The Remediation of Storytelling: Narrative Performance on Early Commercial Sound Recordings

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FROM THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY and the first scholarly recognition of oral tradition as a cultural process, there has been a concomitant concern among students of language and expressive culture with the transformative effects of new technologies of communication on oral performance. One facet of the problem that has concerned scholars of oral narrative from the Brothers Grimm to the theorists of ethnopoetics and the orality-literacy debates is the process of remediation, specifically, the rendering of face-to-face performance forms through the mediation of another communicative technology. What happens when we render oral stories in writing? What are the epistemological, cognitive, aesthetic, and other implications of transferring storytelling from live performance to the printed page? There is a large and ever-growing scholarly literature on these matters, and I shall not even attempt to summarize it here. Rather, I propose to extend the exploration of remediation in a new, largely unexplored direction by examining the adaptation of storytelling to another technology of communication, namely, sound recording. More specifically, I deal here with the representation of oral storytelling on early commercial sound recordings in the United States, from the late 1890s through the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. This was the formative period in the development of commercial sound recording in the United States, a period of experimentation as the early producers of records for a popular market explored the technological and commercial potential of the new medium. The advent of sound recording was widely hailed as a means of capturing and preserving the living voice for later reproduction, a means of transcending the ephemerality of performance. But how did the process actually work? What aspects of their history did the recorded performances carry with them as they were recontextualized from live events to commercial recordings? What new features did the process of recording call forth? And what was the broader cultural field in which these transformations occurred?

As a point of entry into this broad arena of investigation, I deal in this chapter with a series of recordings made by some of the earliest featured performers of the new medium, performers whose recordings demonstrate significant transformations
that reshaped oral storytelling as it was adapted to commercial recording. I intend this chapter to serve as an exploration in the history, culture, and technology of storytelling as a performance form, with special attention to changes that attended the process of remediation from copresent, live performance to sound recording made for a nascent commercial market.

Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade

The first example I consider, “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” was recorded in 1903 by one of the earliest stars of the new medium, Cal Stewart. Stewart’s recorded performances in his adopted persona of Uncle Josh Weathersby of Pumpkin Center, a fictional small town in rural New England, were immensely popular from the last years of the nineteenth century through his death in 1919 and for some years thereafter. Uncle Josh, as Stewart portrayed him, was an incarnation of a stock figure in nineteenth-century American popular culture, the comic rustic Yankee, a symbolic vehicle for the representation of social contrasts between old-fashioned and modern social types and of the encounter of passing ways of life with the new ways of emergent modernity (Rourke 1959, 3–32; Tandy 1964, 1–19).

The stage Yankee appeared in a number of performance vehicles, including prominently dramatic sketches of rural and small town life, rendered in a distinctive vernacular style that was characterized by stereotypical dialect forms, homely images, colorful exclamations, and an understated but loquacious mode of delivery. One of the popular guises in which the stage Yankee appeared, from the mid-1820s onward, was as a performer of stories and recitations in the form of a comic monologue (Nickels 1993, 76–77), a platform format well suited to that mode of traditional storytelling that involves virtuosic performance by a narrator who holds the floor for an extended period of time. Though Stewart was an experienced actor in Yankee theatrical roles, the comic monologue was the performance form in which he excelled and which he cultivated with enormous success in the persona of Uncle Josh Weathersby. The overwhelming majority of Stewart’s recorded performances as Uncle Josh are in narrative form, but for present purposes I focus on one of his popular recordings that illustrates one important presentational mode in the remediation of oral storytelling to phonograph records.

“Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” is a version of a tale reported to be one of Abraham Lincoln’s favorites, part of a large class of narratives in American oral tradition revolving around the horse trader as a trickster figure whose quick wit and glib tongue allow him to manipulate less clever victims to his own advantage (Bauman 1986, 11–32; Dorson 1959, 71). In Stewart’s version, the story becomes a local character anecdote featuring Jim Lawson, one of the more colorful citizens of Pumpkin Center and the key figure in a number of Stewart’s Uncle Josh routines.

Cal Stewart, “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” Monarch 1475, pre-matrix, take 6; April 27, 1903.

Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade, by Mr. Cal Stewart. [Laughs]

Well, sir, Jim Lawson,

he was calculated to be just about the best hoss trader in Punkin Center.
But a gypsy come along one day
    an’ I guess he took all the conceit outa Jim in the way o’ tradin’ hosses.
You see, he trade’im a mighty fine lookin’ animal
    only had one very bad fault:
any time he’d go to ride ’im,
    happened to touch ’im on the sides,
then he’d squat right down.

Well, Jim knowed if he didn’t get rid o’ that hoss,
    his reputation as a hoss trader was forever gone.
So he went over to see Deacon Witherspoon.
Deacon was old an’ gouty,
    kinda hard for ’im to get around,
    an’ he was mighty fond o’ goin’ a’huntin’.
He had to hunt on hossback.
An’ Jim says, “Deacon, I got a hoss you oughta have.
    He’s a setter.”
Deacon says, “Why, Jim, I never heered tell o’ such a thing in all o’ my life.
    Idea of a horse bein’ a setter.
Bring ’im over, Jim,
    I’d like to see ’im.”

Well, Jim took the hoss over, an’ they went out a’huntin’.
They was a’ridin’ along an’ Jim, he saw a rabbit a’sottin’ in the bushes
    an’ he just touched the ol’ hoss on the sides,
    an’ he squatted right down. [Laughs]
Deacon says, “Well, what’s the matter with your hoss, Jim?
    Look what he be a’doin’.”
Jim says, “Keep still, Deacon.
Don’t you see that rabbit over thar in the bushes?
    Ol’ hoss is a’sottin’ of ’im.”
Deacon says, “Well, well, I wanta know,
    most remarkable thing I ever seen in my life.
Well, now, did you ever?
How would you like to trade?”
‘N’ Jim says, “I’ll trade you, Deacon,
    hundred ‘n’ fifty dollars to boot.”
Well, they traded hosses,
    an’ when they was a’comin’ home,
they had to ford the creek back o’ Punkin’ Center.
Well, when the ol’ hosses was wadin’ along through the water,
    Deacon went to pull ‘is feet up,
    keep ‘em from gettin’ wet,
    ’n’ he touched the ol’ hoss on the sides,
    and ‘e squatted right down’n the creek. [Laughs]
Deacon says, “Now, lookee here, Jim.
What’s the matter with this here hoss?
He ain’t a settin’ now, be he?”
Jim says, “Yes, he is, Deacon.
He sees fish in the water.
He’s trained to set for suckers same as for rabbits, Deacon.”
[Laughs]

As featured on the recording, “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” is told as if to a copresent interlocutor in a face-to-face, immediate interaction. In the opening line of the narration, Uncle Josh addresses his interlocutor as “sir,” the conventional appellative of respect. And in line 6, the second person pronoun in “You see” serves as a phatic gesture that picks out the addressee and signals that the narrative is directed at him. These deictic forms serve as contextualization cues that invite the listener to the recording to assume the participant role of targeted addressee, eliding the temporal gap and technological mediation between the recording event and the listening event.

Uncle Josh delivers the story in his characteristic speech style: informal, vernacular, marked by stereotypically “rural” dialect forms. Stewart, who was born and raised in Virginia, made some effort to sound like a New Englander in his Uncle Josh performances, but even those features that he considered distinctive to that region extend more broadly across the country. Stewart apparently considered the preterit form “sot” for “sat” or “set” to be especially distinctive of Yankee speech and he used it heavily, not only in this performance but in others. Indeed, he overused it, coining grammatical variants (“sottin’”) that were not current in actual speech. Yet “sot,” as well as “knowed” (for ‘knew’) and “heared” (for ‘heard’) had a wide currency in American vernacular speech (Atwood 1953, 21, 17, 16; Wentworth 1944, 580, 344, 283). Perhaps the most distinctive New England usage to mark Uncle Josh’s speech is “be” as a progressive aspect auxiliary verb for “am,” “are,” “is,” as in “Look what he be a’ doin’” (line 29), yet it too was occasionally documented in other parts of the country (Atwood 1953, 27; Wentworth 1944, 45–46).

In addition to the general dialect features that characterize Uncle Josh’s speech, several elements came to define his personal style, including his relatively flat intonation, and his trademark laugh, which punctuated the narration on all his recordings. In all, however, though Uncle Josh’s speech displayed a few features that would have been recognizable indicators of New England dialect to those familiar with the region, his overall speech style was an amalgam of lexical and grammatical elements of relatively broad regional distribution in American rural vernacular speech that listeners throughout the United States would have recognized as a generalized “country” dialect—perhaps not precisely like the dialect of their own region, but with
enough familiar elements to do the indexical work of establishing Uncle Josh as a quintessentially rustic figure.

The formal structure of the narrative exhibits many of the common features of American oral storytelling, including prominently the following:

1. The use of “well” as an opening and subsequently as an episode marker (lines 11, 24, 39, 42) (cf. Bauman 1986, 23, 25, 42, 56–58, 83–90, 108–11);
2. The division of the narrative into three principal episodes consisting of dyadic interactions between the dramatis personae (here Jim Lawson and Deacon Witherspoon), played out in quoted dialogue (cf. Johnstone 1996, 40);
3. The predominant use of the historical present (“Jim says,” “Deacon says”) of the verbs of saying employed as quotative frames (cf. Johnstone 1990, 77–88);
4. Uncle Josh’s signature laugh, an exuberant cackle that signals the narrator’s own amusement at the narrated event and serves as an evaluative marker of the key element on which the plot turns, namely, the squatting of the horse;
5. The clever, reportable final utterance, which has the effect of a capping punch line, a characteristic formal feature of the oral anecdote (cf. Bauman 1986, 54–77); and

All these features—the deictic contextualization cues, the vernacular speech styles, the formal organization of the narratives—impart to the recorded performance of “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” as it is played back in the listening event some of the immediacy of face-to-face vernacular storytelling. To be sure, the recorded performance is conspicuously fluent and devoid of any signs of audience participation, but the most virtuosic of traditional oral storytellers do approach or even attain this level of fluency, and the organization of participation in such performances does allow the performer to monopolize the floor while limiting the audience essentially to backchannel responses. The listener can still respond at a distance with a smile or a laugh, and Uncle Josh’s own trademark laugh provides a functional substitute for other participant responses.

An additional mediating element is the introductory announcement that opens the recording, transcribed in line 1: “‘Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,’ by Mr. Cal Stewart (laugh).” Announcements of this kind were common on early recordings and served, among other functions, as orienting frames for the recorded performances (Feaster 2006, 304–46). Here, by giving the recitation an objectifying title, by identifying himself by his own name (not Uncle Josh), and by including his trademark laugh, Stewart frames the narration to follow as a simulation, a reenactment, of a traditional, oral storytelling performance. This framing is entirely consistent with Stewart’s public characterization as an “impersonator” or “delineator” of the comic Yankee type. The announcement, and Stewart’s identification as the animator of Uncle Josh, serve a mediating function, framing the storytelling performance as a constructed display object, albeit one that is a skillful and persuasive simulation of the real thing.
To be sure, however, the platform performances of the Yankee storyteller on which Stewart modeled his Uncle Josh recordings were already simulations, representations of traditional storytelling. The production framework of oral storytelling performance—extended holding of the floor, phatic gestures to a copresent, gathered audience—lends itself readily to platform performance and allows quite well for the retention of the core features of traditional storytelling we have identified. But the crafted rustic persona, and his stylized, stereotyped dialect, are artifacts of the stage Yankee, a symbolic construction of nineteenth-century American popular culture. “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” then, is a mediated representation of a stage representation of oral storytelling.

The Farmer and the Hogs
If we consider “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” to represent a second-order transposition of oral narrative performance, insofar as it involves the adaptation to sound recording of a platform performance that is itself a representation of a traditional face-to-face storytelling performance, our second example, “The Farmer and the Hogs,” adds still other layers of mediation to the performance. This recording, a rendering of a traditional American tall tale, begins with a bit of metanarrational contextualization by the performer, Edwin Whitney, reporting and evaluating a “mighty good” story that is part of the active repertoire of another raconteur, one Strickland W. Gillilan, identified as a “funnyman.” Whitney thus offers a number of warrants for telling the story again: It sustains multiple tellings by Gillilan, Gillilan is known for being funny, and it is “a mighty good story” to boot. In functional terms, these devices both authorize and traditionalize the story, aligning Whitney’s performance to follow with antecedent performances:


A mighty good story is told by Strickland W. Gillilan, the Baltimore American funnyman, better known to you possibly as the author of “Off Agin, On Agin, Gone Agin Finnigan.”

He tells the story of a gentleman who was traveling in the state of Arkansas. He was on horseback, going from one village to another, and while riding past a piece of woods, he noticed a number of hogs, all acting very strangely. He stopped and watched ‘em. The hogs would all stand still, tuck up their ears and listen, and at the same time would all start and run in the same direction
as fast as they could go.

They would run a little ways,
stop,
listen,
run again in a different direction.

Run a little ways,
stop,
listen,
and run some more,

and they kept at it.

The gentleman’s curiosity was so much aroused
that he stopped at the first cabin he saw
as he rode on
and greeted the old man who came to the door.

The old man replied,
[hoarse, gravelly voice; slowly] “Howdy, stranger.”

“Now, my friend,
    have, uh, you lived here all your life?”
“No, sir.”

“Well, maybe you’ve lived here long enough to be able to tell me
    something about who owns this piece of woods up the road,
    the first piece on my right.”

“Yes, sir,
I reckon I can tell you.”

“Well, who owns it, please?”

“I do.”

“Well, those must be your hogs in the woods, then,
    are they?”

“Yes, sir,
    I reckon those’re my hogs.”

“Well, I wish you could tell me what’s the matter with them.
I’ve been up there watching ’em for the last half hour,
    and I never saw anything act the way they do.

They all stand and listen,
then start ’n’ run
all in the same direction at the same time.  
They run a little ways,  
   stop,  
   'n' listen,  
run again in the opposite direction perhaps.
Run a little ways,  
   stop,  
   'n' listen,  
   'n' run again,  
   stop,  
listen,  
and run some more,  
always in a different direction,  
and they keep at it. 
Can you explain to me  
   why they do that?"

"Yes, sir,  
I reckon I kin tell you. 
You see, stranger,  
this is the season o’ the year  
when we’re fattenin’ up the hogs  
   and gittin’ ’em ready for market. 
Well, I been a’ goin’ out ‘n’  
callin’ ’em up to the fence,  
throwin’ over a little corn to ’em  
as fur as it gets ’em  
started along. 
Here about two weeks ago,  
I got this cold,  
and it settled right on my vocal cords  
so I cain’t talk.  
I can’t holler  
   and call the hogs no more,  
so I had to go out ‘n’  
sound on a tree with a stick to call ’em up. 
Well, they got so they’d answer that all right. 
An’ now these dumb woodpeckers,  
   they keep ’em crazy."
Whitney’s telling is framed initially as a report of Gillilan’s tellings, but Gillilan soon recedes from the scene as Whitney takes over the responsibility for the current performance. This is a common move in traditional storytelling: establishing one’s authority for the current performance and claims on the audience’s attention by intertextual linkage to antecedent authoritative performances, and then taking over the performance oneself. I will have more to say about the attribution to Gillilan a bit later. For now, however, I would note that like Cal Stewart’s “Well, sir” at the opening of “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” Whitney’s suggestion that Gillilan is “better known to you” as the author of a widely circulated poem can plausibly be heard, I think, as an invitation to the hearer of the recording to assume the participant role of targeted addressee.

The narration itself begins by setting up the symbolic tension that will provide the central dynamic of the story, namely, the classic confrontation between the cultivated—often urban, often Eastern—outsider and the frontier rustic (Dorson 1959, 92). One inflection of the dynamic that drives these symbolic encounters is a turning of the social tables, as the sophisticated outsider is baffled by a feature of the rustic environment that is completely beyond his ken but readily explainable by the backwoods farmer, even though the explanation may turn out to be a tall tale. Here, we have a “gentleman” traveling through Arkansas, the quintessential region of backwardness and rusticity, and encountering a herd of pigs behaving in a strange and puzzling manner, the complicating action of the story. All of this narrative setup is accomplished by past-tense description of the narrated event, which continues to the point when the gentleman stops at the cabin and greets the old man who came to the door.

Then, with the old man’s return greeting, framed by the quotative frame “The old man replied,” the narrative framework shifts to direct discourse, from diegetic to mimetic modes of performance. The entire remainder of the story is rendered as quoted speech, with the attendant deictic shifts in pronouns, tense, demonstratives, and the like. What is especially striking about the dialogic interaction in this performance, however, in marked contrast to “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” is that it is accomplished without quotative attribution, but it remains abundantly clear nevertheless who is speaking throughout the remainder of the tale. The overall effect is to foreground the mimetic mode of presentation, drawing the performance closer to theatrical enactment than to narrative exposition. It is crucial to recognize, however, that unlike staged theatrical performance, which combines verbal and visual semiosis, the recorded performance is restricted entirely to the acoustic channel. When dialogic interaction is enacted on stage, the audience can see as well as hear who is speaking at any given time. In the recording of “The Farmer and the Hogs,” Whitney must rely on speech alone. He manages the narrative dialogue with three expressive means that build up and sustain the contrast between the dramatis personae.

The two interlocutors are differentiated, to begin with, by contrastive speech varieties: The gentleman speaks standard English, marked by formal syntactic constructions, politeness forms, phonologically standard pronunciation, and carefully marked word boundaries, whereas the farmer speaks a rural dialect, distinguished by stereotypically rustic grammatical constructions and phonology and by honorifics that acknowledge his interlocutor’s gentlemanly status.
Second, the two speakers are further distinguished by voice quality and expressive style. The gentleman’s voice is well modulated, whereas the farmer speaks with a husky, raspy timbre, a consequence, we discover, of a cold that “settled right on my vocal cords so I cain’t talk.” In a related vein, the farmer tends toward laconicity of expression, at least in his early turns at talk, as he responds to the relatively voluble solicitations of the gentleman “stranger.”

Third, the contrastive ways of speaking that distinguish the two interlocutors are further augmented by the structure of the conversation they play out, with their respective turns both differentiated and tied together with a range of cohesion devices:

- Question-answer adjacency pairs: “Well, who owns it please?” “I do.”
- Yes-or-no responses that are tied to antecedent utterances by assuming a positive or negative alignment to them: “Now, my friend, have you lived here all your life?” “No, sir.”
- Lexical repetition: “Well, those must be your hogs in the woods, then, are they?” “Yes, sir, I reckon those’re my hogs.”
- Syntactic parallelism, as the old man responds with variants of the gentleman’s solicitational questions: “Well, I wish you could tell me. . . .” “Yes, sir, I reckon I kin tell you.”

All these devices are found in traditional oral storytelling, but I cannot recall a performance, even by the most virtuosic of storytellers, in which quotative frames are so systematically and completely dispensed with and direct discourse managed with such a complex inventory of devices to differentiate the voices of the dramatis personae. As I suggested a bit earlier in the chapter, part of this strong effort at differentiation is attributable to the exclusive reliance in recordings on sound, which must bear all the burden of keeping the characters clear.

Medium alone, however, cannot account fully for the performance style of “The Farmer and the Hogs.” To bring the style of the recording more clearly into focus, it is illuminating to consider more specifically what performance forms underlie Whitney’s recorded representation. Although he identifies Strickland W. Gillilan, the source of his story, as a journalist and author of popular poetry, Gillilan was also an active performer on the Chautauqua and after-dinner circuits, delivering humorous “entertainment lectures” on a variety of subjects. One of the lectures he offered to prospective clients was “A Sample Case of Humor,” in which he essayed a definition of humor and a typology of humorous themes, “illustrated with stories.” Among his stock themes was “Humor of Rusticity,” for which “The Farmer and the Hogs” might well have been one of the illustrative examples. Gillilan, then, like Cal Stewart, was a platform performer, but whereas Stewart performed in the guise of a stage Yankee, animating a rustic storyteller, Gillilan delivered lectures, using stories for illustrative purposes. Tent Chautauqua was conceived and framed as an educational institution, a means of bringing culture and learning to the rural parts of the country (Canning 2005; Tapia 1997). The Chautauqua lecture was formally marked by smooth and showy fluency, without hesitation phenomena, false starts, or repairs, and by a tendency—passages of quoted speech aside—toward phonologically and grammatically careful standard English.
Like Gillilan, Edwin Whitney was an active performer on the Chautauqua circuit, known, among other things, for his dapper, fastidious dress; he was no Yankee rube dressed in rustic garb like Stewart (Harrison 1958, 103–5; Tapia 1997, 138–39). More important, however, for our purposes, Whitney was a skilled “monactor” or “monodramatist,” a specialist in a distinctive mode of Chautauqua dramatic performance in which an individual animated all of the characters in a play or dramatic sketch (Case and Case 1970, 54–55; Rieser 2003, 231–32). Whitney was advertised in a program brochure as being able to voice “a whole play company at once.” It is these Chautauqua skills that we hear on “The Farmer and the Hogs.” The opening metacommentary, with its intertextual allusion to Gillilan’s story, is in lecture register, extending into the early diegetic exposition: smooth, fluent, Standard English, though with a few vernacular touches. The shift into direct discourse marks the transition from diegetic reporting to mimetic enactment, and this latter portion of the performance is in the “monactor” mode of animating all the dramatis personae.

The monactor mode of dramatic performance was largely a concession on the part of Chautauqua promoters to the religious sensibilities of their core constituencies, who had deep moral reservations against full, staged theater. Having one person—not in costume, not a morally suspect actor—voice all the parts of a classic or properly uplifting play could be promoted as modeling skilled elocution and thus warranted as consistent with the intellectual and moral goals of Chautauqua. Adapted to storytelling, the same mode of dramatic performance became a virtuosic, formalized, theatricalized adaptation of the taking on of voices in direct discourse that is a common feature of traditional vernacular storytelling. Moreover, it is readily adaptable, without significant modification, to sound recording. Whitney’s performance of “The Farmer and the Hogs,” like Cal Stewart’s “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” is thus a remediated representation of a mode of storytelling characteristic of tent Chautauqua, adapted to more extended lecture presentations and marked by theatricalized voicing of narrative dialogue in a manner drawn from one-person dramatic readings or monactor performances.

Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story
Our final example, “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” has presentational affinities with “The Farmer and the Hogs” in certain respects, but represents an entirely new departure in the remediation of storytelling. The recording was made by Len Spencer, one of the first, most versatile, and most successful of the early commercial recording performers (Gracyk 2000, 314–19). Spencer’s father operated a business college in Washington, where the son worked as an instructor. The college made use of recording machines as instructional tools, and Spencer had frequent occasion to visit the nearby headquarters of the Columbia Phonograph Company to have the machines serviced and to replenish the school’s supply of cylinders. On one of his visits, Spencer expressed his desire to have his own voice recorded, and he turned out to have a strong baritone that was well suited to the recording technology of the day. He began his recording career around 1889 or 1890, making song recordings for commercial coin-operated machines that were placed in train and ferry terminals, arcades, and other public places. That is to say, Spencer was from the beginning a phonograph performer.
Unlike Stewart or Whitney, his entire career was linked to the new technology of sound recording. Thus, though he was clearly familiar with the popular entertainment forms of his day, including the monactor mode of performance in which one performer animates all of the characters in a dramatic enactment, he was more professionally attuned to the performance potential of the new communicative technology.

At the heart of “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story” is an enacted representation of a storytelling performance in which the narrator relates a story to an audience whose members contribute back-channel responses and evaluative metacommentary. The story itself is an exemplar of another genre like the tall tale that represents a playful, rekeying transformation of a personal experience narrative. Uncle Jim’s story is a catch tale, which derives its effect by drawing the audience to a particular interpretive expectation, only to pull the rug out from under them at the end by deflating and discrediting their assumptions. As we will see, audience response is essential to the narrative exchange represented on this recording: without the expression of mistaken understanding, Uncle Jim cannot produce his rekeying response.

Len Spencer, “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” Victor 2790, matrix B1246; April 21, 1904.11

[Hoofbeats]
Jim: Whoa! whoa! whoa!
Get over there!
Host: Hello, Jim.
Why, uh, here’s some friends of mine from New York.
I’m just uh, showing them through the paddock
and I want, uh, you to tell them that story about the Tennessee Derby.

Guest 1: Go ahead, Jim,
we always enjoy a good horse story.

[Bugle call]
Jim: You durn fool!
Whoa, there! Whoa! Whoa!
Durn that horse.
Ol’ Marster Dan’l entered Possum in the Tennessee Derby a down in Memphis.
I was only a stable boy, them days.

[Band starts to play]
Guest: Yessir.

Jim: Just before the race,
while the band was a’playin’
just like you hear it out yonder in the grandstand now,
the old master run in and he says, “Jim,
Little Pete just done broke his leg in the last race,
and uh, you’ll have to ride Possum.
Now don’t stand there lookin’, boy,
but get into them colors quick,
and here’s, uh, your instructions:
Now, uh, there’s only one horse I’m afraid of in the derby,
that’s Arizona.
Watch ’im!
Lay close to ’im, boy, till the stretch,
and them climb up and beat ’im up!
If you don’t, I’m a ruined man.”
Yessir.
[Hoofbeats]
Whoa! whoa there! whoa!
Durn that horse!
I never rid a race in my life,
but I knowed how to watch the flag
and this time up
I seen the yellow flag swish down
and we was off!
[Crowd cheers; rapid, multiple hoofbeats]
You couldn’t hear nobody’s step [?]
for yellin’ in the grandstand
just like they are there now,
At the first pole, Arizona was a length ahead of Possum.
[Crowd cheers; music stops]
Guest: Yes, yes, well?
Jim: Possum was a’ goin’ easy, pullin’ for ‘is head.
At the second pole, Possum was right behind Arizona,
still a pullin’ for ’is head.
Guest: Yes, yes, well?
[Crowd cheers]
Jim: In the back stretch, Ol’ Buck come up on the outside.
and then Possum was in the pocket,
with Arizona five lengths ahead.
[Crowd cheers]
Guest: Gee, whiz!
Jim: So we turned to the three quarters,
Guest: Yes?

Jim: then we piled into the stretch.
I worked Possum up on the outside and let ’im go.
[Crowd cheers]
Guest: Good ploy, Jim!

Jim: Tear up toward the stands,
[Crowd cheers]
Guest: OK.

Jim: all together like mad.
[Crowd cheers]
Guest: Yes? Yes?

Jim: Arizona two lengths ahead,

Guest: Well, go on!

Jim: I give Possum the whip
Go there!

And I’m in!
[Crowd cheers]
Four lengths ahead of Arizona.
[Crowd cheers]
Guest: Then you won the race!

Jim: Heh. Aw, no, sir.
There was, heh!, four-five other horses ahead o’ Arizona.
[Laughter; bugle call; hoofbeats stop]

Although “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” like “The Farmer and the Hogs,” uses the monactor presentational mode, this performance exploits a more extensive range of semiotic means and formal devices for dramatic ends and achieves, by these means, a far more complex sonic representation than any of the other recordings we have exam-ined.

Consider, to begin with, what a wealth of theatrical business is accomplished in the first twenty lines of the transcript, solely by acoustic means. Let us start with the mise-en-scène. The opening sound effect of hoofbeats, the command “Whoa! whoa! whoa! Get over there!,” the command plus exclamation “Whoa, there! whoa! whoa! Durn that horse,” and the explicit reference to “the paddock” evoke a man on horse-
back in the paddock area of a racetrack. Voice changes, marked by a dialect shift and pronominal deixis, the greeting, “Hello, Jim,” and the reference to “friends of mine from New York” round out the dramatis personae: The rider is Jim, an African Amer-
ican jockey, and his interlocutors are a white racing man hosting two or more white friends from New York. The band music that begins to play around line 16 serves as a further sound effect that allows for additional spatial contextualization; the low volume of the music and the adverbial phrase “out yonder in the grandstand” expand the mise-en-scène to include additional and more spatially distant features of the racetrack complex. These devices set the stage for the storytelling performance, which is elicited by the host in line 7: “I want you to tell them that story about the Tennessee Derby,” marking the narratives as a part of Jim’s repertoire, a set piece that he had told on other occasions.

The narration itself begins on line 11, as Jim offers some characteristic orientational information concerning the narrative event to follow, an account of his first race as a jockey. Drafted at the last minute to substitute for a rider who has broken his leg in the preceding race, Jim takes on the voice of his master in direct discourse, as his master coaches him in the strategy for his horse, Possum, to beat the rival, Arizona, in the Tennessee Derby. In terms of the recorded performance, this bit of direct discourse represents a double lamination, with Spencer voicing Jim voicing his master. Jim’s affirmative response, “Yessir,” marks the end of this first episode, followed by a frame break, as Jim steadies the horse on which he is mounted in the ongoing storytelling event. Returning to his account of the Tennessee Derby, Jim offers a bit more orientational information concerning his readiness for the race and then launches into an increasingly suspenseful account of the race itself, from start to finish. The tension is provided by the shifting dynamics of the race and his closing drive to the finish line, four lengths ahead of the rival horse, Arizona.

Jim’s narrative performance is punctuated by several effective metanarrational devices. No sooner does the starter’s flag drop and the race begin in his account, when other contextualizing sound effects of the mise-en-scène link the narrative event to the narrated event, intensifying both. The crowd in the grandstand, in the background of the narrative event, cheers in the distance (indicated by the low volume of the noise), and Jim draws that noise into his account by linking it to the corresponding cheers of the crowd at the Tennessee Derby when his first big race began (lines 41–44). At the same time, multiple hoofbeats sound in the distance as a race in the background of the narrative event proceeds. As the Tennessee Derby progresses and the narrative suspense intensifies, the back-channel responses of Jim’s audience grow more and more excited and come at shorter and shorter intervals, urging him on to the climax as Possum gains on Arizona. The effect is further intensified by the cheering of the crowd in the background of the narrative event, which serves at the same time to punctuate Jim’s story. Then the climax: “And I’m in! Four lengths ahead of Arizona.” “Then you won the race!” exclaims an excited guest. But no—here’s the catch: “There was four-five other horses ahead o’ Arizona.”

“Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story” thus emerges as a small piece of audio theater (Feaster 2006, 375–89; Fish 2001), a dramatic representation of a narrative event that contains a storytelling performance. All the dramatic effects of this little enactment are acoustically crafted; that is to say, the recorded performance is more than a simple matter of placing a performer in front of a recording apparatus. Rather, the performance is the product of sound design, an essential quality of audio theater (Fish...
2001). Let us examine the elements and organization of the sound design that shapes “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story” a bit more closely.

Clearly, the primary semiotic resource exploited in the sound design of the recording is speech, which serves multiple functions in the crafting of the performance. It contributes, as I have noted earlier in the chapter, to the setting of the scene; recall, for example, the way that Jim’s commands allow us imaginatively to picture him on horseback. Or consider how the host’s references to the paddock or Jim’s to the crowd “out yonder in the grandstand” establish the proximal and distal features of the racetrack complex in which the narrative event takes place.

In addition to the evocation of setting, speech serves in a variety of ways as an instrument of characterization. Absent any visual means of establishing the cast of characters as embodied individuals present before us on a stage, speech has to carry the entire burden: by address (“Hello, Jim”); reference (“some friends of mine from New York”); aural contrast (African American English vs. Standard English as a means of distinguishing Jim from the host and his guests, or lower vs. higher pitched voices as a means of distinguishing the host from a guest); or other means. Likewise, speech alone must serve as the means of establishing and inhabiting participant roles, without gesture, proxemics, gaze, or other visible signs to help us sort out the storytelling performer from his audience. And finally, of course, speech is the means by which Jim performs his story in the narrative event that is the centerpiece of the recorded enactment.

A critically important complement to speech in the sound design that makes up “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story” as a dramatic enactment is the repertoire of sound effects that figure prominently in the recording. Indeed, sound effects bracket the entire recorded enactment. The first thing we hear, on playing the record, is a clopping sound that is a sonic icon of hoofbeats, which suggest in turn the presence of a horse. That indexical inference is reinforced a moment later by the commands, “Whoa! whoa! whoa! Get over there!” The bugle call, just before Jim begins his story (line 10), the band music that strikes up as he opens his narration (line 16), and the cheers that ring out in the background (indicated by relative volume) as he tells his story of the Tennessee Derby all serve as environmental and spatial indicators, filling out our imaginative understanding of the racing complex, its configuration, and the deictic center and periphery of the focal event within it. The sound effects are supplemented by Jim’s explicit references to the band “out yonder in the grandstand” or the crowd “there now.” Perhaps the most ingenious aspect of the use of sound effects in the acoustic design of the skit is the way in which the sounds of the narrative event—the band music, the cheers, the multiple hoofbeats in the background—merge with the sonic features of the narrated event, Jim’s first race, to enhance the semiotic texture of his suspenseful account. The crowd cheering the riders in the background of his storytelling performance seems also to be cheering him in the race he is recounting, helping to build the excitement as Possum gains length by length on Arizona.

Also impressive is the use of sound effects to punctuate the structure of the dramatic enactment and the story performance within it. The first bugle call and the second set of hoofbeats as Jim steadies his horse once again (lines 10–12) mark the transition from the dramatic setting of the scene to the commencement of his narra-
tive performance. In a similar vein, the point at which the band begins to play marks the transition from the orientation section of his story to the first narrative episode, in which his master drafts him to ride in the Tennessee Derby and schools him in strategy for the big race. The next set of hoofbeats and his third effort to control his horse (lines 34–36) signal the shift to the principal narrated episode, namely, the Tennessee Derby itself, and the cheers of the crowd continue to mark the stages of the race as he ticks off his stage-by-stage gains against Arizona and, ultimately, his climactic finish as Possum comes in four lengths ahead of his rival. The final bugle call, following the responsive laughter of Jim’s audience, serves as an acoustic closing curtain, framing the end of the dramatic enactment and of the recording. Sound, then, is an integral structural element of the narrative event, the narrated event, and the narrative itself in the construction of this pioneering piece of audio theater.

Conclusion
The three recordings I have examined in this chapter are mediated representations of oral storytelling performances. As we have seen, however, they are far from direct, transparent transpositions of traditional storytelling by vernacular storytellers in conventional contexts. Rather, our examination has revealed them to be remediations of what were already transpositions of traditional oral storytelling from sociable encounters to the produced and commodified platform events of stage monologues and Chautauqua lectures. Moreover, the recordings were made by professional performers, in carefully fitted-out recording studios. And notwithstanding the association of storytelling with rustic, agrarian milieus that figures in the representations we have examined—the small-town, cracker barrel philosopher; the backwoods farm in Arkansas; the southern racetrack—the recordings were produced in the urban centers of New York and Washington. Still, in the recontextualized and remediated form in which we encounter them on the recordings, the storytelling performances carry at least some of their contextual history with them, that is, elements of both traditional oral storytelling and the platform events from which they were transposed and adapted for the recordings.

At the center of all three recordings is the representation of the familiar act of storytelling, the verbal production of a narrative text. “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” and “The Farmer and the Hogs” are documented in oral tradition and display thematic, formal, and metapragmatic features that establish them clearly as exemplars of two of the most popular narrative genres in the American repertoire of oral narrative. “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” though not in itself traditional, is cast in a traditional genre, the catch tale, a double-voiced genre that, like the tall tale, builds upon and dislocates the generic expectations surrounding the narrative of personal experience.

Linked closely to the act of storytelling, of course, is the role of narrator and its complement of related participant roles. Each example configures that participant structure in a different way. Cal Stewart animates the persona of the traditional country storyteller: Uncle Josh is a figuration of the classic rural cracker-barrel raconteur, mediated through the long-established stage figure of the comic Yankee. Through the use of various devices—appellatives, pronouns, an informal register—Uncle Josh addresses his narration as if to a copresent interlocutor in a sociable encounter, inviting
the listener to assume that participant role. Edwin Whitney likewise appears to be addressing a copresent audience, but whereas Uncle Josh’s “sir” picks out an individual addressee, Whitney’s “you” is more ambiguous. With no visual cues to setting and participation frameworks, it may be taken as second-person singular, inviting the listener to the recording to imagine himself or herself in a dyadic encounter with the narrator. Conversely, the register and performance style of Whitney’s performance evoke the more distanced participant structure of a lecture, still part of the interaction order, in which his “you” of address suggests the second-person plural of the audience as a collective. In this alignment, the listener to Whitney’s recording is interpellated as a member of the gathered audience of the Chautauqua. In “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” Len Spencer animates Uncle Jim as another stock figure like the comic Yankee: the amiable, avuncular African American storyteller of whom Uncle Remus, of course, is the most familiar exemplar. The participant structure of this recording, though, is a bit more complicated than the other two. The framing of “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story” is theatrical; the listener to the recording is a bystander/overhearer of a dramatic enactment, and there is no direct, prior experience invoked by the performance—it is like a staged theatrical drama, but yet not like it. It has a plot, with multiple characters, but it is restricted solely to the auditory channel and relies on sound design for critical dramatic effects: mise-en-scène, spatialization, and other contextualizing functions. This performance is most completely the product of the new medium. The recording is a true media text: a commodified utterance addressed to no one and to everyone (Warner 2002). To be sure, the other recordings are media texts as well in this sense. My point is that they do not show it as fully and clearly.

What is at play, then, in these recordings, is the construction and manipulation of a tension in modes of address to an audience, which interpellates the listener in two different orders of public. The framing of “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade” and “The Farmer and the Hogs” evokes the public of a copresent, gathered audience. In the former, it is primarily the intimate audience of sociable storytelling, though with elements of the more distanced participant structure of platform storytelling; in the latter, platform storytelling comes more strongly to the fore. In “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” the listener is more clearly positioned as the overhearer/consumer of a media text: anonymous, distanced, and dispersed. That is, as a member of a distributive public, constituted by the circulation of the recording as commodity. And indeed, so are the listeners to the other two recordings.

In addition to the relationship between gathered and distributive publics called into play by these recordings, I would suggest that they also align the listener to at least one additional public. I have already suggested the dynamic tension implicated in the representation of oral storytelling, that most traditional of communicative practices, on phonograph records, that most modern of communicative technologies—at least in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States. Recall that storytelling on the recordings we have examined also indexes the rural, small-town past as well as the encounter between rural folk and urban sophisticates: the gentleman traveler in Arkansas, the visitors from New York at the southern racetrack. The recordings, in essence, render oral, traditional storytelling as a symbolic vehicle of nostalgia, a trope for the sentimental evocation of a folkloric past still familiar to the marketing targets
of the phonograph industry: urban dwellers, bourgeoisified small town people, and prosperous farmers for whom mechanized agriculture provided sufficient leisure and income to indulge in commodified forms of home entertainment. Again, this mode of symbolic construction becomes explicit in the metadiscourse of advertising. Taking Cal Stewart as an example once again, as he was the most famous “talking machine storyteller” of them all, the key throughout his career was nostalgic retrospection: notices and advertisements in newspapers and trade journals characterized Stewart as “right down tew home’ among the folks,” his manner as “quaint,” Pumpkin Center as “romantic,” and the scenes depicted in the recorded stories as “old fashioned.”

This form of mediatized nostalgia, then, invites consumers/listeners to align themselves to a shared American past, what we might term a historically founded public. But from the first invention of the idea of folklore, in the eighteenth century, it has always served well as a symbolic vehicle for constructing links to a shared, primordial past, as part of a modernizing and nationalizing vision. The remediation of storytelling on early commercial recordings, then, enlisted a new communicative technology in the service of a time-honored mechanism of modernization, the recreation of a nostalgic vision of the past. That is to say, the recorded performances I have discussed in this chapter are the popular, performative, commodified analogues of the more philosophical efforts of social theorists to folklorize vernacular forms of expression. They are perfect instruments of bourgeois nostalgia—buy a simulacrum of the past that will nevertheless allow you to display how very modern you are.

NOTES
1. Bolter and Grusin (1999, 173) define remediation as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms.”
4. Motifs: K134, Deceptive horse sale or trade (Baughman 1966, 341); K134.6, Selling or trading a balky horse (Baughman 1966, 342).
5. In the transcriptions that follow, I have had two principal concerns in mind: (1) I intend the transcripts to convey that they are representations of spoken language. The chief means I have employed to this end is nonstandard spelling to capture features of pronunciation. I have not, however, resorted to eye-dialect. One of the recurrent problems in transcribing oral speech, especially oral speech in nonstandard, vernacular dialects, is the danger of making the speakers appear to be unsophisticated rubes. I should make explicit, then, what will be even more obvious in my paper, that those stereotypes are precisely what the performers are trying to convey, and if my transcriptions evoke them yet again, so much the better.
   (2) I have endeavored to represent by graphological means some of the significant formal patterning principles that organize the performances. Line breaks mark breath units, intonational units, and/or syntactic structures, which are usually—though not always—mutually aligned. Indented lines mark shorter pauses. Double spaces mark episode breaks or changes of represented speaker in direct discourse.
6. The original recording is accessible online, through IU ScholarWorks: “Jim Lawson’s Hoss Trade,” https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3173.
8. Motif: X1206(ba) Owner, unable to call hogs because of sore throat, calls them by tapping on fence board with stick. The hogs chase through the woods to various spots where // woodpeckers are drilling, hoping for more food (Baughman 1966, 476).


11. The original recording is accessible online, through IU ScholarWorks: “Uncle Jim’s Racetrack Story,” https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3175.

12. These quotations are drawn from the following sources: Coshocton Daily Age, March 4, 1902, 1; Edison Phonograph Monthly 6 (9) (1908): 26; Edison Phonograph Monthly 7 (1) (1909): 18.

REFERENCES


