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Vachel Lindsay and *The W. Cabell Greet Recordings*

*“Music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance....
Poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music.”*

—Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934)

In April 1912, the Victor Talking Machine Company sent a recording engineer to the Indianapolis home of the “Hoosier Poet,” James Whitcomb Riley. In an era before the adoption of electrical microphones, a homebound Riley read his dialect poems into a recording horn. For a record label like Victor considering the distribution of poetry, Riley’s emphasis on the sound of his poems, particularly the phonetic aesthetics of his dialect poems, made him an excellent choice, as did his popularity in the late nineteenth century as a touring performer. Victor later informed Riley that the records were insufficiently commercial due to their sound quality, but at the poet’s request, they agreed to arrange another recording session and eventually released some of the records. In many ways, Riley’s insistence on creating these records toward the end of his life is an antecedent for the story of Vachel Lindsay’s sound recordings, just as Riley’s poetics provided a space for the performance-forward poetry that Lindsay would develop in the Chicago of the early twentieth century.

About a generation younger than Riley, Vachel Lindsay followed the older poet in using the space between sound and meaning as the primary vehicle of his expressivity. Lindsay’s poems are what I might call sonic ekphrases, sounded representations of the people and events that made up his America.¹ Thus, for Lindsay as well as for Riley, it is no wonder that the burgeoning technology of sound recording held such allure.

Author’s Note: This essay is a critical introduction to *Vachel Lindsay: The W. Cabell Greet Recordings*, a collection I have edited of nearly every extant recording of Lindsay reading his work, recorded at Columbia University by Barnard College professor W. Cabell Greet in 1931. The collection is available in the PennSound Archive.

For Lindsay, the potential to have his poems preserved in something so close to their truest form—the performance, rather than (to him) an ersatz libretto in the printed text alone—prompted him to seek out record companies to record his poems. Like Riley, Lindsay was rebuffed by the record companies that he approached in the late 1920s —“by one in a very cruel manner,” likely Victor—because his work was not sufficiently commercial.² Turning to the academy, Lindsay solicited the assistance of Barnard College professor and lexicologist W. Cabell Greet, who owned a Speak-o-Phone recording device that he used to record samples of American dialects. Greet agreed, and together, in January 1931, they recorded nearly five hours’ worth of Lindsay’s poetry on thirty-eight aluminum records. Lindsay died eleven months later.

Lindsay’s appeal to Greet is significant because it marks a key moment in the birth of the poetry audio archive. Increasingly disdainful of the commercial record companies for their rejection of the Lindsay project that he embraced, Greet was inspired to begin an entire series of poetry recordings, which came to include the most eminent modernist poets, including Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and James Weldon Johnson. The practice of recording poetry has blossomed in the age of digital recording through archives such as PennSound, where the Lindsay recordings and others from Greet’s series, *The Speech Lab Recordings*, reside. These modern archives can trace their lineages through this historical moment and to Lindsay and Greet as central participants in the founding of the poetry audio archive.

I have previously written about these Lindsay recordings as the inception of and inspiration for *The Contemporary Poets Series*, a subset of *The Speech Lab Recordings* dedicated to poetry and eventually distributed to schools on a subscription basis.³ In that article, I make the argument that a significant detail in the history of these recordings is that Greet was a lexicologist and a scholar of American dialects—an ethnographer. Further, his recording engineer, Walter C. Garwick, invented the portable recording device that he would later sell to John A. Lomax and the Library of Congress for use in creating Lomax’s famous ethnographic field recordings, including those of cowboy songs and African American spirituals. Perhaps in no other recordings made for *The Contemporary Poets Series* is the link between American ethnography and American poetry so strong as it is with the Lindsay recordings.

The “Prairie Troubadour,” as Lindsay was called, composed and performed the poems you can hear in this collection for and about Americans, attempting to transfer to his listeners the same wanderlust and thirst for a variety of localism that propelled his walking journeys around the country. Indeed, Lindsay would “tramp” long distances across the nation, travelling, for example, from New York to Florida on foot, trading poems for food and lodging. His encounters with different American subcultures and locales served as the basis for his poetry, which would in turn become the currency to allow him to continue “preaching the gospel of beauty.” In fact, one of Lindsay’s earliest collections of poems is titled *Rhymes to Be Traded for Bread*, a title that playfully and earnestly presents the actual poems that Lindsay intends to trade for lodging and sustenance on his journey from his home in Springfield, IL, to the western part of the country. To be sure, Lindsay’s aesthetics derives from his immersion in the variegated subcultures of America and the music of their respective vernaculars, what he called “the natural rhythms of English speech.”⁴ I might say that Lindsay’s poetry is inflected by a trimodal distribution of locality. First and foremost, as I will elaborate, Lindsay’s poetics develop specifically from the Chicago of the early twentieth century. Second, Lindsay’s poems are imbued with a hybrid polylocalism constructed from cultural immersion in various American geographic milieux. And finally, Lindsay’s poetic experiments are refracted through an imaginary built on problematic representations of the other. Resonances of each of these factors can be heard in the recordings, more vividly and viscerally than in the texts of the poems themselves.

Starting from the influence of travel on Lindsay’s poetics, we might begin to locate his aesthetic lineage somewhere near the intersection of Whitman and Baudelaire. Just as Whitman was, as Kenneth Sherwood puts it, “an originator of distinctively American poetry, who drew upon contemporary speech forms and the Old Testament,” so too did Lindsay seek to blend his affinities for Biblical writings and modern American life in his “preaching the gospel of beauty.”⁵ But Lindsay’s *method* of approach mirrors that of the *flâneur* and the aesthetics of Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, Lindsay’s tramps through America closely parallel the immersive tendencies Baudelaire employed, strolling through Paris to become one with the multiplicity of the city, perhaps best captured in his collection of poems *Paris Spleen* (1869). Admittedly, Lindsay’s

tramps were more populist in ethos than the strolls of the aristocratic *flâneur*. Perhaps a contemporary Chicago influence in the Baudelarian tradition might be Maxwell Bodenheim, Lindsay's fellow denizen of the Dil Pickle Club, the radical Bohemian cabaret of the Chicago Renaissance. I'm thinking specifically of Bodenheim poems like "East Side Moving Picture Theatre—Sunday," in which the poem's speaker chronicles his view of movie house visitors awaiting the start of a film. He enacts the role of the *flâneur* by specifically focusing the poem's lens on the crowd, as the crowd focuses its collective consciousness on the screen. But Lindsay's content is more the Whitmanian celebration of unity through individuality than it is the proto-Objectivist voyeurism of Baudelaire and Bodenheim. For example, we can hear echoes of Whitman's "look for me under your boot-soles" in Lindsay's recording of the poem "The Traveller-Heart": "(To a man who maintained that the mausoleum is the stateliest possible manner of interment) // I would be one with dark, dark earth." This poem would not have been written, however, had Lindsay not had a "traveller-heart," immersing himself in the social milieu of the encounter he describes. Blending immersion, interaction, observation, and celebration, Lindsay's aesthetics emerged from the intersection of a nearly Romantic lyrical idealism and a very modern ethnographic immersion. And that ethnographic immersion intertwines with Greet's work in the speech lab.

If the Greet recordings can be said to combine poetry and linguistic ethnography, then perhaps the best illustration of this important combination is the process of going through the card catalog drawer at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where the catalog of the Greet recordings is housed. The vast majority of the index cards reference recordings of Americans from various localities, most of them Columbia students, reading and participating in interviews. These are recordings that Greet used to study American dialects. The cards bear descriptions that take this basic form: "Female, 22 years old, Philadelphia, PA," and "Male, 23 years old, Hartford, CT." Interspersed among the index cards for the dialect recordings, curiously, are similar cards for recordings of modernist poets like Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot. These are recordings that Greet created as part of *The Speech Lab Recordings*, the project he inaugurated with Lindsay. So observation and description lead to the distillation of culture—through voiced language—in an object. For Greet, that object

is the voice preserved on the physical recording; for Lindsay, his voice preserved in his poems. In this modernist combination of ethnography and poetry, we can begin to see Lindsay's role as a precursor to cross-disciplinary fields such as ethno-poetics.

Indeed, if we listen to Greet's recordings of American dialects, the collection functions as a concrete manifestation of Lindsay's lifestyle and ethos: the foregrounding of locality and the fascination with diversity and the other. As Greet sought out denizens of diverse locales in order to understand differences in our commonality, so too did Lindsay "tramp" through the country as the vagabond *flâneur*, seeking to achieve unity through immersion in multiplicity. Just as Greet collected and preserved his samples of dialects, fragments of disjointly contemporaneous Americana, Lindsay "felt his poems profoundly and really lived them," as H. L. Mencken wrote of him, making his life and his art a single and continuous testament to the living America that he hoped to record and preserve.⁶

Listening to samples of Greet's dialect recordings reveals a clear link between his phonetic ethnographic research and Lindsay's poetics. The recordings foreground the sonic facets of the speakers' voices, making them as crucial, if not more so, than the semantic content of the recordings. In doing so, they function as an empirical parallel to Lindsay's poetics. Lindsay emphasizes the musicality and the sonic properties of the American idiom, in much the same way that William Carlos Williams would treat the materiality of spoken language, or that Language poetry, nearly half a century later, would resist words as transparent pass-throughs to meaning. Lindsay's poetry does stand at a nexus of aesthetic lineages that lead in different, sometimes surprising, directions.⁷ But the relationship of Lindsay's poetics to Greet's linguistic ethnography is crucial to these recordings. They must be heard as part of an ethnographic initiative that focuses on locality, vernacular, the material properties of the human voice, and a performative poetics that both embraces and resists the printed word, all summing together into an aesthetic representation of Lindsay's America.

Despite his position at the crossroads of numerous strains of American poetry and his crucial work in reviving the poem as performance, Vachel Lindsay is not often claimed as a precursor. This is no doubt due to the disturbing racism portrayed by "The Congo," a poem whose visceral effects, as in all of Lindsay's recorded poems,

are amplified through performance. Much has been written about “The Congo” and its overt racism. I will briefly note that the poem does fit into a larger trend of problematic modernist “ethnographies” of the other. One example is the so-called Aboriginal issue of *Poetry* magazine, released in February 1917. Writing in her editorial comment, Harriet Monroe suggests that the “poems from American-Indian motives” in the issue express “racial feeling and rhythm.” This suggestion of an essential racial rhythm pervades poetic theory of the early twentieth century, as Michael Golston has shown. According to Golston, by the late 1930s—just after these recordings of Lindsay were made—“experimental work on rhythm had coalesced into a series of theoretical equations comprising a budding scientific field that linked the human pulse, genetic difference, racial metabolisms, the unconscious, machine-age work, and the geophysical environment: human bodies and minds, it appeared, were genetically precoded to respond to certain rhythms that manifested themselves in cultural productions as distinct as national fingerprints.”⁸ Much more could be said on the intersection of modern poetry’s history with scientific understandings of race. And we might read Greet’s prescriptivist linguistics, his interest in locating the “correct” American dialect, to be an extension of this politics. Whether the current study of poetic literary history should continue to ignore Lindsay is also an ongoing debate. Lindsay’s distorted and harmful ideas of race should be read alongside and as an accompanying frame to his crucial intervention into the revival of a performed poetry, just as contemporary, descriptivist understandings of linguistics find Greet’s contributions both problematic and significant.

Chicago: Populist Poetics and Publishing

Like his imaginations of the other, Lindsay’s fascination with an American polylocalism filters through the Chicago of the early twentieth century, a creative locus catalyzed by The World’s Columbian Exposition (World’s Fair) of 1893. And it was within Chicago’s thriving network of populist art that Lindsay found his poetic footing. Of course, Lindsay’s work was promoted by Harriet Monroe in *Poetry* magazine, most importantly through the publication of “General William Booth Enters into Heaven” in January 1913. Lindsay also appeared

in the first issue of Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*, founded in Chicago in 1914. Beyond publishing venues, Chicago offered social venues like the Dil Pickle Club that provided the physical space to stimulate the development of a distinctly Chicagoan democratic-populist strain of poetics, one that echoes through the sound of the Lindsay recordings and others in Greet's series.

The Dil Pickle, founded in 1916 by labor organizer Jack Jones, was located in Chicago's Near North Side, at 18 Tooker Place, near the Newberry Library. The club and performance space was founded with an anti-capitalist, pro-worker, and anti-normative social aesthetic, deriving from Jones's work with the International Workers of the World (IWW) and his affinity for the bohemian lifestyle. Despite the specific social framing of the club's founding, it was inclusive of all social classes and ideological positions. In fact, all that was excluded, it seems, was exclusivity itself. In a history of the club, Roger A. Bruns writes of Jones that he "brought together writers and artists with hobos and thieves, professors and politicians with hopheads and whores, gangsters and labor organizers with lawyers and social workers."⁹ In addition to camaraderie, the club's focus was on performance. Its stage would highlight all manner of creative and critical topics, many of which would elicit strong reactions from the audience, not always approving. Lindsay's performative and interactive aesthetics made him a perfect guest for the club. Other denizens of the space, in addition to Lindsay, included Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Ralph Chapin, Monroe, Bodenheim, Alfred Kreyborg, and Carl Sandburg.

Greet's *Speech Lab Recordings* certainly taps into the labor-inflected populism that emanated from the Chicago-based epicenter of the Dil Pickle Club. The Club's poetics can be heard in recordings made for Greet by Masters and Sandburg, collections of which I have also edited. From Masters's haunting series of epitaph poems from *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) and *The New Spoon River* (1924), to Sandburg's musical performances of "Cold Rainy Day" and "When Cockle Shells Turn Silver Bells," these recordings are heavily inflected with Chicago's populist, performance-forward aesthetics, steeped in the social churn of the years of the First World War and the Interwar Period. Dil Pickle frequenter Ralph Chapin's famous labor song "Solidarity Forever" could almost serve as a sonic epigraph, or what I call an epiphone, for these recordings.

Chicago also played a key role in the founding and distribution of *The Contemporary Poets Series*, the subset of *The Speech Lab Recordings* meant for distribution. Greet engaged the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to produce and distribute copies of the Lindsay records to schools on a subscription basis. The NCTE was founded in Chicago in 1911, taking as its headquarters the Great Northern Hotel at 267 South Dearborn Street, where the Council's first meeting occurred on December 1–2, 1911. As the Council worked from their Chicago offices to create an official journal of English pedagogy, *The English Journal*, they gave their critical and pedagogical endeavor a “small-press” feel similar to the ethos of the modernist magazines blocks away in Chicago's Loop and Near North Side. It seems fair to call *The Contemporary Poets Series* itself a small “magazine,” albeit sonic. Though it was formed nearly twenty years after the founding of both *Poetry* and *The English Journal*, Greet's series carried with it a similar oppositional and populist aesthetics that sought to reform poetry pedagogy through democratic participation, an aesthetics steeped in the Chicago of the 1910s.

From Transduction through Transcoding: The Difficulty of Representing Lindsay's Aesthetics

While the ability to hear Lindsay's poems may bring the listener closer to the aesthetics of the work than reading the text of his poems, even the phonotextual experience has its limitations. Many of Lindsay's poems exist in the space between the printed poem, Lindsay's performance of the poem, his accompanying artwork, and in some cases, a dimension of kinesis in which the poem's audience completes the work through participating in what Lindsay terms a “poem-game.” Through these multidimensional works, Lindsay transcends the idea of phonotextuality (sound + text) that's often associated with him and forces his work into the visual and physical planes as well. Here we might think of the resonances between Lindsay's work and the typographic innovations taking place contemporaneously in Europe by the Futurists and the Dadaists, from Apollinaire's and Tristan Tzara's calligrams to Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*. As such, representing Lindsay's poems in a manner true to their ethos is very difficult, if not impossible.

We have to look closely at each manifestation of the poems in order even to locate where Lindsay's poetry lies. Perhaps the best way to begin this process is to consider the development of his poems, from composition through individualization by those who experience them.

Many of Lindsay's poems are wrought from song or sonic patterns. As Harriet Monroe said of his poetry, it is "an art appealing to the ear rather than the eye."¹⁰ For example, if we listen to his recorded comments on the composition of "The Locomotive Dragon-Hippogriff," Lindsay tells us that the poem is composed to the tune of a Sousa march.¹¹ Similarly, in his recorded comments on "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes," Lindsay informs his listeners that the sonic template for the poem is not "The Night Before Christmas," a common misunderstanding, but rather Robert Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix." Further, in the printed versions of poems like "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," paratexts inform readers of the tunes that should be performed in accompaniment to the poems (e.g., "To be sung to the tune of 'The Blood of the Lamb'"); listeners to the Greet recordings can hear Lindsay perform the poems accordingly. In his recorded comments on "General William Booth," Lindsay indicates that the poem is scored as a hybrid between the musical tune of "The Blood of the Lamb" (i.e., the lines should be sung) and the unsung meter of the song (i.e., they should be read or chanted). A small glimpse into Lindsay's compositional method is given in Dennis Camp's biography of Lindsay. The author would compose some of his poems along with his nieces, ages four and two, by marching around while singing and chanting "a poem in the making"—in this case, "The Sea Serpent Chantey," a recording of which appears in this collection. It became a regular occurrence for Lindsay and the children to "parade around the dining-room" composing parts of the poem in a kinetic fervor.¹² Mencken tells a similar story of Lindsay composing "The Trial of the Dead Cleopatra," where he "marched up and down chanting it in the manner of a man moved by some tremendous discovery."¹³ From these anecdotes of Lindsay's shamanic compositional method and through textual and auditory evidence, there is clearly an inextricable bond in Lindsay's poetry between the poem as sounded entity, developed through the body and motion, and the poem as it exists on the page.

So we might say that Lindsay's composition of his poems marks a kind of transduction. In the same way that Greet's recording device

would transduce a physical phenomenon (sound/pressure in the air) into electrical impulses to be captured and preserved on aluminum discs, so too did Lindsay transduce a kinesis (an abstract sonic and rhythmic pattern, grounded in the physical reality of motion) into a written composition. While Lindsay was indeed sanguine on the artistic possibilities of new media forms (think here, also, of his work as one of the first film theorists), and while he certainly saw sound recording as less reductive than print, we should also recognize that for him sound recordings were a “lossy” format. The physical motions that birth and charge the poems are lost to some degree due to the medium’s limited capacity to reproduce them. I have no doubt that if Lindsay had lived longer, he would have created poetry on film.

A form of intermediation in themselves, Lindsay’s poems function very much like the records Greet recorded them on: they are material representations of no longer extant sonic and physical phenomena. These recordings are then meta-recordings, recordings of recordings, or perhaps transcodings. They begin as sound and end as sound, passing through several materialities along the way. In this regard, the poems’ ontological evolution mirrors the recordings’ reproduction process. A small subset of the original recordings made on aluminum records were subsequently dubbed to production LPs, to be distributed by the NCTE, and those copies were later dubbed to a record released by Caedmon.¹⁴ The Caedmon record underwent another evolution when it was digitized for PennSound. The full set of recordings, presented as *The W. Cabell Greet Recordings*, were dubbed from the aluminum records to reel-to-reel tapes by the Library of Congress in the 1970s; it was from these reels that the digitized files presented in this collection were made. I argue that the process of transduction and transcoding so familiar to us vis-à-vis sound recordings mirrors a less understood process, that of the representation and preservation of the sounds of Lindsay’s America as his poems.

To focus solely on Lindsay’s poems as static snapshots in time, even in a progressive medium, however, would be to discount what was to Lindsay the most crucial aspect of a poem’s lifecycle: the unique and non-replicable transmutation that occurs (and reoccurs) when the poem is experienced by a listener. The listeners that Lindsay imagined for his performances were not to be passive or marginal to the poet’s activity. Rather, Lindsay sought a form of communion

with his listeners in which the bidirectional transference of energy between performer and audience would draw them together in a way that was impossible through the printed page, but could be approximated on the recordings that he was so determined to produce. The unattributed text on the inside cover of Lindsay's 1929 *Every Soul Is a Circus* expresses his views clearly: "Lindsay...rescued poetry from the library and restored the art to its early dignity as a social exercise."¹⁵ A decade and a half earlier, Harriet Monroe had noted in similar terms that Lindsay sought to "restore poetry to its proper place—the audience chamber, and take it out of the library, the closet" (*COP* vi). Both Lindsay and Monroe figure the "library"—or the printed page—as a metonym for making a closet drama of living poetry. For listeners, this trope should help put the Greet recordings in a particular frame of experience. If he could have imagined it, Lindsay would not have wanted the digitized and preserved form of these recordings, nor even the audience listening to them, to represent a finality of purpose. He suggests through his poetics what he hopes the final product of his poetry will be: a social performativity, including and especially in his absence. The best examples are his so-called poem-games.

Poetry to Dance: The Poem-Game as Kinetic Interpretation

In his recorded commentary on the poems "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," "A Swan Is Like a Moon to Me," "The Blacksmith's Serenade," and "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes," Lindsay informs us that these poems have been designed to be danced as "poem-games." While Lindsay doesn't expound at any length on their poetics until the preface of *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (1917), the idea of the poem-games seems to date back as early as 1908, around the time he composed "The Potatoes' Dance." When Lindsay performed the poem for a group of kindergarteners (it was one of many poems that he wrote for children), they began to dance around to the poem's rhythms, "the natural rhythms of English speech" (*CN* 95). The poem-games would not be fully developed until the summer of 1916 at the University of Chicago, when Lindsay worked with a dancer named Eleanor Dougherty.¹⁶ But for Lindsay this earlier event with the children germinated the basic form and rationale of the poem-game:

that poems written and performed “in the spirit of children playing London Bridge,” at parties and other social gatherings, could restore poetry as an active and social enterprise (CN 97). The children’s dancing of the poem was also significant to Lindsay because it combined pedagogy and expression, much like what we call “active learning” in modern educational parlance. The children learned the poem by interacting with it and making it their own through physical interpretation, discovering the poem’s “secret rhythm” (ESIC xix).

Lindsay’s most developed conception of the poem-game calls for at least two parties: one dancer (or more) in the center of the room and a reciter reading the poem from the sideline. The reciter reads, sings, or chants as appropriate, while the dancer keeps a little behind the meter of the poem, “thinking only of the music of the poem, not the meaning” and locating/interpreting through movement the poem’s “subterranean stream” of rhythm (ESIC xviii-xix). The goal is for the poem to become “writing in air,” suggesting yet another complex transcoding. Here again we see Lindsay’s foregrounding of the materiality of language and his spatial construction of the elements that make up his *mise-en-scène*, each in its proper position within the hierarchy: “the English word is still first in importance, the dancer comes second, the chanter third” (CN 93). In a way, Lindsay’s subordination of music to dance and dance to poetry reorders the hierarchy of these same elements proposed by Pound in the epigraph of this essay. Similarly, by elevating language, Lindsay’s reordered hierarchy would seem to invert the notion of theatrical *mise-en-scène* that Antonin Artaud sets forth in *Theatre and Its Double* (1938), where dialogue is jettisoned in favor of non-lingual sonic and visual elements. Like Pound and Artaud, however, Lindsay emphasizes above all the importance of building a *mise-en-scène* by appealing to a variety of senses. Prioritizing “the English word,” as Lindsay does in the poem-games, could even be read as casting the word as a material element and an incantatory force, a sounded entity more in line with Artaud’s concept of theatrical utterance than with the word understood as a linguistic unit. In other words, through the poem-games Lindsay proposes a primordial, sonic expressivity that transcends semantics, not unlike Reuven Tsur’s concept of Cognitive Poetics.

Thus the poem-games represent a return to the kinetic impulses that Lindsay manifested in the poems: the poet stamped around the kitchen table to put his energy into the poems, and his reader will

release that same energy back into the physical space of the poem-game by dancing it. This transference of energy marks the kind of communion between poet and audience for which Lindsay strove. The poetics of poem-games is also a kind of proto-reader response theory. While Lindsay sets forth the framework of the game, it is a reader/listener who completes the poem by giving it a physical interpretation within the confines of the game's "rules." This summation—Lindsay's poem-game plus its realized interpretation—is the completed poem. The poem is unique each time it is experienced and cannot exist without both poet and interpreter in communication.

Lindsay's Complicated Relationship to Music

Lindsay's indications about the role of musicality in his poetry are quite equivocal, and the ostensible contradictions are compounded, not reconciled, by what listeners hear in the Greet recordings. As I have shown, Lindsay composed many of his poems to familiar song tunes. His poem titles also often employ a distinctive musical vocabulary ("chant," "dirge," "jazz," etc.) to indicate a given work's intended musical effects; in poems like "The Congo" he used percussive rhythms that, as Richard Hyland notes, "take us over...and don't let go." All of these signs suggest that Lindsay saw poetry and music as sibling arts. But in some of his poetics statements Lindsay suggests otherwise. In his instructions for dancing the poem-games, he dictates:

There is only one rule: leave out all musical instruments and singing. To elucidate: leave out thumping, drumming, and musical notation and any imitations of singing and orchestras. Elaborate reading is what is required, reading that comes to the edge of a chant without having the literary meaning clouded by the chant. (*ESIC* xvii)

Perhaps there is a fine line between "elaborate reading" and singing. But the Greet recordings capture Lindsay in a performance mode that most listeners would call "chanting" at the least and "singing" at the most: moving from his modal voice up toward the falsetto register and down as low as a vocal fry. In Louis Zukofsky's famous integral for locating poetry—lower limit: speech; upper limit: music—Lindsay seems much closer to the upper limit.

Perhaps the best way to approach Lindsay's creation of a binary opposition between poetry and music is to consider it a proto-deconstruction. At the time that Lindsay writes his poetics, he feels that music is central to the social customs of the American people and that poetry is marginal: "The American people, so much on the lookout for new sources of pleasure, might think of sampling [poetry]" (*ESIC* xxvii). Calling music a "mechanical weight against which the spoken word has to struggle" may be Lindsay's attempt to create an inversion where the central becomes marginal and vice versa (*ESIC* xxiv). Perhaps it is in the recordings of the poems themselves that the reversal is undone and music and poetry are allowed to exist in a free play of existence. When we listen to the recording of "General William Booth" after reading Lindsay's poetics on music and poetry, we might imagine music and poetry as cohabitant in a sort of duck-rabbit effect: we notice that the poem can be heard as both poetry and music, thus resolving the opposition.

Or perhaps Lindsay is differentiating between setting poetry to music and performing poetry musically. Such an idea is certainly in line with the poetics of many of Lindsay's contemporaries. We might think here of Pound's dictum to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome." Here, then, is one way to approach Lindsay's feelings on the relationship between music and poetry: perhaps he embraced the modernist idea that the subtle musical textures of language comprise a soundscape that resists excessive poetic artifice, like the metrical regularity of instrumental accompaniment. If so, we can say that Lindsay blurs the line between the classic lyric and modern poetry, just as he stands as the forebear of different, sometimes conflicting, poetic lineages. All of this brings us back to the question of the stability of the poem as a transduced, inscribed object.

Ontology of the Recordings: Prescription or Possibility?

Of special interest to me are instances when a poet takes great care to use the printed page as an aural score. Such attention to scoring suggests that the poet is striving to have the reader experience the poem just as he or she heard it during composition. Some examples

include Schwitters's scoring of *Ursonate*; James Weldon Johnson's efforts with his 1927 *God's Trombones* to preserve the rhetorical delivery of African American preachers of the early twentieth century; and Charles Olson's and Robert Creeley's interest in the typewriter as compositional device.¹⁷ Upon submitting a set of poems to Harriet Monroe for possible publication in *Poetry* in 1914, Lindsay included a cover letter in which he wrote: "I respectfully submit these poems as experiments in which I endeavor to carry this vaudeville form back towards the old Greek precedent of the half-chanted lyric...two thirds spoken, one third sung: in this case, the one-third must be added by instinct of the reader" (*COP* vii). One way to interpret the supposed need for the reader's "one-third" contribution is that text on paper is a privative medium. James Weldon Johnson makes a similar comment in the preface to *God's Trombones*, describing the reader's need to interpret because of paper's inability to represent. If we think again of Lindsay's poem-games, another way to interpret this idea is that for Lindsay the reader determines what constitutes the poem in its fully realized form. In other words, the reader completes the poem not because of the medium's inability to preserve, but rather because the poem manifests differently for each reader: there is no stable object to be preserved or represented in the first place.

But then we return to the question: what of Lindsay's meticulous scoring of his poetry for sound? As we have seen, Lindsay's poems often include paratexts that provide guidance about how they should be chanted. These paratexts are somewhat similar to the performance directions that often appear in sheet music, though Lindsay's directions are often vague or equivocal (e.g., "Like the wind in the chimney"). The paratextual performance notes suggest that Lindsay's *printed* poems are meant to serve not only as librettos but also as prescriptive texts for the *sounded* poem, the *real* poem. Heard this way, the recordings take on a prescriptive or didactic function of their own: they say there is a correct way to perform the poem, the way Lindsay composed it, and here is what it should sound like.

Such considerations bring us to the ontological question: what are these recordings? Are they prescriptive models for how the poems *should* sound? In that regard, will they create a tight phonotextual experience allowing a reader/listener to understand the paratextual notes on sound more clearly? Or are these recordings examples of

a way the poems *could* sound? In other words, are these recordings themselves in some sense poem-games, where a rough set of constraints is imposed, but the rest of the performance is left open to interpretation? To begin, we need to take a step further back and ask to what degree these recordings *are* the poems themselves. In other words, if Lindsay felt that textual representations of his poems were librettos for the sounded poems, are these recordings in some sense the actual poems, with the textual representations being a preservational adjunct? Or are these recordings themselves representations of the actual poems, which are lost outside of Lindsay's living performance of them? Such an ontology would reflect the epigraph of this essay and its hierarchy privileging physicality over musicality, and musicality over textuality.

While I prefer an ethos in which recording poems opens them to possibility, I must admit that in digitizing these recordings I very much looked forward to hearing how the poems "should" sound, especially in light of Lindsay's paratextual prescriptions. For example, in "Dirge for a Righteous Kitten," I was drawn to the performance notes ("*To be intoned, all but the two italicized lines, which are to be spoken in a snappy, matter-of-fact way*"), and I was interested to hear Lindsay perform the poem. Upon hearing the recording, the poet's nebulous guide to performance was immediately clarified. Further, what appeared to be a simplistic, whimsically macabre poem emerged as more complex on a sonic level. The way Lindsay reads most of the lines (save the two noted) enacts the funeral bell invoked by the onomatopoeic opening and closing lines. In other words, by "intone" Lindsay means to let each line ring like the bell. The two lines exempted from this prescription enact a kind of dampening of the bell (in the percussive sense). After hearing the recording, I was positive I knew how the poem should sound. But then what of Lindsay's poetics on audience participation? Is there any room open for variation in the performance of the poem—perhaps through different note lengths for the tolling bell? Or did Lindsay intend this recording to be the definitive model? Obviously there is no clear answer, but the fundamental nature of the question itself demonstrates how these recordings expose new complexity in Lindsay's poetry and poetics.

The Inspiration for The Contemporary Poets Series and Beyond

In a letter to Sara Teasdale written only months before his death, Lindsay reveals that he and Greet planned to record more of Lindsay's poetry on an annual basis.¹⁸ In fact, as Lindsay refers to the poetry he plans to record as "brand new tunes," it seems likely that at least some of the poems would exist solely as sounded entities, perhaps never being reproduced in print. This correspondence suggests that Lindsay planned to move his work even further into the interstices between poetry and music. It is also one of the earliest proposals in the US that poetry be captured and distributed first, and perhaps only, as sound.

This idea, exceptionally radical for its time, once again locates Lindsay in an aesthetic matrix—a latticework of poets who sought to preserve sound in the media most accessible to them. In an earlier period, Riley prefigures Lindsay in his desire to preserve speech sounds on the printed page and in finding an ultimate sonic realization for them in the Victor records. In Lindsay's period, James Weldon Johnson's and Schwitters's scored poems are kindred projects to his own use of print and phonographic media. Looking forward, it seems fair to say that Lindsay's poetry and poetics serve as an important precursor to twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry that cannot exist on the printed page (or at the very least resists it). Under this category fall poetic traditions as far-ranging as the Beats and their emphasis on spontaneous prosody; ethnopoeitics and its work on scoring oral traditions; and experimental schools like sound poetry and digital poetry, including poets like Jaap Blonk, cris cheek, and Tracie Morris. We could locate Lindsay's relationship to these avant-garde traditions in the American reception of Dada during and after the First World War, when the movement filtered to Chicago through the pages of Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*.

Of course, the additional recordings Greet and Lindsay had planned were never realized due to Lindsay's death. Nonetheless, his impact on the field of phonotextual studies cannot be overstated. These recordings represent not just a finite set of nearly every extant recording of Lindsay reading his work, but also the first step toward liberating poetry from its "banishment...to the libraries" (*ESIC* xxiii).¹⁹ Lindsay's death galvanized Greet's efforts to found *The Contemporary Poets Series*. I suspect that most of the poets whom Greet recorded

in the speech lab found that the experience with sound technology advanced their poetry. Johnson, whose stated aim in *God's Trombones* was to preserve the speech sounds and rhetorical delivery of black folk sermons, was given an inscriptive medium beyond the printed page for precisely this purpose. Stein, for her part, used the lab to experiment further with a poetics that rests so much on logics belonging to the sonic properties of language. And Williams, in a work called "The Defective Record," created one of the first poems to self-consciously interact with the medium of sound recording. All of these examples point to the speech lab as a locus of poetic formal innovation. Backed by the Chicago-based NCTE, the pedagogical intent of the series serves as the precursor to the pedagogy of contemporary phonotextual initiatives like PennSound.

So much of this essay has been about tracing lineages—of tendencies in poetics, and of poems themselves as they oscillate between media—and the desire to locate origin points in the archive. We might be reminded here of Derrida's *Mal d'Archive*, and the caution that there are no origins to be found in the archive, that every story is encountered in *media res*. Nonetheless, if we can allow ourselves to become ill with the archive fever for a moment, I do think the Lindsay recordings mark an origin point of sorts, insofar as they represent a speech act. The act of Lindsay's seeking out Greet and not taking no for an answer, insisting on the preservation of his poems as sound, has resonated through the archive and is still audible today. If Lindsay were alive today, I believe that he would argue that the free, digital distribution of these recordings also marks a new form of populist access to art, one that forges a communion between poet and downloader.

NOTES

While *The W. Cabell Greet Recordings* is the most complete collection of Vachel Lindsay's recordings to date, there probably remain recordings yet to be discovered. Textual evidence suggests that Greet made records of Lindsay reading the poems "Kallyope Yell" and "When I Was a Tree." These recordings are missing.

1/ According to Albert Edmund Trombly, Lindsay claimed to see his poems first as visual art before he converted them to sound, then into the performed poem, and finally into writing. We might think of these serial mediations as transcodings, similar to those done to the sound files in this collection: an evolution that both adds and destroys with conversion. See Albert Edmund Trombly, *Vachel Lindsay, Adventurer* (Columbia, MO: Lucas Brothers, 1929), 126.

2/ See W. Cabell Greet, "The Lindsay Records," *The Elementary English Review* 9 (May 1932): 122; Greet, "Records of Poets," *American Speech* 9 (December 1934): 312–13.

3/ See Chris Mustazza, "Provenance Report," *Jacket2 Magazine* (May 2014), <https://jacket2.org/article/provenance-report>. This article also goes into greater detail on the role played in Greet's *Contemporary Poets Series* by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), discussed briefly here.

4/ Vachel Lindsay, *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 95. Hereafter cited as *CN*.

5/ Kenneth Sherwood, "Elaborate Versionings: Characteristics of Emergent Performance in Three Print/Oral/Aural Poets," *Oral Tradition* 21, no.1 (2006): 119.

6/ H. L. Mencken, *Vachel Lindsay* (Washington, DC: Keystone Press, 1947), 1.

7/ Lindsay could also be claimed as a forebear of poetries that reflect a more lyrical or confessional style. Discussing Lindsay's role as an influence on slam poetry, Tyler Hoffman quotes from a Roger Ebert review of the film *SlamNation* (1998): "Most of the material exists halfway between rap music and Vachel Lindsay." See Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 200.

8/ Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 47.

9/ Roger A. Bruns, *The Damndest Radical: The Life and World of Ben Reitman, Chicago's Celebrated Social Reformer, Hobo King, and Whorehouse Physician* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 232. For more on the

Dil Pickle Club, see Franklin Rosemont, *The Rise & Fall of the Dil Pickle Club: Chicago's Wild 20s!* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2013), as well as Paul Durica's introduction to that volume.

10/ Vachel Lindsay, *The Congo and Other Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), vi. Hereafter cited as *COP*.

11/ In an amusing collision of mechanical error and content, as the recording device begins to skip, Lindsay's voice enacts the stomping feel of a Sousa march. For more on this phenomenon, see my post "Glitch is Never More Than an Extension of Content," *Stazz's Stuff*, 26 April 2014, <http://mustazza.blogspot.com/2014/04/glitch-is-never-more-than-extension-of.html>.

12/ Dennis Camp, *Uncle Boy: A Biography of Vachel Lindsay* (Springfield, IL: The Vachel Lindsay Association, 2012), http://www.vachellindsay.org/UncleBoy/uncle_boy.pdf.

13/ Mencken, *Vachel Lindsay*, 2.

14/ The first Lindsay recordings added to PennSound were digitized from this LP. More information on the Caedmon Lindsay, including images of the album, can be found on the PennSound Lindsay page.

15/ Vachel Lindsay, *Every Soul Is a Circus* (New York: Macmillan, 1929). Hereafter cited as *ESIC*.

16/ It was at the University of Chicago in 1916 that Lindsay and Dougherty performed the poem-games, including "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," a recording of which appears in this collection. See Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Norton, 1959), 245. Still, there is some confusion as to the origins of the poem-games; elsewhere Lindsay traces them to Spokane, Washington (*ESIC* xvii).

17/ For more on James Weldon Johnson as a cultural preservationist, see Chris Mustazza, "James Weldon Johnson and *The Speech Lab Recordings*," *Oral Tradition* 30, no. 1 (2016): 95–110.

18/ Vachel Lindsay, *The Annotated Letters of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay to Sara Trevor Teasdale* (Springfield, IL: The Vachel Lindsay Association), http://www.vachellindsay.org/LetterstoSara/vl_letters_242_264.pdf.

19/ Lindsay's "first step" toward liberating poetry from the printed page came alongside projects like the Harvard Vocarium initiative of Frederick C. Packard, who recorded poets in the same period that Greet did. Greet's writings suggest, though, that he was not aware of the contemporaneous initiative at Harvard.