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Souvenir Foils: On the Status of Print at the Origin of Recorded Sound

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When Thomas Edison began demonstrating the phonograph to eager audiences in 1878, he promoted the machine—and the American public received it—as an invention that would revolutionize print. The “speaking phonograph” or “talking machine,” as it was first known, was able to record as well as to reproduce sound. (It would not be widely adopted as an amusement device for musical playback until the mid-1890s.) Throughout 1878 and for more than the decade to follow, phonographs seemed to offer an unprecedented, excitingly modern connection between aural experience and inscribed evidence, between talk and some new form of text. The recording surface was originally tinfoil. Air set in motion by the production of sound acted upon a diaphragm connected to a stylus; the stylus indented the foil to “capture” what the inventor Thomas Edison called “sounds hitherto fugitive” for later “reproduction at will.”

At demonstrations throughout the United States and abroad during 1878, audiences greeted the phonograph with both enthusiasm and skepticism. On the one hand, they marveled at the unprecedented phenomenon of recorded sound (a machine that speaks!). Many, however, felt disappointment when, after all the hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding the device, the early, imperfect phonograph produced only faint sounds obscured by scratchy surface noise. But however mixed their reactions may have been, audiences at the phonograph demonstrations regularly and eagerly took scraps of tinfoil home with them when the lectures were over. This chapter pursues those souvenir scraps of indented foil. Those primitive records were clearly meaningful to the women and men who sought them and who were probably asked at the breakfast table the next morning, “What does it say?” Without the phonograph for playback, the tinfoil records of course said nothing. Yet for the people who brought them home, the very same records clearly said something.

These sheets of foil were talismans of print culture. They were pure “supplement,” in the language of literary study today, illegible and yet somehow textual, public and inscribed. Although themselves neither written nor printed, their apprehension became a
necessary part of the social practices according to which printed and other text-objects were understood. They literally contextualized. Put another way, their status as curious new-media texts helped to inscribe the meanings of old-media textuality that had pertained and that would pertain in the future. Because of what they were—and more particularly because of what they were not—the production and collection of tinfoil records formed a new social experience of text and thereby of print. As such these scraps of tinfoil offer one way to inquire into the social meanings of printedness toward the end of the nineteenth century. For sure, these same meanings may also be glimpsed in other, attendant experiences of text and of print—in the ongoing construction of authorship, for instance, in the changing political economies of publishing, the additional subjectivities of late-century literacy, the shifting character and institutional status of textual criticism, and so on. The list is long. Against it tinfoil souvenirs can profitably be read as foils in the literary or the schoolbook sense. Historical characters important in part for what they were not, the foils defined by contrast, acting in mutual opposition to other characters—characters like authors, readers, publishers, and critics, but even more particularly the characters who "spoke" between quotation marks from the pages of American newspapers and in other publications.

Aided by the surrounding publicity, tinfoil records offered a profound and self-conscious experience of what "speaking" on paper might mean. Judging at least from contemporary quarrels between philologists and rhetoricians over the appropriate study of language or the concomitant populism of "verbal criticism" and paens to "good usage," tinfoil records were less causal agents of change than they were fully symptomatic of their time. The contemporary promotion of simplified spelling, the rampant competition between different shorthand systems, the widespread publishing of dialect and regional literatures, the scholarly worries about the "correct" pronunciation of Latin, the probable pronunciation of English by Chaucer and Shakespeare, and the appropriate "collection" of non-Western tongues, "authentic" black spirituals, folktales, and English ballads all reflect concern with the issue of "speaking" on paper. As Jon Cruz has shown in the case of collected spirituals, these concerns lie directly at the heart of "the modern hermeneutical orientation." They are central to the disciplines and disciplinary practices of explaining culture, disciplines and practices that emerged with force toward the end of the nineteenth century, and whose emergence was aided by the structures of the American research university and attended by the birth of a canonical national tradition. This chapter tells the story of a few, fragile sheets of tinfoil because they offer another modest op-
portunity to peer into the concerns of their time. In particular, tinfoil souvenirs make visible certain anxieties regarding the medium of print. One underecurrent to the story that follows is the speculation (which surfaces in another form in chapter 8 below) that such anxieties can profitably be read against and within the disciplinary formations of the 1880s and 1890s.4

Thomas Edison was the first to demonstrate the phonograph in public, when he took his prototype to the New York City offices of the Scientific American magazine in 1877. There, witnesses reported, the phonograph greeted them and inquired after their health. They were fascinated by the apparent simplicity of the device; it was "a little affair of a few pieces of metal," not a complicated machine with "rubber larynx and lips." Wrapped around a cylinder rotated by hand, the tinfoil recording surface was impressed with indentations that formed "an exact record of the sound that produced them" and comprised what was termed "the writing of the machine." These words or "remarks" could then be "translated" or played back. Observers seemed for a time to believe that they themselves might translate, using a magnifying glass painstakingly to discern phonetic dots and dashes. But the really remarkable aspect of the device arose, one onlooker marveled, in "literally making it read itself." It was as if, "instead of perusing a book ourselves, we drop it into a machine, set the latter in motion, and behold! The voice of the author is heard repeating his own composition." Edison and his appreciative audience clearly assumed that his invention would soon provide a better, more immediate means of stenography. Machinery, accurate and impartial, would objectively and materially realize the author's voice.

In statements to the press and later in his own article in the North American Review, Edison enumerated the use of phonographs for writing letters and taking dictation of many sorts, as well as for things like talking clocks, talking dolls, and recorded novels. Music was mentioned, but usually as a form of dictation: You could send love songs to a friend, sing your child a lullaby, and then, if it worked, save up the same rendition for bedtime tomorrow. In keeping with the important public uses of shorthand for court and legislative reports, the phonograph would also provide a cultural repository, a library for sounds. The British critic Matthew Arnold had only recently defined culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world," and now the phonograph could save up the voices and sayings, Edison noted, of "our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones." And there was plenty more to save. The American Philological Society, Edison reported to the New York Times, had requested a phonograph "to preserve the accents of the
Onondagas and Tuscaroras, who are dying out." According to the newspaper, only "one old man speaks the language fluently and correctly, and he is afraid that he will die."

The contrast between our statesmen and the dwindling Onondaga hints that the phonograph was immediately an instrument of Anglo-American cultural hierarchy. It became party to habitual and manifold distinctions between an "us" and a "them." Drawing a similar distinction, Punch magazine satirized in 1878 that the work of "our best poets" could be publicly disseminated by young women using phonographs, taking the place of the "hirsute Italian organ-grinders" who walked about the streets of London. The phonograph became at once instrumental to expressions of difference like these and suggestive of a strictly (because mechanically) nonhierarchical vox populi. One enthusiast proposed half seriously that a phonograph could be installed in the new Statue of Liberty, then under construction in New York Harbor, so it could make democratic announcements to passing ships. Reality seemed hardly less fanciful. With this remarkable device, published accounts made clear, women could read while sewing. Students could read in the dark. The blind could read. And the dead could speak.

In January 1878 Edison signed contracts assigning the rights to exhibit the phonograph, while reserving for himself the right to exploit its primary dictation function at a later time. Exhibition rights went to a small group of investors, most of them involved already in the financial progress of Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. Together they formed the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company and hired James Redpath as their general manager. A former abolitionist, Redpath had done the most to transform the localized adult-education lecture series of the early American lyceums into more formal, national "circuits" administered by centralized speakers' bureaus. He had just sold his lyceum bureau, and he came to the phonograph company with a name for promoting "merit" rather than what his biographer later dismissed as "mere newspaper reputation." The distinction was blurred, however, throughout the ensuing year of phonograph exhibitions. With so much distance separating the primitive phonograph's technological abilities from the ecstatic hyperbole that surrounded the invention in the press, phonograph exhibitors relied upon novelty in their appeals to audiences. Novelty, of course, would wear off, although it would take well into the summer of the following year to "[milk] the Exhibition cow pretty dry," as one of the company directors put it privately in a letter to Edison.

The Edison Speaking Phonograph Company functioned by granting regional demonstration rights to exhibitors; individuals purchased the right to exhibit a phonograph within a protected territory. They were trained to use the machine, which required a cer-
tain knack, and agreed to pay the company 25 percent of their gross receipts. This was less of a lecture circuit, then, than a bureaucracy. For the most part, phonograph exhibitors worked locally; whatever sense they had of belonging to a national enterprise came from corporate coordination and a good deal of petty accountancy. Paper-circulated around the country—correspondence, bank drafts, letters of receipt—but the men and their machines remained more local in their peregrinations, covered in the local press, supported (or not) by local audiences and institutions in their contractually specified state or area. The company set admission at twenty-five cents, although some exhibitors soon cut the price down to a dime. Ironically, no phonographically recorded version of a phonograph exhibition survives; the tinfoil records did not last long. Instead, the character of these demonstrations can be pieced together from accounts published in newspapers, letters mailed to Redpath and the company, and a variety of other sources, which include a burlesque of the exhibitions entitled Prof. Black's Phunnygraph or Talking Machine.

While the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company was getting on its feet, several of Edison's friends and associates held public exhibitions that paired demonstrations of the telephone with the phonograph and raised the expectations of company insiders. Charging theater managers $100 a night for this double bill, Edward Johnson toured uptown New York at the end of January. Not all of his performances recouped the hundred dollars, but in Elmira and Courtland, "it was a decided success," he claimed, and the climax of the evening was "always reached when the Phonograph first speaks." "Everybody talks Phonograph," Johnson reported, on "the day after the concert and all agree that a 2nd concert would be more successful than the first."

Johnson's plan was simple. He categorized the fare as "Recitations, Conversational remarks, Songs (with words), Cornet Solos, Animal Mimicry, Laughter, Coughing, etc., etc.," which would be "delivered into the mouth of the machine, and subsequently reproduced." He described getting a lot of laughs by trying to sing himself, but he also tried to entice volunteers from the audience or otherwise to take advantage of local talent. Another Edison associate, Professor J. W. S. Arnold, filled half of Chickering Hall in New York City, where his phonograph "told the story of Mary's little lamb" and then, like Johnson's phonograph, rendered a medley of speaking, shouting, and singing. At the end of the evening Arnold distributed strips of used tinfoil, and there was reportedly "a wild scramble for these keepsakes."

These early exhibitions helped establish a formula for Redpath's agents to follow. Redpath himself managed a short season at Irving Hall in New York City, but the typical
exhibition was more provincial. In nearby Jersey City, New Jersey, for instance, demonstration rights were owned by Frank Lundy, a journalist, who displayed little polish during exhibitions and who complained bitterly to the company that his territory was always being invaded by others or usurped by Edison's own open-door policy at the Menlo Park laboratory, a short train ride away. Lundy came through Jersey City in mid-June. He gave one exhibition at a Methodist Episcopal church ("admission 25 cents"), and another at Library Hall as part of a concert given by "the ladies of Christ Church." Both programs featured musical performances by community groups as well as explanations and demonstrations of the phonograph. Lundy reportedly "recited to" the machine, various "selections from Shakespeare and Mother Goose's melodies, laughed and sung, and registered the notes of a cornet, all of which were faithfully reproduced, to the great delight of the audience, who received pieces of the tin-foil as mementos." But poor Lundy's show on June 20th had been upstaged the day before by a meeting of the Jersey City "Aesthetic Society," which convened to wish one of its members bon voyage. Members of the "best families in Jersey City" as well as "many of the stars of New York literary society" were reportedly received at Mrs. Smith's residence on the eve of her departure for the Continent. For the occasion, one New York journalist brought along a phonograph and occupied part of the evening recording and reproducing laughter and song, as well as a farewell message to Smith, and a certain Miss Groesbeck's "inimitable representation" of a baby crying. Of these recorded cries, "the effect was very amusing," and the journalist "preserved the strip" of foil, saving the material impressions of Groesbeck's "mouth" impressions.  

12 Phonograph exhibitions such as these relied upon a familiar rhetoric of educational merit. Lecturers introduced Edison's machine as an important scientific discovery by giving an explanation of how the phonograph worked and then enacting this explanation with demonstrations of recording and playback. 13 Audiences were edified, and they were entertained. They learned and they enjoyed. Phonograph exhibitions thus reinforced the double message of the lyceum movement in America, sugarcoating education as part of an elaborate ethos of social improvement. 

Phonograph exhibitions flirted with the improvement of their audiences in three distinct yet interrelated ways. First, they offered all in attendance the opportunity to participate, at least tacitly, in the progress of technology. Audiences could be up to the minute, apprised of the latest scientific discovery, party to the success of the inventor whom the newspapers were calling the "Wizard of Menlo Park." They were also exposed—playfully and again tacitly—to "good taste." In making their selections for
recording and playback, exhibitors made incongruous associations between well-known lines from Shakespeare and well-known lines from Mother Goose, between talented musicians and men like Edward Johnson, between inarticulate animal and baby noises and the articulate sounds of speech. Audiences could draw and maintain their own distinctions, laugh at the appropriate moments, recognize impressions, be “in” on the joke. In the process, they participated in the enactment of cultural hierarchy alluded to above. Finally, the exhibitions elevated the local experience to something much larger and more important. Local audiences heard and saw themselves materially preserved on bumpy strips of tinfoil. Those that met in the meakest church basements were recorded just like audiences in the grand concert halls of New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. Audience members could therefore imagine themselves as part of a modern, educated, tasteful, and recordable community, an “us” (as opposed to “them”), formed with similarly modern, educated, tasteful, and recordable people across the United States. The phonograph exhibition, in other words, offered a democratic vision of “us” and “our” sounds, available to the imagination in some measure because they must have hinted at their opposite: “them” and “theirs.”

Of course, this vision came notably vested with cultural hierarchies and a local/global matrix—region/nation, here/elsewhere, local beat/wire story. The familiar practices of public lectures and amusements, the varied contexts within which public speech acts made sense as cultural productions, the enormous, framing tide of newsprint all informed the phonograph’s reception. If phonographs were “speaking,” their functional subjects remained importantly diffuse among available spoken forms: lectures and orations as well as “remarks,” “sayings,” recitations, declamations, mimicry, hawking, barking, and so on. The sheer heterogeneity of public speech acts should not be overlooked any more than the diversity of the speakers whose words more and less articulated an American public sphere. The nation that had been declared or voiced into being a century before remained a noisy place.14

Actual audience response to the phonograph exhibitions is difficult to judge. Some parts of the country simply were not interested. Mississippi and parts of the South, for example, were far more concerned with the yellow fever epidemic that plagued the region in 1878. Audiences in New Orleans were reportedly disappointed that the machine had to be yanked into in order to reproduce well, and there were other quibbles with the technology once the newspapers had raised expectations to an unrealistic level. Out in rural Louisiana, one exhibitor found that his demonstrations fell flat unless the
audience heard all recordings as they were made. Record quality was still so poor that knowing what had been recorded was often necessary for playback to be intelligible. James Redpath spent a good deal of energy consoling exhibitors who failed to make a return on their investments, but he also fielded questions from individuals who, after witnessing exhibitions, wrote to ask if they could secure exhibition rights themselves. To one exhibitor in Brattleboro, Vermont, Redpath wrote sympathetically that “other intelligent districts” had proved as poor a field as Brattleboro, but that great success was to be had in districts where “the population is not more than ordinarily intelligent.” Some parts of the country remained untried, while others were pretty well saturated, like parts of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Illinois.19

Exhibitors everywhere wrote back to the company for more of the tinfoil that they purchased by the pound. The company kept a “Foil” account open on its books to enter these transactions. Pounds of tinfoil sheets entered into national circulation, arriving in the possession of exhibitors only to be publicly consumed, indented, divided, distributed, collected into private hands, and saved.

Confirming much about the phonograph exhibitions was a “colored burlesque on the phonograph” entitled Prof. Black’s Phunnygraph or Talking Machine. Frank Hockenberry’s skit offers a comment on the phonograph lectures that it lampoons. The term “burlesque” did not then denote striptease, but rather a topical, risqué comedy, full of witticisms pointed at events of the day. The butt of Hockenberry’s burlesque were the phonograph demonstrations of 1878. As a “colored” burlesque, Prof. Black’s Phunnygraph drew much of its “inspiration” from fifty years of minstrel shows. The theatrical season of 1878 had been characterized by a bewildering outburst of so-called “mammoth minstrel shows,” touring troupes of 40 to 60 performers trying to breathe life back into a hackneyed form by finding novelty in numbers.16 Hockenberry’s Phunnygraph was probably intended as an interlude in one of these racist pageants, since its concluding stage directions call for a minstrel staple, “moving to half circle, [and as] soon as half circle is struck, begin negro chorus or plantation melody. Minstrel business.”

Whatever its exact provenance, Prof. Black’s Phunnygraph clearly takes aim at phonograph exhibitors like Edward Johnson and Frank Lundy by assuming the form of a lecture “on de Phunnygraph, or Talking Machine, as she am called by de unsophisticated populace.” A character adapted as much from medicine shows and Barnum-type attractions as from men like Edison or his friend Professor Arnold, “Professor” Black is the device’s “sole inventor, patenter, manufacturer an’ constructioner,” although one character makes passing and disparaging mention of a “Billy Addison.”
The scenery constituted part of the joke. On stage, a sign announcing the lecture connected the phonograph exhibition to patent medicines:

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The remainder of the scenery consisted of "a dry goods box large enough to hold three persons" to which had been attached a "sausage-grinder on top with crank," a household funnel, and "slips of white paper to run into [the] grinder to talk on." The lecture that ensued followed the formula of so many Edison Speaking Phonograph Company exhibitions. Professor Black explained how the machine worked and gave a demonstration that went humorously awry. His "phunnygraph," it turned out, was nothing but three people hiding in a box, and it proved impossible for them to remember and accurately repeat the words and noises that the professor shouted into the kitchen utensils on top of the box.

In the circumstances of its demonstration Hockenbery's "phunnygraph" closely resembles the phonograph it mocks. It jabs suggestively at cultural hierarchy even while giving voice to racist cant, since his machine has made its tour "from de highest ranks ob civilization, clean down to de lowest ranks ob dem dat ain't ranked at all." In addition, Professor Black pretends to record talk, recitations, animal mimicry, whistling, and song, just like Edward Johnson and Frank Lundy actually did. There is also a familiar concatenation of imitations: The players imitate African-Americans degradingly, their characters' dialect and malapropisms imitate standard, spoken English, and the "phunnygraph" tries to imitate everything all at once, like Mrs. Groesbeck and a baby crying. Finally, the stage directions substitute "white paper" for tinfoil, as if to emphasize that the phonograph forms a kind of writing instrument or to underscore the vexing blankness of souvenir tinfoil sheets for their readers.

As Hockenbery's scenery can only hint, it was to the sheets of tinfoil that the language of print culture adhered most freely, becoming confused in the novelty of the phonograph and its records. The material qualities of sheets as sheets proposed an equation of writing and recording that proved impossible to work out. Company executives wrote tellingly to each other that a means must be found for "stereotyping" or "electrotyping" records once they were made, drawing their terminology from common printing processes of the day. Meanwhile in the Gentleman's Magazine, readers learned about "Edison's imprinted
words.” And everywhere the term record gained a new connotation. Those sheets of tinfoil formed public records in a new way. It was not just that metaphors of writing and printing were being deployed; the literal language of texts was being stretched to encompass these new material forms.

The foil was thus the site of enormous tensions: semantic tension regarding the language of textuality and corresponding semiotic tension regarding the meanings made by or in bumps across the surface of the foil. The habit of collecting scraps of foil made these tensions all the more apparent. Phonograph exhibitors ran through pounds of tinfoil, and audiences scrambled for keepsakes. In their sonic “capture” and later, in their mute evocation of public experience, pieces of tinfoil in private hands formed souvenirs of immense power. They were belongings that vouched for belonging. They were artifacts that vouched for facts. Publicly made and privately held, their material existence offered a demonstrable continuity of private and public memories. Having such a record meant having witnessed and aurally confirmed its public production as a reproduction. It also meant having witnessed its public destruction, as the tinfoil was removed from the phonograph mandrel and given away. And it meant having collected to oneself the potentiality of reproduction, which the foil had ceased to embody in becoming a souvenir. Like the players hiding in Hockenberry’s box, scramblers for these keepsakes must have inexactly recollected sounds even as they collected souvenirs.

Susan Stewart’s words on what souvenirs accomplish in general are particularly suggestive in this light. She writes,

> Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlative, the search for the authentic object become critical. . . . We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need to desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.19

The desire for tinfoil must have been partly a desire for authenticity, for what had really transpired. More than any souvenir program, photograph, pencil, or key chain, though, the tinfoil records suggested the authentication of actual sounds that had been shared—shared by a group of listeners, but also shared by the machine, its sensitive and yet entirely insensate body on the table in plain sight at the front of the demonstration hall. Tinfoil offered a new and curious sort of quotation, perhaps, or a way of living with the question
of quotation as never before. To put it another way, the tinfoil souvenirs suggested that oral productions might be textually embodied as aural reproductions, rather than as the usual sort of graphical representation, spelled out and wedged between quotation marks on a page. What audiences had witnessed was not the special performance of texts (for example, a written declaration making a nation independent, paper instruments of law making law, canonical texts making a national tradition). Rather, they had witnessed a special textual-ization of performance—quotation somehow made immanent, quotation marks of a new sort, which turned (or returned, mechanically, miraculously) into the quotations themselves.

Tinfoil records were souvenirs that offered the renovation of the souvenir as such, hinting at changes to the then normal connections between matter and event, stuff and utterance, text and speech act. The phonograph demonstrations were indeed only reportable, not repeatable, in Stewart’s terms—it was devilishly hard to get a tinfoil record back onto the machine once it had been removed, and certainly impossible to reproduce anything from it when it had been ripped up and distributed among the audience. Still, what could be reported about the demonstrations was precisely their repeatability. Narrating the meaning of the tinfoil at breakfast meant testifying to the pending usurpation of that very narrative. The desire for authenticity would finally be consummated, when some now imaginable souvenir spoke for itself. The morning papers promised as much. Tinfoil and newsprint lying side-by-side on the breakfast table served to interrogate that promise, if also to prompt the witness/auditor who owned them and who formed part of their collective, collected subject.

What happened next? In one sense, nothing. Phonograph demonstrators across the country had quickly milked the exhibition cow dry. As Hockesberry’s Professor Black put it, the device had been displayed with “profound satisfaction and excess.” By 1880 its novelty was gone; the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company soon folded its operations; and James Redpath went on to fresh projects. The phonograph would wait almost a decade for any further development, when it would be joined by a twin, the graphophone, and another sibling, the gramophone, all of them replacing tinfoil sheets with more durable matter, respectively, wax cylinders and shellac disks. One more flurry of public demonstrations ensued before the machines were adapted for musical playback and domesticated as commodities for private ownership. Tinfoil souvenirs went the way of all souvenirs, most of them lost and a very few of them reinvested with meaning as the specific experience of their production faded from memory. Allen Koenigsberg’s masterful Patent History of the Phonograph comes in a limited second edition (1991) that offers
a tiny square of "Original Phonographic Tinfoil (1878)" pasted behind its title page beside notice of copyright.50 There the tinfoil still speaks mutely of its own power. It and the page to which it is affixed exist in dialogue about the relationships between pages and history, matter and event. The particulars of a specific exhibition hall, a specific phonograph mandrel, and a specific breakfast table are long ago forgotten with regard to any one scrap of foil, and the tiny squares are all unredeemable as recordings except insofar as Koenigsberg's book and others like it narrate their identity. Yet the tiny squares of bumpy foil still vouch for words uttered or sounds made during some fraction of a second in the year 1878. And they vouch in a way that pages, letters, and quotation marks cannot.

In another sense, however, souvenir sheets of foil forever entered the process of discerning textuality and thus printedness. As a means of preservation the tinfoil phonograph helped to raise emphatic questions of loss within which the efficacy and the meaning of print had long been embroiled. Narrowly a matter of words written down, published, and saved, these questions of loss also suggested much broader practices of cultural self-identification, preservation, and interpretation, of "our" best poets saved against "our" uncertain future, for example, and of Onondaga "accents" "preserved" against "their" imminent demise. It was in this larger, us-and-them sense that culture seemed to require self-conscious preservation. National, ethnic, linguistic, and racial identities needed collection, both in the sense of being possessed and of being understood. Yet the tinfoil souvenirs somehow seemed to hint at loss, for they disparaged print by implication and helped to suggest the latter's inauthenticity as a means of recording and preservation: "Speaking" on paper offered no actual sounds of speech. Yet at the same time, the evident inadequacies of tinfoil records as permanent or indelible inscriptions put the storied, paperless future (which Edison kept vaunting in the press) on hold.

When Edison boasted to the newspapers that his invention would record novels cheaply and thereby ruin the market for books, he reasoned that recordings were printed naturally, by sound waves on tinfoil, rather than laboriously set in type by human compositors. Authors and their audiences would win, even if printers and compositors would lose. But when the inventor's comments reached their readers, set in type of course by compositors, the inventor was quoted as saying that a phonograph record "is not in tpye [sic], but in punctures" on tinfoil. The typographical error is exactly that, graphical. It produces an unpronounceable "utterance," which remains viable only on the page, seen and not said. The four individual pieces of type remain insistently, visually, sorts of type. They are emphatically t, p, y, and e, since they do not make the word type. Yet the words are also emphatically true; like the vaunted records of the future, they are "not in tpye,"

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because they are in type. There is no way to know for sure whether this was accident or derision on the part of a compositor employed by the Philadelphia Weekly—lazy or Luddite? rushed or radical?—and it is unlikely that many readers stumbled or that any noticed their dilemma. A trivial instance, then, but one that neatly captures the verbal-visual status of writing and print that the first phonograph records uncomfortably or unfamiliarly visited. "Behold!" wrote early auditors (instead of "Listen!"), "The voice of the author is heard repeating his own composition." In their rush to celebrate the greater immediacy of a new medium, contemporaries got the sensory apparatus wrong.

Far less trivial than the typography of one word on the future of literature was Moses Coit Tyler's publication in 1878 of a two-volume version of the American literary past. Only a scattering of colleges or universities taught any American literature when Tyler published his History of American Literature, 1607-1765. He was among the first to put together a coherent narrative of American literary history, and his project helps characterize the cultural status of writing and print at the moment Edison's speaking phonograph was introduced to American audiences. As Tyler himself described them, his two volumes sought to present an exhaustive history of those writings in English by Americans that "have some noteworthy value as literature, and some real significance in the unfolding of the American mind." His method had been to troll for years through libraries, seeking out neglected books, assessing their literary merits, and judging their pertinence to "the scattered voices of the thirteen colonies," which eventually and so importantly, in his view, "blended in one great and resolute utterance." It was a hugely ambitious project, and one he everywhere describes in terms that seem to mix the functions of speech and writing. He wanted to see just where "the first lisplings of American literature" took their departure from their "splendid parentage, the written speech of England." Tyler's "lisped literature" and "written speech" confirm the degree to which spoken and written language were integrally, mutually, defining. The substitution of "Behold!" for "Listen!" partook of an ancient tradition still current. Writing in general, and literature in particular, lived and was valued in intricate association with speech acts.

The word record encapsulates these points. Tyler begins his first chapter proposing the intellectual history of America: "It is in written words that this people, from the very beginning, have made the most confidential and explicit record of their minds. It is these written records, therefore, that we shall now search for that record." Despite his reputation as a "superb stylist," Tyler's double use of "record" is confusing. Mental records are his broader category, within which written records stand preeminent. Confusion between the two is indicative of tensions surrounding the potentially national character of
textuality for Tyler and, more generally, the gap he seems anxiously to have sensed between minds and pages, between an author’s conception and its written, printed expression. Whether Tyler composed these sentences just before, after, or in light of Edison’s records, his diction partakes of the selfsame context.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Tyler took liberties when quoting the literary tradition he established. He modernized spelling and punctuation and considered that it was “no violation of the integrity of quotation” for him to expunge or correct any confusion, “extreme inaccuracy,” or “palpable error of the press.” Against such liberal quotation practices, and such mistrust of the press, and in keeping with his larger project to collect and preserve an explicitly American tradition, Tyler’s “record” is a keyword in the sense that Raymond Williams picked out his *Keywords*. Like Williams’s word *culture* (or *class*, or *media*) that is, Tyler’s *record* seems to have “acquired meanings in response to the very changes he proposed to analyze.” The term cannot be defined without recourse to the very conditions it connotes: the lisplings of literature and the construction of tradition. Though obvious in Tyler, the reflexivity of “record” proved fleeting, most likely because playing phonograph records soon gained a broad and habitual appeal.

I am hinting at the power of an unfulfilled desire, part of the cultural construction of any new medium. Phonograph exhibitors promised a new, less mediated inscriptive form; their recordings offered more immediate access to public speech acts than any written or printed instrument ever could. If this promise remained only that in 1878—a promise—it nevertheless provoked repeated and sustained vernacular experiences of the relationships between speech and writing, relationships theorized only later by linguists and philosophers. Breakfast-table conversations must at some level have apprehended what it might mean to “risk death in the body of a signifier,” to use one much later parlance, as a saved, savable scrap of voice-indented foil sat beside the periodic and ephemeral newsprint of which it and its saver were the subject. Tinfoil scrap and newsprint squib: They formed a pair of characters in private conversation about public speech. One was new and both were flawed, those flaws apparent in the contrast between them. The rank artificiality of “speaking” on paper was newly party to the tangle of concerns that tinfoil souvenirs helped to adumbrate.

Recorded sound eventually prospered, of course, but the newspapers of 1878 remain the best record of its public introduction. Into the circulation of the newsprint and the circuits of the American lyceum entered the touring phonograph exhibitors. With their own modest circuits of mail, of revenue, and of foil they immodestly boosted the phonograph in public, promoting it to, as well as via, newly recordable Americans.
Notes

1. "Phonograph and Its Future" North American Review 126 (June 1878): 527–536. One portion of this essay has appeared previously as "First Phonographs: Writing and Reading with Sound," Biblian 8 (1999): 3–16. Many people offered generous comments regarding earlier versions that have been vital to its revision. Among these I must particularly acknowledge Jay Grossman's conference comments and Anne Skillion's editorial advice.


4. My speculative argument takes Benedict Anderson and David R. Shumway as points of departure, respectively Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991) and Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Shumway traces the ideological project of disciplinary formation, notably the verification of American culture in the construction of American literary studies (p. 6); my attention is to anxieties attending and thus motivating such a project.


9. Records of the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company exist at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, N. J., and at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Documents from West Orange have been microfilmed and form part of the ongoing Thomas A. Edison Papers, A Selective Microfilm Edition, ed. Thomas E. Jeffery et al., 4 parts to date (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America). These items are also available as part of the ongoing electronic edition of the Edison Papers; see http://edison.rutgers.edu. For the items cited here, like Uriah Painter to Thomas Edison of August 2, 1879 ("milked the cow"), microfilm reel and frame numbers are given in the following form: TAEM 49:316. Documents from Philadelphia form part of the Painter Papers collection and have been cited as such. The company's incorporation papers are TAEM 51:771. The history of the company may be gleaned from volume 4 of The Papers of Thomas A. Edison, The Wizard of Menlo Park, ed. Paul B. Israel, Keir A. Nier, and Louis Carlat (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). Also see Paul Israel's "The Unknown History of the Tinfoil Phonograph," NARAS Journal 8 (1997–1998): 29–42.
10. Johnson to U. H. Painter of January 27th, 1878, in the Painter Papers; Johnson prospectus of February 18, 1878, TAEM 97:623. Both are transcribed and published in volume 4 of the Papers of Thomas A. Edison. I am grateful to Paul Israel and the other editors of the Edison Papers for sharing their work in manuscript and for sharing their knowledge of the Painter Papers.


12. Lundy's complaint of August 31, 1878, TAEM 19:109; accounts of Jersey City are reported in the Jersey Journal, June 13th, 14th, and 21st, and the Argus, June 20th.


15. These details from the Painter Papers, Letter books and Treasurer's books of the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company, including Smith to Hubbard of November 23, 1878; Mason to Redpath of November 1, 1878; Cushing to Redpath of July 16, 1878; Redpath to Mason, July 10, 1878.


17. Painter Papers Letter books, Cheever to Hubbard of June 10, 1878.


22. An even better example of a similar mistrust of print was the ballad collectors' determination to value unpublished sources above published ones. Francis Child devoted himself to locating manuscript sources and the sources that "still live on the lips of the people," G. L. Kittredge, "Preface" The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, ed. Francis James Child, 5 vols. (New York: Dover, 1965), xxvii–xxviii. Child's work appeared in parts, 1881–1898. American "Folklorists" felt the same way. "Negro" folklorist Alice Mabel Bacon urged, "nothing must come in that we have ever seen in print" (1897); quoted in Cruz, 170. A generation later, the "new bibliography" movement set out to establish editions of canonical "works," salvaged from the (potentially corrupt) printed "texts" of the past.
