghosted maiden of Guthrie’s song may join Gwenivere, Dorothy of the Oz series, Marilyn Monroe, and other female characters alluded to in the text to disrupt the sanctity and seriousness of the male quest, introducing elements of camp into the Arthurian romance and the cowboy tale.<sup>168</sup>

We return, then, to impersonation, imitation, and performance: those qualities that defined, according to Cantwell (and in reference to Guthrie), a new conception of folk singing as personally transformative. Spicer, too, is obsessed with impersonation, often figured as bodily inhabitation, ghostly haunting, or the radio set through which the dead, the undead, the inanimate, the beloved, the alien, the legendary, and even the structures of language may sing.

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<sup>167</sup> By some accounts, Guthrie wrote “The Ranger’s Command” to inspire women to join the war effort (Logsdon and Place 12). Spicer’s citation of the WWII-era song creates additional correspondences with the war and the Nazi imagery of *The Holy Grail*, which recasts Galahad as “an SS officer” in dark glasses and the grail as an atomic bomb (*My Vocabulary* 351, 349).

<sup>168</sup> See Damon, *Dark End* (142–201) and “Jack Spicer’s Ghost Forms” (138–56) for important early work on Spicer’s “camp aesthetic,” and Imbriglio for a response to Damon that draws on more recent work about camp in queer theory. See also Snediker, *Queer Optimism* and Vincent, *Queer Lyrics* for recent queer criticism on Spicer that goes beyond a narrow focus on camp to explore subjects ranging from genre to affect to personhood. Snediker’s chapter on Spicer’s *Billy the Kid* is especially relevant here as it links the importance of “the cowboy as object of a particular species of camp” in Spicer’s poetry to his investigation of serial personhood in that text (139).

Yet if “folkies” believed that folk singing facilitated the reinvention of the self in an idealistic and total sense—in which, in the passage from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan (by way of an impersonation of Guthrie impersonating Blind Lemon Jefferson), all traces of the original self would be effaced in the realization of a new, authentic subjectivity composed of symbolic fragments of a buried past—Spicer never quite pulls off the vanishing act. After all, as Herndon and recordings of his performances attest, Spicer was a terrible singer.

At Spicer’s last public reading at the Berkeley Poetry Conference on July 15, 1965, given days before his sudden collapse from liver failure, he performed the entire series of *The Holy Grail*, including the untitled “Ranger’s Command” poem. The hesitant performance style heard on the recording of this event, and others made near the end of Spicer’s life, differ from those recorded even just a few years earlier and reflect his deteriorating health and increasing anxiety about public readings.<sup>169</sup> A 1957 recording of Spicer reading “An Apocalypse for Three Voices” at the Poetry Center, for example, captures a lively vocal performance characterized by a broad tonal range, a fast-paced yet enunciated conversational style, comically bad singing, and, as Gizzi describes, an interest in “voicings, in the dramatic potential of voices, rather than in a unified personal voice” (218). By contrast, Spicer’s voice on the 1965 recording is relatively monotone and deadpan, with the exception of the moments where he sings lines taken from song lyrics, which disrupt the performance and bring into relief the book’s disjunctive and collage-like form as well as its humor. This includes the lines from “The Ranger’s Command,” which Spicer

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<sup>169</sup> Ellingham and Killian document Spicer’s performance anxiety in their biography of the poet, *Poet Be Like God*. My discussion of Spicer’s 1965 *Holy Grail* performance comes from a digital recording available on *PennSound*. The Pacifica Radio Archives also holds a reel-to-reel tape of this performance, as well as Spicer’s “Poetry and Politics” lecture at the Berkeley Poetry Conference and his Vancouver lectures, meaning that it is likely that the station broadcast them. The poet Susan Howe also used excerpts of the Pacifica tapes in a program about Spicer she produced for her WBAI radio show *Poetry* in 1975.

sings in a wavering voice that imitates a country western twang but slides tunelessly and comically around the notes.

Spicer's poor Guthrie imitation reveals the double-bind of Spicer's poetics of dictation, in which no matter how hard the poet works to get the personal out of the poem in order to receive and transmit something beyond the self, in the end, "[y]our tongue is exactly the kind of tongue that you're born with," and the Outside has to sing with it—both in the context of the written poem and in its performance, where this double-bind becomes most apparent (*House* 8). The emphasis on impersonation in Spicer's poetry has nothing to do then with passing as the real thing but with repetition, performing the failure, materializing the gap—exposing the performative means through which poets and American culture writ large construct authenticity through "'false' origins and etymologies" (Gizzi 216).

In fact, if the Outside has to sing through the medium of the poet, then the failure or refusal to "carry a tune" may also be a poetic strategy, one that disturbs or jams the incoming signal in productive ways (*House* 139). Near the end of the third Vancouver lecture, Spicer gives another description of how the poet should prepare to receive the poem, only this time, it seems, the aim is *not* to cleanse oneself in order to become as pure and holy a vessel as possible for the arrival of the Word:

I think that any poet who doesn't sing off key ought to be very careful because singing is . . . Well, all poets sort of know that, nowadays. One of the few things we have learned is that you have to learn how to sing off key in some way or another. Again, you have your infinite resources in the furniture. You can make the vocabulary the off-key thing, or you can make the whole structure, or anything else, and then the ghosts come and decide differently.

(141; ellipses in original)

Spicer claims the “off key” for poetry as a kind of concealed counterattack against the assault of incoming, ghostly messages, but if this is a scene of poetic composition, it’s certainly a strange one, even by Yeats’s standards. “The poet is a radio,” Spicer writes in the late poem “Sporting Life” from *Language*, “The poet is a liar. The poet is a counterpunching radio” (*My Vocabulary* 373–74). Against purity, against transmission, against reception, Spicer’s radio subverts the message by singing the static.

### “A Voice for the San Francisco Renaissance”: Kenneth Rexroth’s *Books*

In Jack Spicer’s only novel, begun in 1958 and published posthumously as *The Tower of Babel*, the protagonist James Ralston, an East Coast poet and academic, returns to his college town of Berkeley in hopes of renewing his poetry by immersing himself in the Beat scene and, ultimately, in a noir quasi-plot of crime, detection, drugs, illicit desire, and suspicious death.<sup>170</sup> Ralston’s quest for poetic inspiration is soon linked to his attraction to a young poet, Rue, but Ralston’s repressed homosexual desire means that he struggles to bring to consciousness what he describes in a letter to his wife (and through a suspiciously Spicerian analogy) as the “ghostlike interference” of “a station underneath trying to get through” (103). Immediately after posting this letter, Ralston visits the home of Arthur Slingbot, a thinly veiled caricature of Kenneth Rexroth. As he climbs the stairs to Rexroth’s study, he hears “the echoing tones of Slingbot’s public voice humming like the sound of a thousand bees” (104), and soon discovers him in the process of

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<sup>170</sup> Spicer’s novel is generally understood to be unfinished. However, John Emil Vincent has intriguingly argued, contra scholarly consensus, that it should be considered finished, despite its abrupt ending and unsolved crime, according to the internal logic of the text and its therapeutic purpose in Spicer’s life (“Pinnacle”). See Ellingham and Killian’s afterword to *The Tower of Babel* for the more widely accepted narrative of the novel’s composition history.

recording onto “an enormously expensive piece of tape-recording equipment” his Thursday evening “books broadcast for KARE . . . a highbrow FM station over in San Mateo” (105). Ralston “vaguely” recalls the station from his college days at Cal: “It had no commercials (being financed by a Ford Foundation grant or something) and ran (while he was there) to string quartets, sopranos singing English sea-chanteys, and panel discussions about local and liberal subjects.” As the scene in Slingbot’s study unfolds, Spicer creates a dead-on satire of Rexroth’s *Books*, a book review and cultural commentary program that Rexroth taped at his apartment for broadcast on KPFA, and which, at the time of this novel’s composition, aired every Thursday evening (with a Sunday morning rebroadcast). As unflattering to Rexroth as the satire is, Spicer’s detailed description of the recording practices, reviewing style, and unmistakable sound of *Books* indicates that Spicer, like most of the poets in the Bay Area, was a regular listener.<sup>171</sup>

*In The Tower of Babel*, Spicer portrays Slingbot as *taking delight in taunting the pretensions and prudishness of the local radio station and its audience, much as Spicer did on his own folk music program*. Slingbot boasts to Ralston that he enjoys baiting the station engineers who edit his tapes for broadcast with “off-the-cuff remarks,” recording, by way of demonstration, a scandalous rumor about the Archbishop of San Francisco being “arrested in the men’s room of the San Diego Zoo for indecent exposure” (105).<sup>172</sup> He reassures Ralston that the remark will be censored (though Rexroth’s actual rants against the San Francisco Catholic Archdiocese often made it onto the air), and proceeds to recommence his program where he left off before the interruption, in the middle of reviewing a new edition of *Beowulf*. The content of

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<sup>171</sup> Even those poets who tuned in only, as David Meltzer described of his own weekly routine, “for snotty laughs and eye-rolling groans” at “this windbag just going on and on,” still listened (*San Francisco Beat* 229, 269–70).

<sup>172</sup> Slingbot’s throwaway comment captures Rexroth’s infamous tendency toward gossipy and libelous tangents on his radio show, but it also serves to remind the reader of the risks Ralston may face if he were to act on his desire for Rue.

the review, however, proves hardly less outrageous. Swerving between outlandish conspiracy theory and a display (or imitation) of impressive erudition—Ralston is surprised to discover that Slingbot is discussing a new edition, not translation, of the poem in Anglo-Saxon—Slingbot ultimately makes the claim that *Beowulf* “is a hoax, an enormous fake” evident to “anyone who bothers to examine the poetic contents of it—who is not a professor or an idiot” (106). When Ralston later asks if he really believes this, Slingbot answers simply that he dislikes the poem and that “[p]eople have to be shaken up,” which turns out to be as much a guiding ethos for the program as any (107).

In addition to provoking station engineers and English professors, Slingbot uses his microphone to publicize his own causes: in this case, the plight of Washington Jones, the central figure in *The Tower of Babel*'s noir plot. “Next week,” Slingbot advertises to what Spicer describes as a “vast, invisible, and future audience,” “I will tell you . . . about the persecution of a fine Negro artist in a manner more appropriate to Jackson, Mississippi than to San Francisco” (106).<sup>173</sup> Jones, who Spicer based in part on Bob Kaufman, is an African American Beat artist who has been accused by Sonia, Rue's Eastern European lover, of battering her after a party of which Jones has no memory. Slingbot recruits Ralston to Jones's cause, but Ralston questions the wisdom of publicizing the allegations on the radio. Slingbot, who had earlier indicated that the remark was meant especially for Sonia to hear, pleads with Ralston not to tell the lawyer because he “doesn't like publicity” (107). Publicity, of course, is the point; as Slingbot stated

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<sup>173</sup> Rexroth did often use his weekly program to publicly address racism and African American activism. While Rexroth was generally antiracist in his politics and an admirer of the radical pacifist tactics used in the civil rights movement, he saw himself as a gadfly who provoked complacent white liberal moderates, southern segregationists, African American writers, “race leaders,” and black nationalists alike. Some of the remarks he made on the air prompted a long written rebuke from Booker T. Jackson, Jr., an African American listener who called Rexroth out for his hypocrisy, ignorance, and insensitivity regarding so-called “white backlash” to the civil rights movement and the strong rhetoric of writers like LeRoi Jones and James Baldwin (Rexroth Papers 11:4).

earlier, “They [KARE] don’t pay me anything but it’s good publicity” (105). At any rate, Ralston could hardly keep a public radio broadcast a secret.

This interplay between public and private address, or between mass publicity and secret communiqué, amplifies a dynamic that has been building throughout the taping scene. From the moment Ralston arrives at Slingbot’s apartment, he tracks Slingbot’s movement between a “public voice” intended for the tape recorder and a “private voice” intended for Ralston. At first, the two voices are clearly demarcated, but they quickly blur as Slingbot turns on and off the recorder with increasing frequency. In these moments, which also coincide with Ralston’s subtle challenges to Slingbot’s authority, Slingbot addresses his present interlocutor at a “half-public” register (104) and, after some throat clearing, in a “fully public” tone even when the recorder is off (105). Spicer dramatizes here the interference produced by the overlapping of public and private forms of address, and of public and private identities and voices—a confusion that becomes even more evident when we recall that the entire recording session for this public broadcast takes place in the intimate space of Slingbot’s home.

This fictional scene speaks to Spicer’s continuous investment in questions of poetic reception through the trope of the radio, but here I’m interested in how it also points us to something specific about the subjects of its parody: Rexroth and KPFA. As we saw in the previous chapter, KPFA’s experiment in noncommercial FM radio revived questions about the ontology of radio and the meaning of the terms *public* and *private* for a publicly funded station that contested the corporate privatization of the airwaves while addressing its listenership sometimes as a single, private individual, sometimes as a specific, local community, and sometimes as “a vast, invisible . . . audience.” For Lasar, this confusion about KPFA’s intended public was related in part to the station’s close association with local poets. “Did the first

Pacificans create KPFA to reach out to the masses,” Lasar asks, “or as an avenue of internal communication, a voice for the San Francisco Renaissance?” (*Pacifica* 73).<sup>174</sup>

While Lasar suggests that KPFA in general might be thought of as “a voice for the San Francisco Renaissance,” it would not be a stretch to attach that voice specifically to Rexroth. No single Bay Area poet had as great, or as contentious, an impact on KPFA as Rexroth, whose influence among poets and at the station arguably did more to realize Hill’s dream of transforming radio into an experimental medium for the spoken word than Hill himself. By performing the role of the public intellectual, Rexroth embodied KPFA’s public sphere model of radio as it was defined in opposition to McCarthy era censorship and mass-mediated “public opinion.” At the same time, Rexroth’s (oft-mocked) casual style of vocal delivery, amateur tape recording techniques, and mode of intimate address to his listeners reflected KPFA’s quest for a more authentic, noncommercial sound and direct, reciprocal communication with its listeners. These notable aspects of Rexroth’s broadcasting style are of a kind with his call—articulated in critical essays and performed in his own poetic works—for a more direct, reciprocal, and simultaneously public form of poetry. In Rexroth’s recorded, broadcast, and written work, he, like many other postwar poets associated with the New American poetry sought more authentic, direct, and individual forms of communication that would respond to a perceived crisis in listening in American society that had silenced poetry as a living, communicative form in the public sphere and relegated it to a defanged object of study in the academy.

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<sup>174</sup> The opposition Lasar creates between KPFA as a general public medium and KPFA as a medium for poetry is striking but overly reductive. Certainly Hill would never have described *Pacifica*’s intended audience as “the masses” given his antipathy to what he saw as the deindividuating effects of both communism and consumer capitalism, and one need only consider the effort by many San Francisco poets to bring poetry out of the university and into the streets (often literally), to understand that “reaching out to the masses” could also be a motivating purpose for a literary movement. Yet by opposing a public address to a private one, Lasar’s rhetorical question captures the very contradictions and conflicts that inhered in the efforts by *Pacifica* and San Francisco poets to collapse these two forms of address in radio and in poetry.

By claiming Rexroth to be *the* voice of the San Francisco Renaissance on KPFA, I also refer to the role he took as the literary movement's ambivalent spokesperson, much as he did in other local, national, and international media outlets. On KPFA, Rexroth fostered a receptive, local readership for poetry by publicizing contemporary Bay Area poetry as part of a larger avant-garde and generational "rebellion" against mass society with roots in a revolutionary tradition that synthesized aesthetics and politics. At the same time as he constructed a public for San Francisco poetry by articulating its public-oriented uses, Rexroth also used his microphone as "an avenue of internal communication" to friends, foes, and fellow poets in ways that helped to create the useful fiction of a dynamic local literary scene populated with an ever-shifting cast of memorable bohemians. As I consider in more detail these exemplary aspects of Rexroth's *Books*, however, I do not intend *voice* to operate only as a metonym. As we will see, what made Rexroth such a representative figure for KPFA's listeners had much to do with his actual voice—by which I mean the construction and reception of that voice as it was performed, recorded, broadcast, heard, mocked, and remembered. Moreover, the reification of what Brook Houglum describes as Rexroth's "vocal signature" (59) exposes the contradictions of both a phonocentric poetics and a broadcasting model rooted in ideas of authentic speech and direct transmission.

Rexroth's association with Pacifica Radio began before KPFA, and ultimately extended well beyond his *Books* program. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Rexroth, a committed pacifist with strong ties to the radical pacifist movement and the Waldport CPS camp, became acquainted with Hill and his model for alternative radio in the late 1940s when KPFA was still just an idea on paper. While I found no evidence that Rexroth was involved with or appeared on the station during its interim year, by the fall of 1952 his name appears regularly in the pages of

the *Folio* as the station's resident book reviewer.<sup>175</sup> Richard Moore, by his own account, endeavored early on to bring Rexroth to KPFA's studio for a book review program but Rexroth would not agree until the station allowed him to record the program on tape in his own home and on his own time (113). Although Moore was initially "dismayed" by his first audition of Rexroth's reviews, which "sounded like someone rummaging in an attic and mumbling furiously to himself," KPFA put the tapes on the air and kept doing so, every week, for more than twenty years.

Rexroth quickly became one of KPFA's signature voices for listeners who loved or hated but rarely expressed indifference toward his weekly program, which in addition to providing critical commentary on an impressive range of titles in a variety of subjects operated as a platform for Rexroth's views and opinions on poetry, politics, and local and national events. According to Rexroth's biographer Linda Hamalian, "Some listeners tuned in for the information; others wanted to hear his latest, and sometimes outrageous, pronouncements on the state of contemporary intellectual life" (221). A profile printed in the *Folio* in 1958 characterizes *Books* as "excit[ing] considerable controversy" and "intense reactions" among the station's listenership over the poet's opinionated reviews and "pungent criticisms of our social and civil ills" (*KPFA Folio* May 24–June 7, 1958). The photograph of Rexroth accompanying this profile provides an appropriate visual representation of his sonic ethos: against a background that juxtaposes a full bookshelf and a prominently displayed cattle skull, in casual dress and relaxed,

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<sup>175</sup> A *Folio* cover feature on Rexroth states that he started reviewing books for the station in 1951 (*KPFA Folio* May 24–June 7, 1958), which appears to be the source for the date given in Lasar, Hamalian, and Houghlum. Moore dates the earliest tapes to 1950 (113). *Books* first appears on the published program schedule for November 7, 1952 (*KPFA Folio* Nov. 2–15, 1952), but this does not contradict an earlier start date. Rexroth also mentions the program in a letter to James Laughlin dated November 4, 1952: "My radio review is going good—people like it. Wish it paid me some money" (*Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin* 183). The oldest still extant tapes of the program are dated back to May 1952 and are held with the Rexroth Papers (98:3), though several are in very poor material condition. It is also difficult to determine a precise end date for the program, but *Books* appears regularly in the *KPFA Folio* into 1974.

seductive pose, the poet cuts a distinctly Western and free-thinking figure of the public intellectual.

In addition to *Books*, Rexroth's unmistakable growl could be heard across KPFA's schedule on any given week. He appeared reading poetry, performing with jazz, or delivering lectures; leading writers' workshops; offering public affairs and sociological commentary on current events; and conducting interviews with a range of cultural figures from the British poet Stuart Holroyd to the jazz musician Ornette Coleman. Nor was Rexroth's voice limited to KPFA's signal range; *Books* and other Rexroth programs aired on Pacifica stations WBAI in New York and KPFK in Los Angeles. Rexroth's fingerprints can also be found on many Pacifica programs on which he did not personally appear, indicating the ways in which his presence at the network was at once highly audible to listeners and muted, characterized by a behind-the-scenes influence that could be (and still is) hard to define. As an unofficial, and occasionally unsolicited, advisor to station program directors, he offered many suggestions over the years for programs and participants.<sup>176</sup> Many of the poets who recorded for KPFA initially came to the station through Rexroth's direct invitation or his indirect influence. Rexroth also helped to facilitate the partnership between KPFA and the Poetry Center after the latter's founding in 1954, which became a major conduit for contemporary poetry on the station.<sup>177</sup> Considering that he was never

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<sup>176</sup> Rexroth's advisory role for Pacifica is evident in a letter from Rexroth to Eleanor McKinney dated April 17, 1960, written during a visit to New York and soon after Pacifica's acquisition of WBAI. Rexroth provides a long list of poets and personal contacts who might be interested in appearing on, or getting more substantially involved in, the new station, including Elizabeth Kray of the YMHA Poetry Center ("not only to give you regular readings but, more important—small seminars in 'Creative Poetry' by younger writers"), M. Rosenthal (who "has a whole stable of young poets, and is probably one of the best ways of by passing the Establishment"), and Gloria Oden ("the young Negro poet who I told you would be a very valuable addition to your NYC staff") (Rexroth Papers 12:6). The letter also includes contacts for programming related to art criticism, politics, jazz, and architecture.

<sup>177</sup> Rexroth's public falling out with Robert Duncan and the Poetry Center in 1957 threatened the institutional relationship between KPFA and the Poetry Center. For an account of this episode, in which Rexroth lashed out on his radio show at Duncan, the Poetry Center, and several of its most respected visiting poets for rejecting his request for an honorarium for a free-admission reading, see Hamalian (274) and Jarnot (169–70). In a letter to Eleanor McKinney expressing anger over Rexroth's slanderous comments, Duncan also acknowledges his experience as a

a paid staff member at KPFA (like his Spicerian avatar, he did it for the publicity), and that he outrageously claimed at times that he “never listen[ed] to the radio FM AM or any M” (*Pacifica Records* [WI HS] 1), Rexroth profoundly influenced the station and the network’s literary programming as well as its overall aesthetic and political orientation.

I focus specifically on *Books*, though, to show how Rexroth performed the role of the public intellectual and the public poet on KPFA by redefining the intimate, seemingly private address of radio. Every week, fed with a regular supply of tape and an influx of review books from a wide range of mainstream, scholarly, and small press publishers that he piled around his study, Rexroth ad libbed his tangential reviews into the microphone of a tape recorder. Michael McClure describes his experience of watching Rexroth record one of his programs: “He would pick up a book and hem and haw in grand style while flipping the pages and eyeing the front and back material, and then deliver a learned, unrehearsed review to the machine. I was never sure whether he was reading the book as he flipped the pages, or if he was stalling to remember it” (“Seven Things”). Either way, the scope of his areas of knowledge was immense, and he was “creative and rebellious in his use of them,” encompassing everything from “Byzantine theology and Church history, to Hesiod’s Orphic theogony to Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, to backpacking and mountain trailing, to Eskimo songs, to Cubist poetry, to Natural History, . . . [and] Anarchism and the labor movements.” Lasar aptly nicknames Rexroth “the omnivore” (*Pacifica* 119), and *Books* demonstrated the eclectic, erudite, and voracious reading habits of a poet whose formal education ended with his expulsion from high school but who earned a reputation as one of the great autodidacts of his generation.

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listener to Rexroth’s rants: “I’m sure that Kenneth’s remarks on his radio program are understood in context. I at least so understand his attacks on Pound or Sartre Olson or Creeley or whomever happens to be handy—it is not the truth of a statement but the use of a statement that determines his impulse” (*Poetry Center Records* 6).

Two very early tape recordings of *Books* dated May 15 and July 9, 1952 and held with Rexroth's Papers at the University of California, Los Angeles, convey the omnivorous tastes and bombastic opinions that Spicer caricatured in his novel and that listeners celebrated and maligned. The books under review in these programs include new books and notable reprints in the genres of young adult nonfiction, archaeology, paleontology, history of science, drama, art criticism, Latin poetry and criticism, science fiction, psychology, and religious studies. Of a reprint of F. J. E. Raby's *History of Christian-Latin Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*, Rexroth claims that he believes "no greater work on the subject has ever been written" while acknowledging that the specialized book is unlikely to be of interest to many of his listeners. Another largely positive review of Herbert Read's *Philosophy of Modern Art* digresses into a general critique of the impoverished state of modern art criticism, and a new edition of Carl Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* inspires a lengthy treatise on the limits of Jungian and Freudian psychology. In addition to such intellectual if discursive commentary, Rexroth offers a hearty review of Edwin Gross and Nathalie Gross's *Teen Theater*, which he recommends as a manual of theater practice for adolescents. He also takes up Ray Bradbury's *Golden Apples of the Sun*, though the dismissal of contemporary science fiction that follows concludes with Rexroth admitting that he's already forgotten what Bradbury's stories were about.<sup>178</sup>

Rexroth does not discuss any new books of contemporary poetry in these two programs, but the genre did constitute a significant part of Rexroth's weekly missives. The range of his reviewing, however, meant that he framed his contemporary poetry reviews both from the

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<sup>178</sup> In a 1969 interview with Meltzer, Rexroth explains his interest in reviewing science fiction on a program that otherwise largely eschewed fiction, "In the McCarthy period when the only expression of any kind of radicalism was confined to science fiction, I used to review science fiction for KPFA" (Interview 238).

position of a poet-expert and as a generalist and books enthusiast. Over the years, Rexroth promoted on his program the work of Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, Robert Duncan, William Everson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Carolyn Forché, Allen Ginsberg, Jessica Hagedorn, LeRoi Jones, Jack Kerouac, Philip Lamantia, Denise Levertov, Gloria Oden, Kenneth Patchen, Jerome Rothenberg, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen, among many others. In doing so, he helped create an audience among KPFA listeners for new writing, much of it experimental in nature and published by small presses, while situating that work in a uniquely broad international and historical context and an idiosyncratic personal archive. In 1955, for example, Rexroth reviewed on his program excerpts from Kerouac's manuscripts of *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* that had been published in *New World Writing* as "Jazz of the Beat Generation." Praising Kerouac's prose as ranking alongside that of Jean Genet and Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Hamalian 243), Rexroth brought his listeners' attention to an important, experimental, and as yet largely unknown writer.

Rexroth was especially instrumental in publicizing new works, public readings, published recordings, and radio broadcasts of San Francisco poets. Throughout the 1950s, Rexroth created and disseminated the idea of the San Francisco Renaissance in essays, interviews, and on KPFA as a cultural and generational movement like modernism and the cultural front before it, but defined by its opposition to postwar American society and culture. He described this new poetry as "characterized by total rejection of the official high-brow culture" ("Disengagement" 15), in social "revolt" against mainstream values (2), and disengaged and disaffiliated from traditional institutions and politics. He celebrated, however, its communitarian ethos in the creation of new audiences for whom "poetry has become an actual social force" instantiated in large public readings and disseminated through small, underground presses (15). The generosity of Rexroth's

praise at one moment, however, did not guarantee its continuance to the next, especially when it came to the Beats and their many imitators. As Kerouac knew perhaps better than anyone, Rexroth could be harshly critical, cruel, and even vindictive in his print and broadcast reviews.<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, Rexroth's activism on behalf of poetry and poetic community earns him his disavowed title as the progenitor of the San Francisco Renaissance. *Books* therefore must be understood as of a kind with the reviews and editorials Rexroth wrote for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Nation*, and other national publications—and with his advisory role to James Laughlin of New Directions—in promoting and influencing the work of many young, underappreciated, and experimental poets.

Moreover, like the Libertarian Circle and the poetry salons held at his home, Rexroth's radio work offered a model of the poet as public intellectual that countered the one proffered by the New Critics. For Rexroth, poetry encompassed a way of life and a form of inquiry connected to rather than surgically removed from deeply felt intellectual, political, and social commitments. This model of public and intellectual engagement, even more than Rexroth's poetry, influenced many of the younger poets of the San Francisco Renaissance (including, as we will see, Allen Ginsberg). Ferlinghetti claimed that his “real education began with Kenneth Rexroth on KPFA” (Ferlinghetti et al.). If we recall that Ferlinghetti arrived in San Francisco in 1951 with a doctoral degree from the Sorbonne, it becomes evident that this “real education” had as much to do with learning by way of example a creative, capacious, individual relation to knowledge—and an expansion of the possible sources for poetry—as it did with encountering specific areas of study.

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<sup>179</sup> In a 1959 *New York Times* review of *Mexico City Blues*, for example, Rexroth sharply dismissed Kerouac's representations of jazz and Buddhism as ignorant, writing that “the naive effrontery of this book is more pitiful than ridiculous” (“Discordant and Cool”).

Rexroth's performance of unspecialized erudition, forthright opinion, and aggressively individual, yet intellectual tastes also connected to KPFA's overall experiment in noncommercial broadcasting. As Lasar states in reference to another *Books* episode from the fifties, "Here was the perfect literary sage for KPFA's audience, an accredited radical with a gentle voice who could talk about the Bloomsbury group, imperialism, Lenin, and Trotsky in one breath and tell his listeners what to get their Scout nephew or niece for Christmas in the next" (*Pacifica* 122). Leaving aside for a moment the questionable modifier "gentle" for Rexroth's broadcast voice, Rexroth's performance of the "literary sage" as autodidactic anarchist poet did advance KPFA's interests in broadly educational but institutionally unaffiliated programming that would promote the free exchange of knowledge and opinions through a distinctly pacifist world view. With programs like *Books*, KPFA sought to prove that radio could support a more robust public sphere by acting as a supplement to print culture and by privileging the role of literature in particular for sustaining that sphere and producing a citizenry capable of engaging with it. *Books*, after all, publicized foremost an intellectualism rooted in the medium of print.

Rexroth espoused a particularly Emersonian view of the uses of literacy, shared by Hill and many early Pacificans, that rejected passive conformity to an institutionalized canon and advocated instead the active, spontaneous, creative integration of written forms of knowledge with personal experience in a wide and diverse world. This did not mean that Hill, with his love of modernist poetry and Kierkegaard, or Rexroth, with his on-air discussions of Hesiod and cubism, eschewed highbrow, intellectual, or even canonical texts but that both in their own ways sought "authentic" relationships to texts defined as both subjective and subject-forming, private and public-oriented. At times, Rexroth's rambling, egoistic weekly address could be characterized as approaching Emerson's projection of the ideal "American scholar": "the

delegated intellect” of the body politic who appears not as a “mere thinker” but as “*Man Thinking*” (“American Scholar” 1139). The point of a given episode of *Books* thus was always less about the critical evaluation of any specific book or books than about Rexroth’s dynamic performance of a unified life of the mind. This performance—also seen in his poetry, prose, and published written reviews—is exaggerated in Rexroth’s radio work because the medium allowed for the appearance (if not the fact) of an unedited, unmediated, spontaneous unfolding of thought in speech. Like the syllabic form of his long poems, Rexroth’s radio program built a network of what Michael McClure describes as “links for the free movement of the mind” engaged in finding and creating synthesis among the diverse beings, objects, ideas, and histories of the world (Ferlinghetti et al.).

Rexroth’s broadcast performance of an unfettered “Mind Thinking” took on particular significance in the context of McCarthyism and Cold War containment ideology. Lasar places Rexroth alongside Alan Watts, Pauline Kael, and Felix Greene as the defining voices of KPFA in the fifties who “for all their egotism . . . remained true to the Pacifica Foundation’s fundamental mission: to expand the possibilities for dialogue and the sources of information”—a mission that was increasingly under attack in the 1950s (*Pacifica* 112). The international scope of Rexroth’s literary tastes and his deep knowledge of political theory brought many listeners into contact with foreign and supposedly “dangerous” texts and ideas, including some of the very ones being censored in the public sphere. Week to week, Rexroth defiantly held forth on a range of subjects generally considered taboo in 1950s American society and almost completely absent on U.S. broadcasting media outside of Pacifica stations: from communism, Soviet thought, labor unionism, and anarchism; to racism, segregation, and sexism; to liberated and alternative sexual relationships and identities; to banned books and censored literature. Rexroth also challenged

Pacifica's commitment to what would later become known as "free speech radio" by collapsing the fragile distinction between the censorship of political speech and the censorship of profane, vulgar, or indecent speech through his own broadcasts and in his uncompromising defense of allegedly obscene literature, including Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*.

This is not to imply that Rexroth's (often self-contradictory) opinions expressed on any of these subjects were always approving, socially progressive, or politically radical. On the contrary, Rexroth's fascination with "foreign" texts and ideas, as Lasar points out, shared with Alan Watts an orientalism that "modified old imperial arguments to make the Other seem less foreign and hostile" (*Pacifica* 121). Similarly, his self-professed feminism, much like his self-professed antiracism, was undermined by the constancy of his sexist remarks and attitudes. Voices like Rexroth's and Watts's offered a loud rebuke to the notion that the listening public constituted a passive, easily influenced audience in need of paternalistic protection, but they also made evident the limits of Pacifica's early liberal public sphere model and its complicity in excluding and silencing already socially marginalized voices and perspectives. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rexroth, though still broadcasting regularly, appeared more and more out of step with the radical cultural politics being sounded by the newly formed women's and "Third World" collectives at KPFA and other Pacifica stations.

I've focused so far on Rexroth's voicing of a (white male) public intellectualism through his radio program and in relation to Pacifica Radio's early broadcasting model and 1950s Cold War ideology. I want to turn now, though, to the materiality of that broadcast voice as it circulated in the context of KPFA's efforts to reinvent what I described in the previous chapter as radio's "constant voice." Rexroth, much like Hill and Adorno, associated the medium of radio with the dissemination of a monolithic, authoritarian voice that effectively silenced the intentions

of any individual speaker. According to Moore, Rexroth initially resisted the invitation to record book reviews at KPFA's studios on the grounds that "he could not . . . be turned on and off like some switch," echoing Hill's own critique of the coerced, mechanized voice of the commercial radio announcer (113). Rexroth's extemporaneous approach to delivering his reviews therefore responded to Hill's call for a new radio "voice" and mode of direct address to the listener that would interrupt the deindividuating mechanisms of mass communication by recognizing that "the act of broadcasting," much like "ordinary conversation," has integrity only "where the intention is one of human communication between the man at the microphone and the listener" (*KPFA Folio* Oct. 21–Nov. 3, 1951). This intimate and gendered model of man-to-man rational conversation depended on an announcer who would speak solely out of "his own interests and values." Certainly no one could accuse Rexroth of speaking on behalf of anyone or anything but himself, even if he may have lacked at times the "restraints, candor, respect" that KPFA also promoted as "common to all productive human relations" (*KPFA Folio* Mar. 9–22, 1952).

Rexroth's use of a personal tape recorder, his casual delivery style, and the overall notoriously bizarre and poor quality sound of *Books* thus took KPFA's experiment in noncommercial sound to its logical extreme. KPFA staff members frequently took to the airwaves and the *Folio* to defend or apologize for the unpolished sound of their many live programs, commentaries, and roundtable discussions. On the one hand, poor sound quality was a necessary evil within an innovative broadcasting model that gave autonomy to community-generated content.<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, KPFA cultivated and celebrated such programs as more

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<sup>180</sup> KPFA's decision to keep broadcasting readings recorded at the Poetry Center, despite their poor quality, represents the station's commitment to local content. As Eleanor McKinney complained in a 1958 letter to Ruth Witt-Diamant, the Poetry Center's poor quality tapes were often "almost technically impossible to broadcast, and make poor representation of the fine readers"; McKinney implored the Center to enlist "capable technicians and first-rate equipment" or at least "record this material at the proper speed" (Poetry Center Records 4).

authentic and therefore conducive to participatory listening “not because they are ‘professional,’ but because . . . they include thought that is as raw and—hopefully—as honest as you would expect to hear in your own living room” (*KPFA Folio* July 27–Aug. 2, 1952). Rexroth recorded *Books* not in his living room but in his study, but that “raw” home recording sound certainly came through, generating enough commentary from listeners to practically codify a new literary subgenre of descriptions of Rexroth’s voice. McClure recalls that “[m]any of us had our own imitations of Kenneth’s voice” but that “no two of the imitations sounded alike”; the same can be said of the many colorful descriptions of Rexroth’s voice that abound in published accounts of the program and archival listener letters. “[I]t was like listening to W. C. Fields playing the Wizard of OZ on the boards of a medicine-show chautauqua,” writes David Meltzer in an exemplary instance of this genre, “His voice a rolling drone where many voices would emerge, ranging from cracker-barrel rube to imperious high-cult Brahmin” (qtd. in Moore 113). Clearly, this was a voice that had never before been heard in radio.

Rexroth’s flagrant disregard for broadcasting standards of elocution as well as sound amplification and recording frustrated station engineers and management as well as many listeners.<sup>181</sup> For other listeners, though, the bizarre, “raw” sound of Rexroth’s program was inextricable from the unique, anticommercial sound of *Pacifica* itself. As Andre and Margaret Moreau put it in an undated postcard to the station,

Please! Keep Rexroth just as he is. He can cough, belch, expel air in any way he chooses and we shall applaud. We love those motorcars that zoom through the room too.

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<sup>181</sup> Thomas Bell was one of the many listeners who wrote to the station to complain as much about *Books*’ incomprehensible sound as its inflammatory comment. In a letter dated August 12, 1960, he writes, “I thought such ham-actor delivery—the steam engine sighs, the abrupt plunges from emphatic highs to portentously rumbing [sic] lows—went out with elocution in the 90’s. . . . I found it impossible to make sense of his words even when he didn’t sound as if he were speaking through a mouthful of mush” (*Pacifica Records* [WI HS] 16). Rexroth himself expressed surprise and dismay at the sound of his recorded voice on *Books*: “I play back tapes and shudder—sounds just like a B gangster pitcher [sic]” (qtd. in Hamalian 221).

We . . . feel that Rexroth is Pacifica, maddening, at times inexplicable, irreplaceable and uniquely precious.”

(Rexroth Papers 12:6).

Other letters indicate that many fans did interpret Rexroth’s program as a welcome intervention in and dissent from broadcasting norms of objectivity, professionalism, and voice. Gene Grimdt, for example, writes in January of 1953 to praise “the ‘personal’ attitude towards the books you comment upon. In this age of ‘objectivity,’ ‘non-committal’ commentaries etc., your subjective approach is most heartening to listen to” (Rexroth Papers 8:9). William Clarke likewise singles out Rexroth’s program in a letter from the same year: “No selling, no propagandizing: just a man saying what he thinks. Excellent” (Rexroth Papers Box 4:12). Listeners who spoke warmly of Rexroth’s unique sound responded to the aura of authenticity, spontaneity, and unmediated communication that both he and KPFA sought to create. As Brook Houglum writes in her analysis of the broadcasting of Rexroth’s recorded poetry on Pacifica stations (the only scholarly article yet published to treat Rexroth’s radio work as a distinct part of his literary corpus), the “sounds and pauses that interrupt fluid, standard speech” in his radio program “contributed to the production of precisely the colloquial, immediate speech he aimed for” (59).

Whether listeners celebrated or bemoaned Rexroth’s sound, the letters they sent to the station and to Rexroth also provide evidence for the ways that the unique aural experience of *Books* did stimulate participatory response from the audience.<sup>182</sup> Many listeners wrote to request more information about specific books reviewed; a few sent poems and asked for writing advice. In addition to one-off missives, several listeners took up the call for dialogue in even more substantial ways, like Lenora Hering and Sylvia M. Coddington, both of whom initiated

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<sup>182</sup> The archival collections of Rexroth’s Papers at UCLA and the Pacifica Radio Foundation Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives both house substantial listener correspondence about Rexroth’s *Books*.

reciprocal correspondence with Rexroth in the mid-1950s (Rexroth Papers 10:3, 4:12). When Rexroth complained about his messy personal affairs on the air, listeners volunteered their secretarial, transcription, or even childcare services.<sup>183</sup> The fact that Rexroth apparently responded to many of these listeners supports the notion that he shared the value KPFA placed on listeners “talking back”; the fact that many of his correspondents were women puts pressure on the “man-to-man” rhetoric of KPFA while reflecting the demographics of radio listening in general. What KPFA and Rexroth share—despite management’s periodic objections to Rexroth’s recorded sound quality, profanity, ad hominem attacks, and gossip about internal station conflicts—is the belief that radio could become a medium for authentic, direct communication. As station manager Harold Winkler wrote in a 1959 letter to Rexroth’s ex-wife Marie Rexroth, echoing the sentiment of listeners like the Moreaus: “In many significant ways I think of Kenneth Rexroth as I think of KPFA” (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 28).

Listener correspondence also reveals other ways that Rexroth’s *Books*, and KPFA more generally, addressed a local, intimate community, since Rexroth’s listenership included many individuals who actually did know him personally. Letters from friends frequently comment (sometimes in anger) as if his taped broadcasts were personal letters, and indeed Rexroth did read and respond to some of his correspondence on the air. Bay Area poets constituted an especially significant part of Rexroth’s listenership and were often the intended recipients of some of his more outrageous statements. In this sense, too, Rexroth often used *Books* to communicate a private message to a specific community or even a specific listener while at the same time performing the role of the public cultural critic. In a 1959 recording taped by Rexroth while on fellowship with his family in Aix-en-Provence, for example, Rexroth reviews

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<sup>183</sup> Carol Tinker, Rexroth’s fourth wife, met the poet by responding in 1963 to one of his on-air pleas for live-in help (Hamalian 312).

paranormal researcher Andrija Puharich's *The Sacred Mushroom: The Key to the Door of Eternity* in order to launch one of his increasingly common attacks on the Beats and their association with illicit drugs. "I'm all for the sacred mushroom," he sarcastically declares, "I hope that somebody sends Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, and Robert Creeley—all them real gone cats—I hope somebody sends them each about 30 pieces chocolate coated" ("Letter from Aix").<sup>184</sup> While Ginsberg and Kerouac were baffled, pained, and angered by Rexroth's apparent about-face on their work, Ferlinghetti took Rexroth's attacks on the Beats less personally, enjoying them as productively hyperbolic satire intended for an in-the-know audience. "The put-down of the mushroom beats was good," Ferlinghetti states in a letter to Rexroth in response to this episode of *Books*, "Keep up the bad work. . . . How about a real broadside attack on the Beat—to be published by City Lights?" (Rexroth Papers 6:13).

While Rexroth played, and with increasing reluctance, the role of the San Francisco Renaissance's "native informant" for national and international press outlets, for local poets like Ferlinghetti, Rexroth's KPFA program represented one channel of many for participating in and making sense of the Bay Area literary scene. A core contingent of Rexroth's listeners would have attended many of the same readings, read the same local little magazines, and tuned in to KPFA's other broadcast readings, interviews with poets, and literary discussions. They listened to Rexroth's program, therefore, not only to be informed about Bay Area poetry in the unique context of Rexroth's wide-ranging reviews and commentary but to hear his idiosyncratic take on last week's visiting reader at the Poetry Center, to find out whom he would defame or scandalously expose this week, and to delight in his lampooning of KPFA itself and its audience.

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<sup>184</sup> Statements like these reflect Rexroth's increasing hostility from the late fifties on toward the sensationalized Beat phenomenon, which he believed detracted attention from the "serious" work being written by San Francisco poets, as well as his personal dislike of Kerouac and his intensifying social paranoia (instigated in part by the public affair between Creeley and Rexroth's third wife Marthe begun in 1956).

And they did so not only in the privacy of their own homes but with others, scheduling listening parties or discussing, debating, even mocking the program in other social and literary contexts (Hamalian 316). It is this more ephemeral discursive production that Rexroth's *Books* inspired among Bay Area poets that encouraged a sense of literary community, even through dissent and disagreement, and that made KPFA into a major outlet for the San Francisco Renaissance.

Rexroth's *Books* therefore did operate as "an avenue of internal communication" for a Bay Area poetry community, but it did so through and because of the innovative model of locally oriented, autonomous, listener-sponsored broadcasting that Pacifica created.

When Rexroth switched from taping book reviews to dictating his autobiography on his program during his year in Europe, he explicitly addressed this intimate audience of friends, poets, and strangers as a way of justifying his preference for the spoken over the printed word. "Speech seems to me to give one a more natural approach to this subject matter than does a typewriter or pen," he explains on the first tape in the series. "Doing a book this way initially for the audience of KPFA, a very large number of whom I look on as personal friends, reduces or elevates the whole procedure to the level of conversation" (Rexroth Papers 96:1). Rexroth's interest in the immediacy of the spoken and broadcast word reflects his own quest, much like that of Hill and Pacifica Radio, for "new forms of direct, intimate, interpersonal communication that might intervene in . . . a brutal, over-sanitized, consumerist cultural moment" (Houglum 64). In essays like "Unacknowledged Legislators and Art Pour Art," first published in 1958, Rexroth's call for a new poetry echoes Hill's call for a new kind of radio in a time of communicative impasse:

As human beings grow more remote from one another, they become more like things than persons to each other. As this happens the individual becomes remote from, *loses*,

himself. . . . A great deal of our communication is not with persons at all. . . . The arts presume to speak directly from person to person, each polarity, the person at each end of the communication fully realized. The speech of poetry is from me to you, transfigured by the overcoming of all thingness—reification—in the relationship. So speech approaches in poetry not only the directness and the impact but the unlimited potential of act.

(12)

Whereas Hill drew on literary analogies to describe the new model of radio he hoped to create, Rexroth approaches radiophonic and telephonic metaphors to describe the communicative power of the arts. “With whom does [poetry] communicate?” Rexroth asks. “The poet may envisage a specific audience . . . but actually he broadcasts and takes his chances with an audience” (5). Nonetheless, if the communication is authentic, the audience can receive its signal even from impossible distances in space and time and hear the poet “speaking, alive, to us, person to living person” (13).

At this point, it seems reasonable to argue, as Houghlum does, that “[r]adio broadcasting served as a productive site” for “the emerging orality of postwar poetry” and poets’ interests in “liberatory and dialogic modes” (64). While this may describe Rexroth’s own perspective, I hesitate to adopt an uncritical phonocentrism that would overlook or forget the sticky issue of mediation that, as Spicer (not to mention Derrida) would remind us, interferes and underwrites all communication. In the absence of a physically present speaker, KPFA’s listeners, like generations of listeners before them, heard authenticity in certain kinds of sounds and effects of vocal delivery while disavowing the medium of their transmission. This necessarily interpretive act of listening relied on the reification of what Houghlum suggestively terms (but does not

theorize) as a “vocal signature” (59). In other words, the iteration of that “signature,” its vocalized performance, and its transference across the medium of radio or the printed page exposes its intransigent “thingness” and its inconvertibility to pure signification and self-possession.

The over-production of discourse about Rexroth’s voice, while often comic and evidently socially binding for Bay Area listeners, thus also indexes an uncertainty about what that voice signifies and what can be communicated in its performative repetition, its questionable durability across time and space, and its mechanical reproduction. The same broadcast sounds that for some listeners registered as “direct, intimate, interpersonal communication” (Houglum 64) for others proved a barrier to communication, calling attention to their own mediation in radio. When KPFA listener John S. Sills, for example, wrote to express his disappointment with Rexroth’s pauses, sighs, and “throaty delivery,” he speculated, “Perhaps with him, as with me and this damned typewriter, his tape recorder stands between him and his audience” (Rexroth Papers 12:6). Once again, “authentic speech” occurs not in the speaking body but in the act of aural reception as a site of difference and meaning production.

Moreover, if Rexroth and other poets were drawn to radio “to test and imagine the possibilities for direct, intimate, interpersonal communication,” they certainly made an odd choice of medium. Radio’s overdetermined reception as “a brutal, over-sanitized, consumerist” mass medium was not so easy to overturn, even in the context of Pacifica’s radical experiment in publicly supported broadcasting. Many Bay Area poets, including Rexroth, Spicer, and Ginsberg, periodically expressed wariness about appearing on KPFA’s frequency and allowing their voices to be sent out into the highly regulated yet invisible ether. The increasingly subtle interpenetration of public and private through new sound technologies raised Cold War anxieties

about surveillance, censorship, and the decontextualization, as Davidson writes, of “voice from speaker, conversation from community” (*Ghostlier* 203). This anxiety comes through not only in poets’ interactions with recording and broadcasting media, but in their claims for the new possibilities of oral poetry, embodied performance, and literary community. San Francisco poets and Pacifica Radio together produced a countercultural imaginary that centered on *listening* as a potentially radical, progressive, and social act, but they did so in an era when it was difficult not to worry about who might be *listening in*.

### **Broadcasting “Howl”**

When Allen Ginsberg arrived in San Francisco in the summer of 1954, he was eager to meet Kenneth Rexroth, with whom he had initiated a brief correspondence two years earlier on the recommendation of Philip Lamantia (Rexroth Papers 8:1). Although Ginsberg had described the forty-seven-year-old poet to Neal Cassady in 1952 as “an old guy, not really great as [a] writer, too hung up on booklearning” (*Letters* 81), he also valued his knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, his literary status and connections. Rexroth’s “encouraging and kind letters” (Rexroth Papers 8:1) about an early poetry manuscript had given the young writer confidence and facilitated the publication of a few of Ginsberg’s poems in the 1953 annual *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*. Rexroth was away from the city when Ginsberg arrived, but he put him in touch with Ruth Witt-Diamant, the director and founder of the newly launched Poetry Center, through whom Ginsberg also met Robert Duncan (*Letters* 94). Later that summer, Ginsberg finally met “the big cheese poet,” as he continued to plunge into the literary and arts environs of

Berkeley and San Francisco (97). Soon, he had also fallen in love with a young City College student and painter's model, Peter Orlovsky.

During these same months, Ginsberg started drafting the fragments of dreams, hallucinatory visions, formal experiments, and ideas on prosody that would become "Howl." A journal entry dated October 17–18, 1954, recounts Ginsberg's vision while on peyote of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel as an "[i]mpassive robot (antennalike structures)" and "an evil monster—A tower in Hell" (*Journals* 61): images that would inspire the second section of "Howl." Another precursor to "Howl," the draft poem "Dream Record: June 8, 1955," Ginsberg sent to Rexroth. In the accompanying letter dated June 15, 1955, Ginsberg explains his attempt to formally recreate in the poem "the jump or interval or ellipsis or eclipse of consciousness" that he had experienced in his dream about the late Joan Burroughs, and that he saw glimpses of in an early poem of Rexroth's and in Keats, Cezanne, and Hart Crane (Rexroth Papers 8:1). Despite Rexroth's lukewarm response, Ginsberg continued to work out the syntax of ellipsis in a new poem. In mid-August, he wrote to Kerouac to encourage him to come to San Francisco and to send "first draft scribble notes of a poem . . . nearer in your style than anything" (*Letters* 117). In the letter, Ginsberg writes that he may be able to include Kerouac in "a poetry reading program this fall" at "[a]n art gallery here"; moreover, he entices, "we can record and broadcast whatever we want on Berkeley station KPFA."

Kerouac made it to San Francisco in time to attend the legendary reading on October 7, 1955, at the Six Gallery, where Ginsberg first performed part 1 of "Howl" alongside readings by Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, and Michal McClure, with Rexroth as MC. Kerouac would enshrine the evening as "the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance" in *Dharma Bums*, and those in attendance, including much of the Bay Area poetry scene, were drawn, drunk

on Kerouac's wine, into the incantatory, escalating rhythms of Ginsberg's performance of the first part of "Howl."<sup>185</sup> The immediate reverberations of the as yet unpublished poem created a city-wide buzz, amplified by Ginsberg's subsequent performances of part 1 of "Howl" at his first Poetry Center appearance on November 20 (*Journals* 168n, 201) and of the complete poem at a "re-creation" of the Six Gallery reading staged at the Berkeley Town Hall Theater in March of 1956. The underground circulation of tape-recorded and mimeograph versions of "Howl" also grew its anticipatory reception around the Bay.<sup>186</sup>

KPFA, as Ginsberg had implied in his letter to Kerouac, would appear to be another obvious alternative to mainstream publishing for disseminating the radical voice of "Howl." Indeed, around the time of the first Six Gallery reading, Ginsberg sent a tape recording to KPFA in hopes that the FM station would broadcast some of his new work. KPFA, however, proved to be a bit more selective in its programming than Ginsberg had boasted to Kerouac or than he may have assumed from his experience listening to broadcasts of Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, Duncan, Lamantia, and others. Eleanor McKinney (then Moore) auditioned the tape, and replied in a letter dated October 17, 1955—ten days after the Six Gallery reading and incidentally one year to the day of Ginsberg's vision of the antennaed face of Moloch on the Drake Hotel:

I am sorry there was such a delay in listening to the recording, but today, at last, I was able to hear it entirely through without interruption. I found the imagery and rhythm very compelling. I must confess however that I wished the poem might have been condensed

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<sup>185</sup> Notably absent from the event were Six Gallery co-founder Jack Spicer, who was on the East Coast at the time of the reading, and Robert Duncan, who was in Mallorca with Jess (Jarnot 138).

<sup>186</sup> Recordings were made of Ginsberg's November 1955 and March 1956 performances of "Howl" (see the note below on the provenance of extant Ginsberg recordings). Witt-Diamant recalled in 1969 listening to a "mad, wonderfully mad" tape of "Howl" that circulated around the Bay before the poem's publication ("Exploring the Arts in the Bay"). The mimeograph edition of "Howl" was printed by Robert Creeley and Marthe Rexroth in an edition of 25 copies on May 16, 1956.

so that its power was not over-extended into a kind of tract, to which I felt the poet was not committed in sympathy or resolution.

(Pacifica Records [WI HS] 1)

“I don’t find this suitable for broadcast,” McKinney determines, but encourages Ginsberg to send more poems for broadcast consideration. Since she does not indicate the recorded poem’s title, and I am not aware of the fate of this tape, it is impossible to know (though fascinating to imagine) whether Ginsberg sent KPFA a recording of the first part of “Howl” or another poem.<sup>187</sup> If the tape were of “Howl,” though, it would have been the earliest recording of the poem, possibly even preceding its first live performance at the Six Gallery.<sup>188</sup>

Speculation and missed opportunities aside, almost exactly a year later, the station reversed its opinion, and in the fall of 1956, coinciding with the first printing of *Howl and Other Poems* by City Lights Books, Ginsberg recorded in KPFA’s studios a reading of three poems from the book: “A Supermarket in California,” “In Back of the Real,” and the complete “Howl.”<sup>189</sup> The recording was broadcast, according to the *Folio*, on Saturday, December 8, 1956,

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<sup>187</sup> It is possible that this tape was one of the ones Ginsberg recorded in the summer of 1954 at Neal Cassady’s home. As Ginsberg writes in the liner notes to *Holy Soul Jelly Roll*, “[Cassady] had an old tape machine Kerouac had used earlier. I recorded a few poems in his wooden living room, an old frame house in San Jose” (n. pag.). Recordings of Ginsberg reading and singing “Walking at Night in Key West,” “The Green Automobile,” and “Green Valentine Blues” attributed to this recording session appear on vol. 1 of *Holy Soul Jelly Roll*—though none of these match McKinney’s description.

<sup>188</sup> Determining and dating the earliest known recording of “Howl” has been a tricky enterprise. At the time of this writing, a recording of Ginsberg reading part 1 and the beginning of part 2 at Reed College in Portland in February 1956, rediscovered and digitized for online streaming in 2008, has been widely acclaimed as the earliest recording. This supplants the previously regarded earliest recording of “Howl” from the March 11, 1956 performance at the Berkeley Town Hall Theater, though this is still the first recording of the complete poem. However, my own opinion is that the earliest recording is actually one that has been in circulation for some time and that appeared on the Evergreen album *San Francisco Poets*. This album was released in 1958, but the recording of Ginsberg reading an evidently early version of “Howl” at a live event corresponds with Ginsberg’s and Witt-Diamant’s descriptions of Ginsberg’s first Poetry Center appearance on November 20, 1955, in which Ginsberg on Witt-Diamant’s request substituted the word “censored” for the “dirty words” in the poem (Ginsberg, *Journals* 168n).

<sup>189</sup> The Pacifica Radio Archives dates this tape to October 25, 1956, which I believe indicates the original recording not broadcasting date. Ginsberg spent much of 1956 away from San Francisco, first at sea with the Military Sea Transport Service (MSTS) and then in Los Angeles, Mexico, and New York before leaving for Tangiers and Europe

at 10:30pm, inaugurating Ginsberg's first appearance on radio and the first sound recording of "Howl" to reach a public audience (*KPFA Folio* Nov. 26–Dec. 8, 1956). Ginsberg would not have been among the listening audience for the broadcast, however, as he had returned East in preparation for his travel to North Africa and Europe. During his absence, *Howl and Other Poems* became embroiled in a highly publicized censorship controversy, beginning with the seizure of the book's second printing by customs officials on the docks of San Francisco in March of 1957, and followed by the arrest of Ferlinghetti and Shigeyoshi Murao in June for the sale of obscene material at City Lights bookstore. The case culminated in the September trial and ultimate acquittal of Ferlinghetti (charges against Murao were dropped) by Justice Clayton W. Horn in a decision that raised the bar for legally determining obscenity in California. The attention generated by the trial catapulted Ginsberg, *Howl*, City Lights, and the San Francisco literary scene into the national and international spotlight.

At home, KPFA kept its listeners in the Bay informed with intense coverage of the case's proceedings and various reactions to Ginsberg's title poem. Rexroth, who testified on behalf of the defense at Ferlinghetti's trial, took to his microphone immediately after the initial seizure of *Howl* and in the weeks and months after to offer his fervent objections to censorship, his defense and evaluation of the book's poetic merits, and his developing conspiracy theories about the case. On June 27, 1957, KPFA broadcast a special program on *The "Howl" Controversy*, which featured a rebroadcast of Ginsberg's 1956 recording and a live panel discussion moderated by

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in March of 1957. This leaves only brief windows for a KPFA studio recording; his Bay Area sojourn in September and October 1956 after his MSTs discharge coincides with the Pacifica date. Lewis Hill, in his introduction to the rebroadcast of "Howl" prior to the KPFA panel discussion on censorship, confirms that the recording was made in KPFA's studios "some months ago" and first broadcast on a late evening program. There are, however, two slightly different versions of this recording, which I discuss in more detail below: 1) the original studio recording, in which Ginsberg intentionally leaves out certain lines and vocally censors certain words by substituting the word "blank," which somehow made its way to *PennSound*; and 2) the edited version produced for the June 1956 rebroadcast with additional words and lines censored by KPFA, which is owned by the Pacifica Radio Archives. This latter version was remastered and released on *Pacifica Radio: Sixty Years, Sixty Voices*.

Hill on the legal, judicial, and aesthetic issues of the case, in which all panel participants agreed that the book did not merit the charge of obscenity. The program would be one of Hill's last live appearances on KPFA; he would not live to see the trial or its conclusion.

These two broadcasts—the fall 1956 studio recording of “Howl” and the June 1957 panel discussion—are important documents for understanding the mutually constructing relationship between KPFA and the San Francisco Renaissance. The station's early willingness to put “Howl” (albeit a censored version) on its airwaves, its vigorous on-air defense of free speech and the public's right to hear, and its continued commitment to supporting boundary-pushing literature regardless of “mass” appeal or opinion, built on and solidified the station's reputation as a unique, dissenting voice in radio. These broadcasts presaged Pacifica Radio's subsequent censorship battles with the FCC, including over the broadcasting of “Howl,” as well as of works by Ferlinghetti, Creeley, Edward Albee, and other writers. The early “Howl” broadcasts also presaged Pacifica's path-breaking role in bringing gay and lesbian perspectives and voices onto America's airwaves (Johnson and Keith 27–28).<sup>190</sup> According to David Lamble, a reporter, cultural critic, and queer media pioneer who also produced gay programming for KPFA as part of the Fruit Punch collective beginning in 1973, “the first truly gay radio broadcast occurred whenever Allen Ginsberg first ‘Howled’ on Pacifica Radio's KPFA” (qtd. in Johnson and Keith 28). In the context of 1950s broadcasting, the sound of Ginsberg's “Howl” was “unlike any

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<sup>190</sup> KPFA broadcast one of the first serious radio discussions of homosexuality in 1958 in a controversial two-part program titled *The Homosexual in Our Society*, produced by public affairs director Elsa Knight Thompson. The program featured a discussion between Harold L. Call of the Mattachine Society, a mother of a gay son, a criminologist, an attorney, and several psychologists. The panel articulated a relatively progressive view for mainstream media in the 1950s—the panelists all opposed the criminalization of homosexuality and several strongly critiqued its pathologization by psychiatry—and it was rebroadcast several times and published as a transcript at the request of listeners. It would be several more years, however, before a Pacifica station would broadcast gay men speaking directly for themselves rather than a panel of experts speaking *of* them (in the 1962 WBAI program *Live and Let Live*, which was also the subject of a FCC obscenity inquiry), and several years beyond that before LGBTQ broadcasters would produce their own regularly broadcast programs on Pacifica stations. In this context, Ginsberg's 1956 broadcast gains groundbreaking significance.

message American radio had ever transmitted” (ibid). KPFA’s broadcasting of “Howl,” however, raised troubling questions about its capacity to serve as an organ for public dialogue and dissent, authentic speech and artistic expression, and participatory listening in the context of censorship.

For Ginsberg, recording “Howl” for broadcast raised a set of fundamental ambivalences about the meaning and medium of radio for the performance, publication, and reception of poetry, and, ultimately, about poetry itself as a vehicle for communication. Several scholars have contrasted the critical representations of radio in Ginsberg’s work with his later use of the “low-tech” tape recorder as a compositional tool for “auto poesy.”<sup>191</sup> As Davidson argues, “For Ginsberg the orality of the tapevoice stands in direct opposition to the heteroglossia of incorporated sound” (*Ghostlier* 206). In Ginsberg’s *Fall of America*, “the heteroglossia of incorporated sound” is associated especially with the car radio, which blasts a nonstop spew of what Charles Olson would term “mu-sick”:

antennae’d car dashboard vibrating

False emotions broadcast thru the Land

Natural voices made synthetic,

pflegm obliterated

Smart ones work with electronics—

What are the popular songs on the Hiway?

“*Home I’m Comin Home I am a Soldier—*”

.....

Lulled into War

thus commercial jabber Rock & Roll Announcers

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<sup>191</sup> For analysis of the opposition between tape recorder and radio in Ginsberg’s work, especially in reference to “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” see Davidson, *Ghostlier* (203–6); Yu (31–36); and Hoffman (139–42).

False False False

(57)

In this poem, “Bayonne Turnpike to Tuscarora,” Ginsberg critiques the studio-engineered electronic “Super-Hit sound of All American Radio,” whose synthetic, electric music, removed from body and breath, is as false as the lies it spins, “lull[ing]” a pacified public into support of the Vietnam War.

Pacifica Radio, as we’ve already seen, shared this dismal view of commercial radio and, like Ginsberg with his tape recorder, also sought to intervene in a sanitized, propagandistic media soundscape by “seiz[ing] the means of reproduction and adapt[ing] it to oppositional ends,” in part by giving airtime to poets and pacifists and their unedited phlegmy voices (Davidson, *Ghostlier* 206).<sup>192</sup> The close relationship between Ginsberg and Pacifica Radio inaugurated in the first two KPFA broadcasts of “Howl” complicates an overly neat opposition between tape and radio in Ginsberg’s life or work, or in histories of postwar media generally. At the same time, though, the limits of the medium of radio and the question of reception would continue to haunt. For both KPFA and Ginsberg, as for Rexroth in his *Books* program, at stake in the broadcasting of “Howl” was the hope and promise that co-opting radio’s “constant voice” for liberatory ends could enable new possibilities for direct, unmediated communication.

The KPFA recording of Ginsberg from October 1956 opens with the click of a recording device and the sound of the poet’s voice, close-miked, introducing the book from which he will read. He speaks clearly but in the kind of direct, casual, conversational tone in which KPFA specialized:

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<sup>192</sup> Yu is more critical than Davidson about the political limits of the poet’s individual effort to co-opt “the means of reproduction” in the absence of the more social yet particularized vision of avant-garde community Yu sees represented in “Howl” (36).

Ok I'm going to read *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg, I guess, published by, um, City Lights Pocket Bookshop in San Francisco in 1956. Library of Card Catalog Account Number et cetera 56-8587. The first poem I'll read was one I did here in dear old Berkeley, called "A Supermarket in California"—it being the supermarket down on or by Grove and University, on a rainy lonely night. Of course, I wrote this after I had written a lot of great poetry, so this is sort of like coming down off of the post-coitus tryst, so to speak.

("KPFA Pacifica Studio Recording")<sup>193</sup>

With a light, winking tone, Ginsberg addresses his invisible listening audience as fellow Berkeleyites, setting the scene for a lonely stroll with Walt Whitman through "[a]isles full of husbands" and "brilliant stacks of cans" (*Howl* 29), and out into the "solitary streets," "home to our silent cottage" (30). Although he undercuts the poem's importance in his introduction (while building up anticipation for "Howl"), by opening with "A Supermarket in California," Ginsberg boldly announces himself in poetic, familial, and erotic kinship with Whitman: the muse of the poet's "tryst." The perspective of the poem is overtly queer. Ginsberg recasts the supermarket—an icon of Eisenhower America—with all its associations with the middle-class, consumerist, nuclear family as a site of gay flânerie, where gay men like the speaker cruise for "Angel[s]," and sample and steal from the consumer excess, "never passing the cashier" (29).<sup>194</sup>

Marginalized and "absurd" in the postwar landscape of "[w]hole families shopping at night" (29)—of supermarkets, "blue automobiles," suburban houses, and the paranoia of pervasive

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<sup>193</sup> Transcriptions of the 1956 KPFA recording are my own, and are taken from the version digitally available on *PennSound*.

<sup>194</sup> Maria Damon explicates the queer slang use of *angel* for a gay man by Beat and San Francisco writers, and Spicer in particular (169–70).

surveillance—the speaker and the “shade” of old “graybeard” “stroll dreaming of the lost America of love” (30): Whitman’s dream of a democratic America that may be realized through (homo)erotic not consumer desire.

If that America is “lost,” or never consummated, traces of its subversive possibility live on in the lonely comradeship of queer life that takes place, Ginsberg implies to his KPFA listeners, right here in “dear old Berkeley.”<sup>195</sup> The familiar, intimate address of Ginsberg’s introduction and reading style thus projects and invites an “in-the-know” listener who will apprehend not only the particularity of the Berkeley supermarket but the poem itself as a subversive, gay text (29). In doing so, Ginsberg likewise subverts radio’s apparent purpose—the reproduction of consumer desire, in which the “[h]ypnosis of airwaves” will “[d]rive your mind down Supermarket aisles” (*Fall* 56)—by broadcasting and activating queer desire in the margins of the FM band. Yet like the poetic speaker’s paranoia, both justified and titillating, of being “followed in my imagination by the store detective” (29), Ginsberg’s broadcast is hyper-aware of the reality of living in a surveillance society, in which someone is always eavesdropping.

Ginsberg reads the short poem “In Back of the Real” after “A Supermarket in California,” but soon expresses his impatient desire to “get rid of all these earlier poems and read ‘Howl.’” Dismissing the previous poems as mere warm-ups to “Howl,” Ginsberg raises his listeners’ expectations for the “long poem” in three parts. Yet while Ginsberg’s initial comments at the beginning of the recording projected an intimate, local audience, his introductory comments to “Howl” begin to challenge the limits of that reception, revealing his uncertainty about radio as a medium for the oral transmission of poetry and the eros of poetry community.

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<sup>195</sup> Like Spicer, Ginsberg in his early work frequently links homosexuality with loneliness and isolation. He drew attention to this theme in a letter to John Hollander about critics of *Howl* who “ignor[ed] big queer lonely lyrics about Whitman and Moloch in whom I sit lonely cocksucking” (qtd. in Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance* 82). See Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance* for an analysis of this theme (81–82).

After giving the poem's title as "Howl (for Carl Solomon)," Ginsberg reflects on the conditions for its performance:

Actually it should be read, the way it should be read, is, um, with people or in front of people, the way I have been reading it recently, this way, except I've read it too much and so the heart has gone out of me for reading it. However, the way it should be read is, um, kind of ecstatically if possible, but it would take ecstasy to read it. What I'm going to do is read it quietly and give it a silent chance, and if I can work up into any kind of real rhythm, I'll try and deliver that—which I would like to do, but it's very difficult to do because it requires a certain kind of openness on my part. And a sense of openness on the audience part, too, actually, for transmission, really.

("KPFA Pacifica Studio Recording")

Speaking rapidly, Ginsberg indicates that the poem's ideal communicative power is realized in and through embodied oral performance but expresses skepticism about whether he can adequately and consistently reproduce that performance, especially without a manifestly visible and present audience to receive it. The poem's meaning appears to inhere in the poet's embodied, oral performance "with people or in front of people," in which an "ecstatic," Whitmanic, erotic "openness" between poet and tribe facilitates the mystical, communal "transmission" of an immanent poetics.

Ginsberg echoes here remarks he and other San Francisco Renaissance poets made frequently, expressing the desire—and the exhausting exertion—"to reach a community by means of an operative or heightened language that can be experienced in nondiscursive ways" (Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance* 19). The significance attached to poetry readings by these poets has as much to do with heightened listening as it has to do with heightened language,

requiring participatory, erotic receptivity from the audience as well as the poet to create through the “cooperative experience of listening,” an affectively “binding” and sensorial experience of being together (Wald 675). This communal enactment of aural receptivity and participation of the audience, and communion and visionary separation by the poet, could prove a difficult balance even in a live performance, and Ginsberg often articulated high expectations for his audiences, including in those earliest performances among friends and fellow poets now enshrined in Beat lore.<sup>196</sup> As Davidson argues, for all the emphasis on the sociality and “cult of energy” in Beat literature, Ginsberg’s poetry and performances consistently register “a corresponding anxiety or self-consciousness about the difficulties of attaining such participation” whose “price . . . is loneliness” for the prophet-poet (*San Francisco Renaissance* 63, 82).

If, as Ginsberg lamented, even the motivating desire “to communicate a live poetry” in front of audiences could easily become “more a trap and duty than the spontaneous ball it was first” (“Notes Written” 30), what to do, then, with the isolated conditions of this studio recording, which separates breath from body, the poet from a strange and invisible audience, and the time of utterance from the time of reception? Considering the extent to which postwar oral poetics in general, and Ginsberg’s lyric in particular, was defined against a commoditized, coopted, mass-mediated culture, it’s not surprising that Ginsberg is skeptical of his ability to overcome the mediation of radio (even on a noncommercial frequency) for the authentic “transmission” of the poem. While the published, print text of the poem relies on similar conditions of distance and mediation, this only solidifies Ginsberg’s claim that the auratic power

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<sup>196</sup> Near the end of his life, for example, Ginsberg recalled his annoyance with the audience at his first performance of the complete “Howl” at the March 1956 “re-creation” of the Six Gallery reading, who expected a repeat of the original “hoot party,” and who “wanted to encourage but were a little too familiar, too ‘knowing’” to get the “non-wine sublimity or aesthetic seriousness” (*Holy Soul* liner notes, n. pag.). Eventually, though, the dynamic build of the poem brings the audience to proper attention, to understanding that “it should be *listened* to.”

of poetry can be only fully realized through live performance. Despite his extensive discography, Ginsberg, at least early on in his career, was especially doubtful about the value of recording “Howl” in studio conditions given the poem’s association with public performance and his suspicion of the falsifying manipulations of sound engineering. For both the Evergreen record *San Francisco Poets* and the Fantasy album of *Howl and Other Poems*, Ginsberg elected to use recordings of “Howl” taped at public readings rather than recordings made “under better mechanical conditions in studio” because he felt “the spirit wasn’t in me” in the latter (qtd. in Hoffman 131).<sup>197</sup> As Tyler Hoffman writes in his discussion of Ginsberg’s early recordings, Ginsberg appears driven by an “anxiety about repetition and mediatization—and the homogenizing effects of both—in a condition of late capitalism”: “the ‘spirit’ fades as repetition sets in, with mechanical reproduction . . . stripping the voice of its humane force” (131).

The additional layer of mediation through radio would appear to compound this anxiety for Ginsberg, especially given radio’s overwhelming association with the “False False False” corrupt sound transcribed in *The Fall of America* (56). In “Howl,” radio also figures as part of the psycho-sono-sphere of surveillance, propaganda, brainwashing, and absurd horror, where those “who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism . . . were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury” (*Howl* 18). Yet what makes KPFA’s 1956 recording of “Howl” fascinating is precisely the recording’s power to draw attention to these moments in the poem, to force our recognition of the speaker’s inextricable entanglement in Moloch’s wires, and

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<sup>197</sup> For the Fantasy record of *Howl and Other Poems*, Ferlinghetti arranged for Ginsberg to record in a Paris studio with the aim of “mak[ing] the sharpest clearest livest recording, uninterrupted by remarks or extrapolations” (Morgan and Peters 76). While Ferlinghetti sought a “live” sound without interference, Ginsberg preferred the “live” sound of a public reading. In the end, Fantasy released a compilation of studio and “live” recordings, including a recording of Ginsberg reading “Howl” in Chicago in January 1959 at a benefit for *Big Table*.

to amplify an ambivalence expressed within the text of “Howl” about the technics and limits of poetic transmission and reception.

Despite Ginsberg’s stated reservations, in my experience of listening to this recording Ginsberg is eventually able to build from a relatively quiet, slow, hesitant performance to a loud, rhythmic, incantatory performance of breath and cracking voice by the end of parts 2 and 3. This does not mean, however, that he heroically overcomes the medium of recording to transparently transmit the poem directly to the listener’s ear. On the contrary, the layers of mediation consistently interfere as much in what cannot be heard as in what can. Gone is the conversational, intimate tone that Ginsberg of “A Supermarket in California,” and in its place is the nonstop, repetitive, energy-sapping “howl” of the prophet, and without an auditor present to heed his warning. The poet’s isolation in the recording studio is especially striking in this performance; as Ginsberg’s voice rises in pitch and volume as parts 2 and 3 build, the microphone picks up the reverb created by the voice vibrating against the studio walls, amplifying a sense of desperation and madness and sonically conjuring the four walls of the asylum.

This recording effectively dramatizes Lewis Hill’s analogy of the “private room” that I discussed in chapter 3. For Hill, the “private room” describes the communication crisis of postwar society, where “the individual and the electrical appliance alike are plugged into a socket of uniformity,” without the will or means to communicate with other atomized individuals so that “when the time finally comes for the individual to cry help, there is no certain method of communicating such a cry beyond the private walls” (“Private Room” 2). Hill draws the parallel with the radio broadcaster, “who like the rest of us, has his private room,” but whose mechanization within the organ of mass communication renders “the whole code and ritual” of

authentic, human communication impossible. The amplified echoes of Ginsberg's "howl" from within the "private room" of KPFA's studio powerfully conjures Hill's analogy, while questioning Pacifica's own power to project a human voice beyond the limits of its medium. As Ginsberg implied in his introduction to the poem, how can the poet be sure of the poem's transmission beyond the studio walls, or of the existence of receivers that would faithfully receive it?

When I listen to this recording in the private room, so to speak, of my own headphones, the reverberating yet intimately close voice and the absence of an audibly present audience to project oneself among creates an uneasy experience. Am I listening to the poem as its intended addressee, or am I *listening in on, eavesdropping, overhearing*—"listening to the Terror through the wall" (*Howl* 10)? This anxiety and uncertainty of address is part of the text of "Howl" itself, which registers a desire for the lyric's intimate address to an individual, the beloved, a singular *you*, but complicates that desire in at least three ways: in the first instance, by proliferating the poem's intended, named addressees (Carl Solomon, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Naomi Ginsberg); in the second instance, by taking on the bardic, public address to an entire generation, tribe, nation, or people in a Whitmanic ecstatic dissemination, "scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may" (13); and, in the third instance, by evoking the specter of the unintended addressee who triangulates and co-opts the message for other, potentially nefarious ends. These three modes of address are all part of the tradition of the lyric and the long tradition, at least since John Stuart Mill, of understanding the lyric as "preeminently the utterance that is overheard" (Frye 249). In Ginsberg's poem, however, the sense of "overhearing" takes on new resonances in the context of the surveillance society of Cold War America. Considering the midcentury sexual taboos evoked throughout the poem and by the proper names of Ginsberg's

intimate address, which include homosexual and heterosexual promiscuity as well as incestuous Oedipal desire, the threat of the spying eye and ear is pervasively real and active in the text (and especially evident in the censored radio recording). Yet while this ever-present “third” listening in on the poet’s address to his beloveds carries the risk of repression and censorship, it equally threatens to co-opt and take up the address into its own machinery. For all of the repeated, ecstatic claims for authentic human connection and love—“Carl Solomon! I am with you in Rockland” (*Howl* 24)—“Howl” (and part 2 in particular) questions whether the desire for connection doesn’t become solipsism, lonely onanism, or narcissistic madness in the inescapable “pure machinery” of Moloch and in the machinery of the poem itself (21).

In “Howl,” radio appears as one mechanism through which a disseminated, bureaucratic authority devours these efforts at authentic, intimate human modes of address, speech, and experience. In addition to manipulating the public through the insanity of mass “hypnotism” while silencing its critics as the insane criminals (18), the radio also issues news updates on the minds and eardrums driven to madness and ecstasy by the incessant noise of subways (10), children (10, 21), jukeboxes (11), sirens (13), “bad music” (15), jazz (17, 20), airplanes, bombs (26), and their own howls, shrieks, cries, and communist choruses. “I’m with you in Rockland,” the speaker insists, “where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio” (24). Reversing the trope of the paranoid schizophrenic who thinks the radio is sending secret messages meant only for him (an image not far from Spicer’s or Cocteau’s model of poetic dictation), Ginsberg describes a mad world where our most intimate experiences are made perversely public, broadcast for all to hear, and where the inhuman systems of power produce deep concern about the specifics of our bodily and mental health under their biopolitical management. As Ginsberg wrote in a 1959 letter to the editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*,

“[mass communication] media are exactly the place where the deepest and most personal sensitivities and confessions of reality are most prohibited, mocked, and suppressed” (Morgan and Peters 209). Yet there is a Foucauldian logic at work here, in which power is seen to operate not primarily through sexual repression but through the production of an excess of discourse, an “institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more” (Foucault 18), and in which even silence and censorship become forms of broadcasting. By broadcasting “Howl” into the highly regulated commons of the airwaves, Ginsberg invites both the prohibitive “policing of statements” through the mechanism of censorship and “a veritable discursive explosion” about sex by, in the case of *Howl*, the institution of the state justice system (Foucault 18, 17).

The industrial architecture of radio and television broadcasting is also part of the hellish urban landscape of “Howl,” which transforms Ginsberg’s initial vision of the “Impassive robot (antennalike structures) of Sir Francis Drake Hotel” with “a crown” (*Journals* 61) to the image of “Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!” (*Howl* 21). The figure of the antenna—also a prevalent feature of the U.S. landscape depicted in *The Fall of America*—is multivalent in “Howl,” conjuring industrialized means of control (the robot), communication through mass media (radio and television), and the naturally occurring antennae of insects, giving Moloch the disturbing hybridity and uncanny sentience of a human-made monster. In their association with broadcasting, antennae also become the visible signs of an invisible, wireless, electromagnetic atmosphere through which mute signals pass in the ethereal “machinery of night” (9), transmitting messages at the speed of light seemingly instantaneously across impossible “gaps in Time & Space” (20).

On the one hand, these antennae—hardly a dominant figure in “Howl”—register as yet another part of the pervasive, all-consuming, paranoid conditions of American society that have

driven to visionary madness its “great minds” and outsiders. On the other hand, the technology of radiophony resonates with the series of figures Ginsberg famously uses to explain the formal and transcendental project of “Howl”: to “[make] incarnate gaps in Time & Space” (20). Like the “alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibrating plane” (19), Cezanne’s contrary “images juxtaposed” on a visual plane (20), the jazz beat, or the cinematic jump-cut, the mechanical “alchemy” of broadcasting reveals and relies on a gap between transmitter and receiver through which transmission occurs and on which its instantaneous communication depends. Earlier in the poem, Ginsberg uses an electric metaphor that in our context is especially evocative of radio transmission: “incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world of Time between” (10). For Ginsberg, materializing the “gaps” between the poles offers possibilities for the transcendent enactment within time of the beyond-time, or for the incarnation of Logos in the body of Christ and in the intimate publicity of his cry, broadcast from the Cross to that invisible, absent ear of God:

to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless  
and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to  
conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head,

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be  
left to say in time come after death,

and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and  
blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma  
sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio

(20)<sup>198</sup>

Ginsberg's public performances of "Howl" put on display the body of the poet in his (sometimes literal) nakedness, drawing out the poem's liberatory and communal claims.<sup>199</sup> In contrast, its publication in print, sound recording, and broadcasting media point to the structuring principles of absence and silence on which those claims rely.

In the context of the KPFA broadcast in particular, the "gaps" become most audible in and through the ellipses produced by censorship. If the recording I have been discussing is indeed a copy of the original that aired on that first late-night broadcast, listeners who tuned in may have noted a few moments of self-censorship by the poet.<sup>200</sup> Ginsberg sparingly uses censored substitutions like "blank" ("who let themselves be blanked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists") and "asterisk," which corresponds to the asterisks in the published text of "Howl" ("with mother finally \*\*\*\*\*" [19]). In the published print text of *Howl*, the latter calls attention to the unspeakable taboo of incest put into speech by the text. If any listeners were

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<sup>198</sup> Jazz is inextricable from the commercial radio medium that blasted it constantly in the late forties and fifties. In Ginsberg's liner notes to *Holy Soul Jelly Roll*, he explains the presence of jazz heard in the background of the 1949 recording of "A Mad Gleam," recorded at John Clellon Holmes's apartment, as an unintentional record of the soundscape of the time: "Symphony Sid was background in Holmes' early recordings—an all-night radio show that played advanced bebop. The radio was on when he turned on his tape machine. It wasn't a deliberate attempt to put poetry and jazz together. Jazz was all around anyway, it was part of the ambient sound" (n. pag.).

<sup>199</sup> On Ginsberg's performance of a "sexed and race body" in his public readings, see Hoffman (128–45). Ginsberg famously stripped naked in front of a heckler at a reading in Los Angeles on October 31, 1956, just a few days after recording the tape for KPFA.

<sup>200</sup> My assertion that *PennSound*'s recording is a digitized copy of the "original" KPFA broadcast comes from my comparison of this one with Pacifica Radio Archives' recording of the 1957 panel discussion, and Hill's statements in the latter that the station has further edited the poem (as I discuss in more detail below). I cannot know for certain, though, that KPFA staff did not make additional edits in either of these recordings before broadcasting them.

following along with the print text, they may also have noted the absence in Ginsberg's reading of the following three lines from part 1:

who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and  
 listening to the Terror through the wall,

who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana  
 for New York

(10)

who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the  
 filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on broken  
 wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s  
 German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet,  
 moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steam-whistles

(17)

I can only vaguely speculate about the reasons for the excision of these lines (assumedly though not conclusively by Ginsberg). What seems most evidently significant about this recording, however, is how much is *not* substituted, cut, or passed over. The recording includes sexually explicit language, slang, and curses that had never before been heard on radio or television, and the largely uncensored and joyful representations of homosexuality and gay sex from a queer first-person perspective must have been especially shocking for some listeners and, for others, thrilling to hear voiced on the radio in 1956.

Six months later, and a few weeks after Ferlinghetti's arrest on June 6, 1957, KPFA rebroadcast "Howl," excerpted from the longer recording, at the beginning of an hour-long

program and panel discussion on “The ‘Howl’ Controversy,” produced and moderated by Lewis Hill. On this occasion, the issue of censorship—of both the printed and the broadcast text—was very much at the forefront for KPFA and its listeners. Given the subject of the program, Hill, in his introduction to the rebroadcast “Howl,” acknowledges and explains the reasons the poem has been censored for broadcast on KPFA. The recording, he explains, “was made at KPFA several months ago” and “broadcast by KPFA . . . very late one evening,” “before the censorship controversy about the poem had arisen” (Hill, “Panel on ‘Howl’”). Hill continues,

For those who are especially curious about the details of the obscenity issue surrounding this poem, it should be mentioned that Mr. Ginsberg’s reading, if compared with the printed text of the poem . . . reveals that the poet himself deleted for radio broadcasting one or two passages. . . . Moreover, for this particular broadcast, and specifically in consideration of the hour at which this broadcast occurs, KPFA has edited out two or three words or brief passages in the poem, simply as a matter of taste. I think you may feel assured, however, in what you are going to hear that the full essence of what has provoked the San Francisco Police Department into the arrest of Mr. Ferlinghetti is still present.

Hill defends the station’s decision to further censor the recording of “Howl” as “simply a matter of taste” given the 8:15pm broadcasting hour, rather than as a matter of obscenity or even as a concession to the FCC’s stricter regulations against “indecentcy” in broadcasting. Moreover, the panel discussion that follows comes to a resounding consensus against the state’s charge of obscenity in regards to *Howl* on the grounds of legal precedent, prevailing definitions of obscenity, and the book’s literary value. All five of the panelists were either closely tied to the case or advocates for First Amendment freedoms of speech and the press: Ferlinghetti was the

defendant in the case and the book's publisher; UC-Berkeley Professor of English Mark Schorer would testify on behalf of the defense; book critic William Hogan defended *Howl* in the *San Francisco Chronicle*; attorney George Brunn had conducted a legal study of post office censorship; and LeRoy Merritt, UC-Berkeley Professor of Librarianship, co-chaired the California Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee. Unsurprisingly, given Pacifica Radio's foundational principles, the program advances KPFA's defense of the public's right to hear and free expression in the arts.

However, listeners who phoned in to the station during the program, and whose questions were paraphrased and presented to the panel by Hill, repeatedly challenged KPFA on its own censorship of the poem. In the recording of the program, Hill first raises the question, posed by one such caller, of whether "the words and phrases that were deleted" contain "the essence of obscenity, which we might assume caused Mr. Ferlinghetti's arrest" ("Panel on 'Howl'"). The panelists initially respond by echoing Hill's introduction, asserting that while "you might certainly take this off the radio . . . [as] a matter of taste," "the words that we didn't hear in the poem," as Hogan puts it, "are not important in the reading" of it. Moreover, the panelists point out, many similar words did make it into the broadcast and apparently without mass outcry by the listening audience. The panelists' efforts to dispel objections to KPFA's censorship of the poem, however, continued to be challenged by listeners. As Hill states late in the program, they have been "showered by questions from listeners" who seem "as much concerned with the censorship they've heard this evening and indeed see in the book . . . as about the anxiety of the San Francisco Police Department or [Ferlinghetti's] legal plight." The panel's inability to adequately address the specifics, justifications for, or consequences of the station's own censorship of the poem—or indeed to raise any differences between broadcast and print media in

the eyes of either KPFA or the law—significantly undermines the larger argument against literary censorship. The repeated references to “taste” as the criterion for excluding passages from the poem also reveals the pervasive power of censoring institutional and cultural norms.

Certainly listeners did not hear, as Hill claimed, “the full essence” of “Howl,” particularly because those additional words and passages edited out by the station were predominantly descriptions of sex, and thus central to Ginsberg’s depiction of liberated sexuality and the poem’s queer perspective. For example, whereas Ginsberg had vocalized the censored word “fucked” by substituting “blanked” in his otherwise faithful reading of the line, “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy” (*Howl* 13), KPFA silently cut the entire line, thereby removing one of the poem’s most explicit and celebratory references to homosexual sex. Moreover, several of the lines removed or left out of the broadcast were read aloud by the prosecution during the trial, thus affirming listeners’ suspicions that the cut passages included those that had motivated the obscenity charge (despite the legal precedent set in *Roth v. United States* that defined obscenity in light of the total work and not words, lines, or passages taken out of context). These excerpted lines include the one quoted above, which was read twice during the trial (Morgan and Peters 139, 146), as well as the following line, censored by KPFA in its June rebroadcast and quoted three times over the course of the trial: “who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and naked in the lake” (*Howl* 14; Morgan and Peters 147, 186, 191).<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Other lines read during the trial and also omitted from the broadcast of “Howl” include: “Who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York” (*Howl* 10; Morgan and Peters 139); “With dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls” (KPFA cut only the word “cock”) (*Howl* 10; Morgan and Peters 139); and “Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of insensitive bullshit!” (KPFA cut the last phrase) (*Howl* 22; Morgan and Peters 148).

My aim here is not to deny KPFA's bold and radical willingness to broadcast Ginsberg's reading of a poem that, even with the additional edits to the recording, still constituted one of the freest expressions of human sexuality ever presented on radio. The broadcasting of "Howl" on KPFA was even cited by the defense attorney during his closing remarks as evidence of the public's reception of the poem as having literary and social value (Morgan and Peters 193).<sup>202</sup> However, in censoring the broadcast version of "Howl," KPFA opened the door to major questions about the limits of free speech in broadcasting, radio's capacity to foster an open public sphere, and the station's respect for its listeners as individuals capable of making their own judgments of taste and decency. How could open dialogue about this particular case—how could communication in general—occur in the context of censorship? Who decides what or who can enter the public sphere, and who or what is silenced within it?

Censorship of the poem did not constitute the only barrier to dialogue in Hill's program. As Hill sheepishly explained at the beginning of the discussion, although the station had sought to include the perspectives of the Police Department and the prosecution in the case, efforts to do so were rebuffed. In response, Hill attempted to keep the conversation "confined . . . principally to information rather than mutual congratulation," and to draw out differences in the panelists' evaluative views on the aesthetic merits of the poem as a "responsible" work of art. The struggle to include opposing perspectives on KPFA had intensified during the McCarthy years as conservative and even many liberal commentators increasingly refused to appear in any context associated with the Communist Party, however remotely or speculatively. Although Pacifica's pacifist-anarchist founders—and the majority of its staff, volunteers, and listeners—were generally opposed to communism, the network's interest in airing minority and marginalized

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<sup>202</sup> KPFA also came up in the trial during Rexroth's testimony on behalf of the defense, in which he cited his radio program *Books* among his credentials.

views, and indeed its particular pacifist interest in confronting the Cold War conflict between communism and capitalism, meant that it did allow communist perspectives and voices on the air. This, along with Pacifica's more general progressive leanings, meant that the network and KPFA were frequently accused in the conservative press, including by the notorious *Counterattack*, of "red" sympathies—accusations that culminated in a 1963 Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) hearing on alleged communist infiltration of Pacifica.

Throughout the 1950s, KPFA took steps to balance the perceived leftism of its programming and reputation. For example, on the same night in December 1956 when Ginsberg's recording first broadcast, KPFA launched a new regular commentary program with Russell Kirk, author of *The Conservative Mind* (1953). Kirk's program, the cover essay explains, will offer "the conservative point of view" in response to listeners who "feel our political position is biased: too much liberalism" (*KPFA Folio* Nov. 25–Dec. 8, 1956). Such juxtapositions, however, appeared to many more as concessions than real efforts to create dialogue, and anyway would become increasingly rare on Pacifica's airwaves. As Lasar documents, the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s saw Pacifica's shift toward a more assertive position of dissent over dialogue. In 1960, Pacifica President Harold Winkler described KPFA's purpose as to broadcast the "intellectual 'shocks'" of "peripheral, not-yet-accepted views which men with intellectual fidgets pour out of their restless minds"—men, Winkler states, like "the Ferlinghettis of the literary world" ("Pacifica Radio—Room for Dissent," *Pacifica Radio Sampler* vol. 2). In 1962, his successor Trevor Thomas declared Pacifica an advocate of a "free press of the air" realized not in the "one-for-one balancing of alternatives" but through "the presentation of minority views, views which may be challenging,

unfamiliar, even obnoxious, but which are necessary to a full examination of The Establishment” (*KPFA Folio* Jan. 28–Feb. 11, 1962).

Pacifica’s more assertive advocacy of a “free press of the air” against censorship (voluntary or enforced) by government or corporations, however, was especially tested by its continuing association with “the Ferlinghettis of the literary world.” While KPFA’s broadcasts of Ginsberg reading “Howl” in 1956 and 1957 did not initially attract the attention of the FCC or any documented objections by listeners, FCC investigations into allegations of obscenity on Pacifica in subsequent years frequently concerned the broadcasting of literary works. The first of these concerned a December 1959 broadcast of a recording of Ferlinghetti taped at a benefit for the censored little magazine *Big Table*. In 1960, FCC wrote to Pacifica to inquire about the broadcast based on listener objections to the airing of the poems “The Great Chinese Dragon” and “Tentative Description of a Dinner Given to Promote the Impeachment of President Eisenhower.” Pacifica’s official response, echoing the language used in the panel about “the ‘Howl’ controversy,” strongly argued that the poem did not pass any “test” for obscenity either in its print or aural forms but conceded that “some passages . . . do not quite measure up to Pacifica’s own standards of good taste” (Pacifica Records [WI HS] 5).

Pacifica stations continued, however, to broadcast boundary-pushing literature, and in 1963, Ferlinghetti’s 1959 program was again cited by the FCC, along with broadcasts of works by Robert Creeley, Edward Albee, and Richard Pomerantz, as grounds for blocking the renewal of Pacifica’s station licenses until all obscenity charges had been cleared. Dovetailing with the SISS hearings on communist infiltration at Pacifica and a corresponding loyalty oath controversy, the FCC obscenity investigation contributed to the first major external threat to the network’s survival. Pacifica’s successful defense of its programming—both investigations

exonerated the network—encouraged boldness if “not to crusade in the area of obscenity,” as an internal board meeting document declared, then “to be progressive in those areas” (Pacifica Foundation Records [WI HS] Box 1.1). For KPFA, the conclusion of these investigations in 1964 firmly established the station as a staunch defender of the First Amendment just prior to the eruption of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at UC-Berkeley.

Poetry broadcasting on KPFA in the 1950s and the 1960s thus established a politicized context for the reception of San Francisco Renaissance poetry as marking a significant intervention into the laws and cultural norms that limited the freedom of expression. While mainstream American media outlets and established literary critics were decrying what they saw as the disaffiliated apoliticism of “the Beat generation,” for KPFA and its listeners, the poetry of the San Francisco Renaissance was political from the outset, in part because of its situation within a context of Bay Area civil rights, anti-anticommunism, and free speech activism that contributed to the expansion of “the category of ‘speech’” (Land 102). This aural association between the poetics, aesthetics, and performance styles of writers like Ginsberg and the politics of the political dissent of the new left endured long past the sixties, and can still be heard on Pacifica stations today. From the 1950s on, a romantic, expressive, spontaneous lyric—with an emphasis on voice, Whitmanic civic expansiveness, Emersonian immanence, and the improvisational collaboration of jazz—became in American poetry one of the major expressways for the political poetry of dissent. Moreover, a poetic cadence audible in leftist political expression since the sixties is, as I understand it, importantly and predominantly sonic, oral, and *aural*, which is not to say unmediated or unwritten. In circulating these poetic performances and sounds of dissent through aural networks, FM radio stations, freeform radio programs, and independent record labels facilitated the emergence of alternative, “underground,”

countercultural publics constituted around shared experiences of listening. The mutually constructive relationship between Pacifica Radio and the San Francisco Renaissance reveals the significance of poetry and the spoken word alongside music in creating this alternative soundscape.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the reverence attached to Ginsberg by Pacifica Radio stations and their listeners in the years and decades after his first appearance on KPFA's airwaves as a young upstart in a vibrant Bay Area poetry scene. With the numerous rebroadcasts and performances of "Howl" on Pacifica stations in the sixties and seventies, and the many, many appearances by Ginsberg on Pacifica stations to read poems, participate in fundraising drives, sing Blake, chant mantras, or talk politics, drugs, sex, war, conspiracy, and rock 'n' roll—Ginsberg defined for many listeners the sound of sixties liberation, and the soul of Pacifica Radio. In 1971, KPFA declared October 30 to be "Allen Ginsberg Day," and gave over an entire fifteen-hour day of programming to recordings from a (never-to-be-released) sixteen-volume set of Ginsberg's complete works read by the author.<sup>203</sup> These kinds of literary marathons were not unusual for Pacifica stations—though the back-to-back marathon of Ginsberg and, on October 31, Gertrude Stein is noteworthy—but it nonetheless marked an occasion for the station to celebrate its long-running association with the poet. For KPFA and its listeners, a day devoted to the poetry of Allen Ginsberg would not have appeared incongruous in a programming schedule that included, among other things, extensive coverage of the Attica Prison uprising and the prison abolition movement; a groundbreaking new feminist program *Unlearning How to Speak* (titled after a Marge Piercy poem); tapes from the Cabrillo Music Festival and works by

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<sup>203</sup> The recording set was a collaborative project of Ginsberg and Barry Miles, who recorded several of the poems in KPFA's studios. Hal Willner references his astonishment at discovering these unreleased recordings of Ginsberg's "complete works" in his introduction in the liner notes to *Holy Soul Jelly Roll* (n. pag.).

contemporary Mexican composer Carlos Chavez; and, of course, *Books* with Kenneth Rexroth (*KPFA Folio* Oct. 1971).

However, if *Howl*'s 1957 censorship trial resolved the issue of its right to circulate in print while raising the bar for determining obscenity in literary works, Ginsberg's and Pacifica's fight to broadcast "Howl" uncensored on the radio proved to be long and discouraging.

Throughout the seventies and eighties, the FCC gained increased regulatory power; media conglomerates took over much of the FM spectrum; and Pacifica was once again embroiled in a series of high-profile obscenity cases. In 1978, the Supreme Court upheld the FCC's censure of Pacifica Radio for WBAI's broadcast of George Carlin's "Dirty Words" comedy routine in a landmark case that gave the FCC broad powers over speech in broadcasting. In 1987, the FCC, under pressure from a major lobbying effort by the religious right, broadened its powers to censor "indecent" in broadcasting, defining indecency in much broader terms than the more strict "tests" required to legally charge obscenity. Once again, discussions and expressions of homosexuality were especially targeted; as justification for the new guidelines, the FCC cited their (dropped) case against Pacifica station KPFK for the broadcasting of Robert Chesley's play *Jerker, or the Helping Hand* (1986). In protest over these guidelines, all five Pacifica stations broadcast an interview with Ginsberg called *Why We Can't Air "Howl"* but stepped back from directly challenging the FCC in fear of major fines, legal fees, or the revocation of station licenses. The result of the expanded powers of the FCC was a significant "chilling effect" in broadcasting as many stations voluntarily self-censored any material that could be judged indecent.

For Ginsberg and for Pacifica, the new enforceable indecency standards meant the end of broadcasting "Howl"—even the original censored recordings, which were never broadcast in

their entirety again in his lifetime or to this day. In 2007, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Howl and Other Poems*, WBAI planned, in the spirit of Ginsberg, to challenge the FCC and rebroadcast the 1956 recording, but ultimately decided it was too risky, releasing the recording online instead as part of a webcast titled *Howl Against Censorship* (Cohen). In 2014, a program about Ginsberg on *From the Vault*, a series produced for radio and podcast by the Pacifica Radio Archives, played only an excerpt from the recording, stating, “it is still illegal to air ‘Howl’ on American airwaves without language edits” (“Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’”). In our own historical moment, these examples serve as reminders of the ways that *listening* can be a potentially radical, progressive, and social act, even, and especially when, when the surveillance state is always listening in.

## Conclusion

### Listening in/to the Archive

In the special collections reading room at the University of California–San Diego, I tune in to Pacifica Radio’s New York station WBAI-FM circa 1961. Or, to put it more accurately, I listen to cassette copies of an audiotape reel recorded by the poet Paul Blackburn of various programs broadcast by WBAI that spring. Listening through the layers of mediation that substitute for Blackburn’s listening ear, I catch an interview with Allen Ginsberg, a Mozart piano concerto, part of a BBC production of *King Lear*, and even a broadcast of Blackburn himself reading translations of medieval Provençal poetry. At one point, the radio programs are interrupted as Blackburn tapes over them, reading directly into the microphone from Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*. During the piano concerto, I can hear a typewriter in the background, and suddenly I’m acoustically projected into a room with dimensions, imagining the poet at work (ANP Tape SPL-155).

In the 1960s, Blackburn was a fixture of New York’s Lower East Side poetry scene, curating reading series at Le Metro and Les Deux Mégots and helping to establish the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church. Like Tony Schwartz, he was also a tape enthusiast, dragging his enormous portable tape recorder to readings or switching it on at home to record poems in progress, late-night conversations with friends, family musical sessions with his wife and young son, audio letters to be mailed to friends, and the radio. Today, Blackburn’s tape collection is the cornerstone of the large collection of post-1945 American poetry recordings at UCSD’s Archive for New Poetry. When I visit the archive in the spring of 2014, my intention is to seek recordings and documents related to two poetry programs that aired on Pacifica’s WBAI in the 1960s and

1970s: Blackburn's *Contemporary Poetry* (1964–1965) and Susan Howe's *Poetry* (1975–1980). Once in the archive, however, I become absorbed in questions of listening, both for myself as a researcher and for the writers I study, whose tapes and manuscripts document not only readings, radio programs, or conversations but their own subjective experiences of listening.

In this dissertation, I have sought to trace some of the ways that poets responded to a crisis in listening in the early years of the Cold War by engaging new audio technologies and by inventing poetic forms attuned to discord. I think of this dissertation as fundamentally a project about poetic listening—about how poetry in all of its multimedia forms can represent not only sonic patterns of music, speech, and environment but diverse experiences and cultural practices of listening. The distinction is a fine one, and at times perhaps I have drawn too strict a line between the evidently integral relation between sounding and hearing—between the presence of sonic stimuli (or the written representation of that sound) and the materialization of a listening subject to apprehend it—not to mention between aurality and the other senses. In doing so, however, my purpose has been to force a shift in literary critical attention away from an exclusive focus on what poetry recordings, or even the study of sound culture, can tell us about a given poem, poet, or literary history and toward what poetry might have to tell us about the mediated cultures and histories of aurality. Jack Spicer's radiophonic poetics—his figure of the poet as an embodied, combative radio for the static transmission of an alien correspondence sent out to an impossible absent audience—offers a powerful metaphor for poetic composition and reception. But it can also transform how we conceptualize aurality by teaching us to resist dominant tropes of passivity and immediacy, to listen for noise and silence as well as meaningful sound, and to attend to the differential listening practices, affects, subjects, and publics interpolated by sound and broadcasting technologies. We also find this attention to differential

listening in Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which teaches readers to attune to the gap between sound and its aural apprehension as the disseminated site of radical black futurity. Extending Hughes's model of deferred listening beyond the text of *Montage* suggests a path toward a critical historiography of aural difference as a means of racial (re)production and resistance. Poetry is important to the cultural history of sound recording and broadcasting not just because it has always been there in its persistent yet minor way, one type of recorded sound among others, but because the genre's attunement to sound *and* its mediation points to different ways of narrating that history.

As a methodological intervention in the study of post-1945 American poetry, media, and sound culture, this dissertation has also argued that literary scholars must go beyond "close listening" to constellate the aural networks in which poetry circulates. Drawing out historical connections among cultural producers, institutions, publics, texts, discourses, and soundscapes enables a critical genealogy of poetry's cultural work in the age of mass communication media. While I have largely focused on the relatively confined historical period of 1945 to 1965—and its associated "old" media of magnetic tape, the LP record, and FM radio—such an approach to aural networks, it seems to me, could also inform new ways of thinking about contemporary poetry and "new" media in the digital age. The tyranny of the screen in digital culture and digital studies, for example, perpetuates a visual bias that is productively disoriented by attending to how aural (and haptic) sensory regimes construct and are in turn constructed by new and old media forms. Where and how do we hear poetry today, and how do contemporary poets represent and respond to sound culture? How do tropes of sound, voice, noise, silence, aurality, and deafness circulate and operate today in public discourse? Investigating these questions could lead to further study on digital poetics—an analysis of sound in digital poetry, for example, or of

the cybernetic discourse of “noise” in digital poetry and digital poetry criticism. Such questions might also point to ways of studying how contemporary performance poetry such as spoken word circulates, whether through social media and online platforms, in relation to other genres of cultural production such as hip-hop and performance art, or in the context of contemporary discourses on race and sound. Focusing on poets’ engagement with specific media institutions, as I do throughout this study, could also reframe the object of analysis by drawing our attention to the educational, corporate, and independent media entities that condition the circulation and reception of poetry today, and the ways poets respond, resist, and experiment in relation to new media technologies and industries. Or, to take up yet another thread from this project, a study of the aural networks of contemporary poetry might continue to listen, as Meta DuEwa Jones does in her study of jazz poetry, for the echoes of cultural memory that are sounded, silenced, and remixed in recent works and performances.

However, rather than follow a progressive narrative from past to present, analog to digital, I’d like to unravel this last thread of cultural memory by returning briefly to the archive. A historically grounded approach to the study of poetry’s aural networks requires such returns to the archive; as I argued in the introduction, the narratives we can tell about poetry’s engagement with sound culture and genealogies of listening are enriched by archival research in print, audiovisual, and digital collections, many of which are still accessible only in traditional brick-and-mortar repositories. The preceding chapters draw heavily from my own archival research, much of which was conducted in underutilized and under-funded collections, but I have not made central to my argument thus far the associated methodological and theoretical questions that come with researching sound in the archive. How does one listen in or to the archive? How might attention to aural culture alter the meaning of what an archive is, what it preserves, and

how one should interact with it? What would it mean to theorize listening as an archival practice or methodology?

I embarked on this project at an exciting and challenging time for researching poetry's "audible past," to borrow Jonathan Sterne's phrase. In a 2001 article for *The New York Times*, the poet and literary critic Ammiel Alcalay lamented what seemed to be the imminent disappearance of once-audible voices of our literary history, trapped on "thousands of decaying reels of audiotape, film and videotape" in archives and libraries around the country. Alcalay described some of sounds that would be lost without drastic efforts to save this heritage: "Before they disappear, you can still listen to Langston Hughes (in 1958) praising Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti for initiating poetry-and-jazz performances the year before . . . You can see a San Francisco poetry reading for gay liberation in 1971, or Allen Ginsberg in the basement at City Lights bookstore discussing William Carlos Williams as Neal Cassady arrives." Alcalay's piece reflected a dawning public awareness of the existence and precariousness of vast archives of recorded media in obsolete, fragile formats—including and even especially relatively recent formats such as magnetic tape, CDs, and early digital media—as well as growing interest in new possibilities for engaging audiences for poetry through the internet. As evidence of the former, in 2000, the U.S. Congress passed The National Recording Preservation Act to address the preservation of an at-risk recorded sound national heritage and promote public awareness. In the world of poetry, these two trends combined in the large audio digitization projects of websites like *UbuWeb* (founded 1996), *PennSound* (founded 2005), and *Poets.org* (audio archive digitized 2007), as well as of libraries like Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room and the Library of Congress. By 2011, the 1958 recording of Hughes mentioned by Alcalay—and discussed in my third chapter—would be accessible to anyone with an internet connection to digitally stream

online through the *Poetry Center Digital Archive* as part of the San Francisco State Poetry Center's project to digitize some of its audio holdings.

Digitization projects like these, while important, have represented only a small intervention in the much wider crisis in recorded sound preservation. A 2010 report commissioned by the Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Board echoed Alcalay's ominous tone, suggesting that little progress had been made in the ten years since the Board's establishment under the congressional act. According to the report, "major areas of America's recorded sound heritage have already been destroyed or remain inaccessible to the public" while the lack of coordination, national standards, and funding resources may be hastening the "permanent loss of irreplaceable sound recordings in all genres" (Bamberger and Brylawski vii). A key finding of the study was that while digitization is essential for the accessibility and preservation of deteriorating formats, digital recordings are among the most at-risk, raising significant technical and costly challenges for libraries and archives. The report also observed that media used for unpublished recordings such as oral histories, ethnographies, and radio programs tend to be more unstable and irreplaceable than established commercial forms (17), and more likely to be housed in precarious private collections or uncatalogued and unprocessed in libraries.

These archival realities raise significant challenges to studying the history of poetry recording and broadcasting, even with the exponential growth of digital recordings online. In my research, I quickly learned that I would have to go beyond published recordings and digital collections to recover the scope of the audio circulation of post-1945 poetry, the original contexts in which recordings were made and circulated, and the ephemeral traces of radio in particular.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Most digital poetry audio collections online do not provide the kind of metadata that researchers would find in a library catalog record or finding aid, making it difficult to trace provenance or fact-check information about a

Tracking the dispersed documentary record of this history, however, required substantial financial resources that would not be feasible without institutional forms of support that are often lacking for humanities-based research.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, in the archives I visited, however, the state of the recorded sound collections varied widely. Large, established audio collections such as the Pacifica Radio Archives tend to follow best practices for preserving fragile media such as tape, but the size of these collections also strains institutional resources, requiring archivists to make hard choices about what to preserve, catalog, and digitize. At the other end of the spectrum among the archives I encountered are small collections of poetry recordings associated with poets' papers and housed in special collections and rare book libraries. Many recordings of this type are at risk due to the lack of widely adopted audio preservation standards and technical expertise at the time of acquisition, the relative rarity of the sound media in these particular collections, and the scarcity of resources. Audio materials in collections like these are often uncatalogued, making it difficult if not impossible for researchers to discover them. In general, poetry recordings—if they are collected at all—are not likely to be privileged for preservation unless they are part of significant literary audio collections like UCSD's Archive for New Poetry; recordings by or of lesser-known writers or writers from already marginalized social groups are even less likely to be identified by institutions for collecting, cataloging, and digitization.<sup>206</sup> This means that it takes creative and experimental strategies on the part of the

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recording. This is due in part to the particular challenges raised by unpublished sound recordings, which often come to a collection without basic information about who recorded them and when, or what they contain. It also reflects, however, the intentions of the particular online collection, many of which are oriented to educational ends or to engage audiences for poetry rather than to researchers.

<sup>205</sup> I was privileged to receive funding for my research from the Council on Library and Information Resources, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

<sup>206</sup> These is one advantage to working with poetry recordings over other recorded sound genres: the copyright issues that plague music collecting and preservation tend to be less pronounced for poetry audio given how much of this

researcher to recover the full diversity, for example, of an ephemeral phenomenon like the radio broadcasting of poetry—something that I do not think my preliminary research on this topic goes far enough in pursuing.

Despite these challenges, there is reason to be hopeful. Several very recent initiatives are worthy of mention here for what they may make possible for future research on radio, poetry performance, and American cultural history. In 2014, the National Recording Preservation Board established the Radio Preservation Task Force (RPFT), a collaborative team of radio broadcasters, archivists, librarians, and scholars dedicated to the preservation of radio history through the creation of an online inventory of existing radio collections, the administration of funding to endangered collections, and the support of scholarship on the cultural history of radio. The RPFT has the potential to significantly amplify the diverse sounds and ongoing histories of radio, particularly because of its attention to radio history outside the so-called “golden age” of the 1930s and 1940s. Based on my preliminary findings about poets’ involvement with FM radio after 1950 and on local, public, and community stations, there is reason to believe that the RPFT and related radio initiatives will help us to recover a significant dimension of literary history and a body of recordings that have been largely inaccessible until now. To name just one recent and exciting example relevant to my own research, in 2016 the Pacifica Radio Archives completed a three-year grant-funded project to catalog and digitize over 2,000 recordings from the American women’s movement broadcast on Pacifica Radio stations from 1963 to 1982. While preserving poetry programming was not the stated purpose of this project, within the collection one can find an astonishingly rich poetry archive. For literary scholars, this collection makes newly audible not only rare performances by and interviews with writers like Alta, Audre Lorde, Adrienne

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recorded legacy was unpublished or published by independent entities, and how willing most poets are to license their work for broader circulation.

Rich, and Ntozake Shange, among many others, but also the ubiquity of poetry in feminist broadcasting and the significance of community FM radio stations to the feminist poetry movement. In addition, the increased attention to the accessibility of sound on the web is spurring the development of new digital tools for audio transcription, tagging, and computational analysis by institutions like Pop Up Archive, the New York Public Library Labs, and the Institute on High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS). These tools have the potential to make spoken word digital collections much more accessible, discoverable, and searchable to researchers and members of the public.

It therefore seems increasingly likely that sound will become more central to the ways that we research and represent the past. Yet scholars—and literary scholars in particular—still lack robust methods for *how* to listen in the archive. These methodological questions are at once practical and theoretical; in my experience, they range from how to capture information from a listening session when the unpublished recording cannot circulate outside the archive, to how to engage critically with the affective experience of listening to a poet's recorded voice. In a sense, this dissertation represents my effort to develop critical methods for listening to the archive of recorded and broadcast poetry. And while I will not attempt to outline a coherent methodology, I will propose a few manifesto-like theses drawn from my own research experience:

1. *We must listen.* Scholars of twentieth and twenty-first-century American poetry must go beyond the print textual archive to fully understand the ways that poetry circulates in our culture, as well as the significance of performance, sound media, and aural culture to poetic history.

2. *We must contextualize our listening.* The audio recording as an artifact is limited, however, in what it can tell us about the poem, performance style, event, or literary scene that it supposedly documents. Quality metadata, attention to the material specificity of various audio technologies and formats, research in associated print materials, rigorous historiographical methods, and critical theoretical frameworks are all essential for recovering contexts often inaccessible in the recording itself. Contextualizing listening must also mean developing an awareness of aurality as a historically specific, culturally constructed, and technologically mediated practice.
  
3. *We need to capture listening.* The common perception of sound as ephemeral, even when listening to repeatable recordings, raises particular challenges to listening in the archive. We need to continue to develop new methods and tools for transcription, note taking, tagging, and analysis of audio recordings. We also need more descriptive, narrative, and poetic accounts of listening experiences. Descriptive “close listenings” offer one way to capture a reader’s listening experience, but they can also reify notions of the universality of that experience. “Capturing” listening could thus also mean accounting for the ways that we listen *differently* and listen *to* difference.
  
4. *We need to listen collaboratively.* Decades of developments in audio technology and dominant cultural practices have framed the consumption of recorded sound as a private, solitary experience, mediated through personal devices and noise-cancelling headphones. Even when equipped with such isolating apparatuses, listening in the supposedly silent institutional space of an archive or library can mean tolerating withering looks and

complaints from other researchers unaccustomed to encountering sound as artifact. As scholars of aural culture, we should strive to make the archive—literal and metaphorical—not only a noisy site but a social and collaborative one. Creative collaboration beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries among scholars, librarians and archivists, poets and artists, and diverse listening publics can help build rich contexts for encountering and studying aural culture.

These propositions are focused on the archive as a physical, institutional space, and on audio recordings as the primary medium for listening to poetry. But, in a sense, listening is always already an archival practice, an act of memory—which is also to say, an act of forgetting. Think, for example, of the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s, which represented a broad cultural remembering of a repressed past through collective acts of listening mediated by “old” and “new” sound media technologies. Increasingly, I am drawn to theoretical questions about what it means to listen *to* and not only *in* the archive, and what it means to offer a genealogy of listening as an accretion or assemblage of the past. These questions are in the air, so to speak; as Kate Eichhorn observes, since the 1980s, scholars have refigured the archive as “a site of enunciation” (183), signaling a movement away from “*looking* to the archive for written traces of the past to *listening* to the archive in the present” (184). But I still want to put pressure on the association of aurality with presence and the present. If artifacts from the past do not “speak” in unmediated terms, then neither do researchers “listen” to them without activating whole histories of inherited cultural practices—another kind of “written trace” or repertoire— that shapes different experiences of what can and will be heard.

I'll argue once again that poetry may offer an especially useful medium and method to amplify the aural trace. I visited UCSD's Archive for New Poetry because I wanted to extend my understanding of the history of poetry broadcasting on Pacifica Radio beyond the scope of this dissertation project. But the poets I was engaged in studying there pointed me toward new ways of listening in and to the archive. If Paul Blackburn's tape collection came to represent for me a documentary record of one poet's listening—and the illusory sense that the past could be made auditorily present again through these tapes—Susan Howe's poetry reoriented my ears to absence and silence, the hiss of tape static, the phoneme on the page. Like Jack Spicer, whose recorded voice Howe recovered from Pacifica's vaults to replay on her own radio program, Howe believes that poetry mediates a voice from outside. But Howe's outside is the polyphonic outside of history, whose erasure from the archive leaves a visible aural trace. As Howe writes of her first textual encounter with the narrative of Hope Atherton, the source for her work *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, "A sonic grid of homely minutiae fallen away into posterity carries trace filaments. Tumbled syllables are bolts and bullets from the blue" (13). So a mundane passage from a seventeenth-century colonial narrative reprinted in a nineteenth-century historiographical text can, in an instant of poetic listening, reanimate the voices of the dead as if by a shock of electric current. Read Howe's filament against Ginsberg's radio antennae, the groove of Hughes's LP records, the tape-splice of sono-montage; this is the alchemy of the gap. Let's listen for its vibratory, electric hum.

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