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Sounding Sex: Erotic Oralities in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Archive

One of the most common and meaningful facets of oral experience is also one of the most elusive to locate in traditional historical records: the sounds of sex.¹ Issues of privacy and morality – operating on personal and legislative levels – conspire to render the words and non-linguistic articulations that accompany sexual acts barely audible, if not wholly muted. These challenges are compounded when examining periods prior to the twentieth century’s widespread technologizing of sound. Intertwining histories of sound and sex, this chapter recollects a range of late-nineteenth-century erotic oralities from both text and audio sources, including the sounds of sex itself as well as sounds temporally adjacent to sex – that is, conversations preceding and succeeding it. Rather than offering a tenuously unified account of these utterances, I embrace a diversity of archival materials that yield equally variable sonic experiences. Given that sex is so often a blend of reality and fantasy, of physical actions and psychic imaginings, these sources have fraught relationships to “authenticity”.² Instead of telling us what sex “actually” sounded like, then, they indicate what erotic sounds were understood to convey in the period, from pleasure to hilarity to power. In addition, they suggest the different aims of representing these sounds: to inspire amusement, arousal, fear, and more.

Discussions of sound, sex, and their interrelations permeate a range of nineteenth-century discourses. Victorian conduct books outline the ideal soundscape for copulation in heterosexual marriage: the “quietude of the night” is the “most congenial” time; husbands are encouraged to intermix speech with kisses for their wives’ enjoyment; and wives are enjoined to silence – no talking, coughing, or nagging – after sex to promote conception.³ Approaching courtship and procreation from a different perspective, speech correctionist Joseph Poett laments the refusal of “several matrimonial alliances” with those who have speech impairments due to the fear that the marriage “would entail upon their

1 I would like to thank Josephine Hoegaerts, Clare Mullaney, and Janice Schroeder for their generous feedback on this chapter.

2 For more on the relationship between sex and fantasy, see Sinfield.

3 Riddell, 2014, 99–100.

Note: *Content Warning: this chapter discusses representations of sexual violence.*

offspring [a] distressing infirmity”.⁴ Decades later in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin echoes the notion that the voice is pivotal in procreation, declaring that “the vocal organs were primarily used and perfected in relation to the propagation of the species”.⁵ Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing concurs, writing that “birds allure by their song” and the one who “sings most beautifully” will be granted their mate of choice. He extends this logic to humans, asserting “the voice may also become a fetic[h] [sic]” and that many marriages to singers are attributable to such erotic fixations.⁶ Even the ultimate icon of ostensible nineteenth-century prudery, Queen Victoria, fondly recalls the vocal dimension of her wedding night with Prince Albert as they “kissed each other again and again [. . .] of course in one bed” and she was “called by names of tenderness” she had never “heard used [. . .] before”.⁷

What these disparate examples from arbiters of social mores to innovators of scientific discourse spanning the century collectively argue is that what people say, how they say it, and the sonic context of these articulations are integral to sex. To discuss sex was to discuss sound; therefore, changes in one realm entailed changes in the other. Unsurprisingly, then, scholarly accounts of significant developments in the erotic and mediatic worlds of the Victorians share a comparable outline: Michel Foucault illuminates the discursive explosion on the topic of sexuality and the rise of non-normative sexual identities in the period, while Friedrich Kittler details the advent and proliferation of new communication technologies such as phonographs and telephones during the same century. Kittler, however, notes that Foucault’s “analyses end immediately before that point in time at which other media penetrated the library’s stacks,” so that his work does not explore the rewriting of “eroticism itself under the conditions of gramophony”.⁸

I take up Kittler’s invitation to explore the intersections of sound and sex in both print and audio through my two central case studies, which provide an unparalleled amount of material from the late nineteenth century – over a million words, and nearly an hour of sound. I begin with the notorious and labyrinthine erotic memoir *My Secret Life* (1888) written by the pseudonymous Walter. Next, I turn to the ribald material on phonographic cylinders from the 1890s: a collection of amateur and commercial audio recordings that approach the topic of sex in various ways. Though erotic utterances attributed to people of different races, genders, sexualities, and classes resound throughout these materials, they are mediated

⁴ Poett, 1833, 32–33.

⁵ Darwin, 2004, 632–633.

⁶ Krafft-Ebing, 1978, 21–22.

⁷ Riddell, 2014, 70.

⁸ Kittler, 1999, 5, 56.

through white male writers and performers; accordingly, they call for attention to the power dynamics operating between the articulation and the recording of sound by different parties.

My overarching argument is twofold. First, generally, that sound – including speech, non-linguistic utterances, and non-human noises – is not incidental to but constitutive of the representation of sex in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Second, and more particularly, sound emerges as a tool to craft patriarchal fantasies of sexual control as well as to reveal the illusory and often violent nature of these fantasies. Though my main sources purport to loosen restrictions around erotic utterances, in so doing they also reinforce social hierarchies through their dismissal of the agency of sexually marginalized others; in short, the fantasies they concoct are inseparable from abuses of power. Neither of these arguments are surprising: the entanglement of sex and sound is a commonplace reality, rather than a sensational discovery. However, despite this entanglement, sound has been under-examined in histories of sex, and particularly so in accounts focused on periods before the rising accessibility of audio recording during the twentieth century. Similarly, the violent male fantasies animating these materials are not exceptional, but belong to patriarchy's wonted operations, wherein both sound and sex are routinely mobilized as tools of subjection. Though *My Secret Life* and the phonographic recordings are unique in their voluminous material, the alignment between much of their content is suggestive of its quotidian nature. Put differently, the relationship between sound, sex, and power at the core of these texts is significant precisely because of its ordinariness.

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1990) is a useful launching point – in terms of its rhetoric, rather than its historicization of Victorian sexuality – to consider the sexual utterances of the past. Foucault begins by ventriloquizing a once-pervasive view of Western sexuality in the nineteenth century: “a mute, and hypocritical sexuality” reigned as “verbal decency sanitized one's speech” and “a general and studied silence was imposed”.⁹ This sense of repression, conveyed in sonic terms by Foucault, in turn made talking about sex feel transgressive. Foucault's account then reaches its volta as he posits his alternative viewpoint, characterizing Victorian society as one which “loudly castigat[es] itself for its hypocrisy [and] [. . .] speaks verbosely of its own silence” while, in actuality, obeying institutional imperatives that reach their crescendo in the nineteenth century to transform sex into discourse “through explicit articulation” and “garrulous attention”.¹⁰

9 Foucault, 1990, 3–4.

10 Foucault, 1990, 8, 18, 36.

Though Foucault couches his argument in vocal language – replacing mutism with loquacious articulation – this rhetoric remains largely symbolic as he analyzes material written about sex. I analyze sources, textual and sonic, that provide a materialized complement to Foucault’s metaphorical claims about a profusion of sexual speech: they testify to the everyday coincidence of sex, sound, and fraught exertions of power. Historian Josephine Hoegaerts argues that to better understand temporally distant sounds, the scarcity of audio materials from the past can be supplemented by exploring the “sounding qualities of written text” – a generative approach as “listeners in a period before acoustic recording were extremely skilled at describing vocal sounds,” doing so with detail and creativity.¹¹ Indeed, the nineteenth century witnessed an “increased awareness of sound” as “the terms of aural-ity” came to penetrate people’s thoughts about themselves and their world.¹² As my case studies demonstrate, this rising attention to the language and experience of sound was crucial to the depiction of sex in the late nineteenth century. The pieces I examine are subjective though verbose accounts that prioritize sound as a key element in the composition and content of their sexual narratives.

My approach aligns with the work of Ellen Bayuk Rosenman who moves away from polarized conceptions of Victorian culture as either sexually repressive or sexually excessive in favor of focusing on “a continuum of desires”.¹³ Rosenman’s preference for parsing the idiosyncrasies of sources in lieu of establishing “universal principle[s]” is one I emulate, though I substitute an attention to the sonic dimensions of sexuality for her emphasis on the “distinctive sexual charges vision takes” in the period.¹⁴ Most scholarship on *My Secret Life* and the phonographic cylinders focuses on their anomalous existences – parsing out the history of how they came to be – rather than closely listening to their contents, and how those contents represent the everyday entanglement of sound and sex. Ultimately, both sources are structured by unequal though pervasive power dynamics that inform the relationships – at once audible and erotic – that they record.

¹¹ Hoegaerts, 2021, 123.

¹² Picker, 2003, 111, 11.

¹³ Rosenman, 2003, 2.

¹⁴ Rosenman, 2003, 3, 10.

“A Babel of Lascivious Cries”: Vocal Pleasure and Violence in *My Secret Life*

Of all Victorian material focused on sex, none is more voluble than the sprawling *My Secret Life* by the pseudonymous Walter.¹⁵ Various hailed as the “most well-known erotic text from the period”, a “lavish pornographic magnum opus”, and an “erotic epic”, it spans eleven volumes, thousands of pages, and over a million words.¹⁶ Most famously, Steven Marcus labeled the book a “pornotopia” within which “reality is conceived as the scene of exclusively sexual activities”.¹⁷ Scholarly work on *My Secret Life* has primarily debated its authorship, authenticity, and generic manifestation. These works scour the text for “clues” about who wrote it, whether any of it is “true”, and what formal characteristics predominate.¹⁸ What is often neglected in these accounts is the physicality of the sexual activities that constitute Walter’s world – context overshadows content.

Importantly for my purposes, the content of the text vividly engages the erotic sensorium beyond its expected tactile and visual dimensions. Sound emerges as inextricable from eroticism: *My Secret Life* echoes with “lascivious utterances”, “baudy ejaculations”, and “cries of ecstasy” that are essential to the embodied descriptions of sex it contains.¹⁹ Walter underscores the primacy of the sonic dimensions of sex in his preface when he declares he “did, said, saw, and heard well nigh everything a man and woman could do with their genitals”; notably, two of the four verbs concern the production and reception of sound.²⁰ He further claims that his efforts to capture sexual speech distinguish his book from its predecessors in prose pornography. Referencing John Cleland’s infamous erotic novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748), Walter insists the “book has no bawdy worth in it” because “baudy acts need the bawdy ejaculations; the erotic, full flavored expressions, which even the chastest indulge in”.²¹ For Walter, sex without sexual sounds is not sex worth narrating. Readers therefore encounter a book with explicit sexual language articulated as people laugh, cry, screech, yell, shout, snort, whine, moan, whisper, shriek, sing, bawl, sigh, curse, and more during sex.

¹⁵ *My Secret Life*, 2019, 1395.

¹⁶ Morrison, 2006, 16. Frederickson, 2014, 29. Rosenman, 2003, 1.

¹⁷ Marcus, 1966, 194.

¹⁸ See Gibson and Pattison for two different theories of authorship. Marcus approaches *My Secret Life* as factual, while Gay dismisses it as fantasy. Morrison tackles the genre of Walter’s book.

¹⁹ *My Secret Life*, 2019, 420, 1323, 884.

²⁰ *My Secret Life*, 2019, 3.

²¹ *My Secret Life*, 2019, 3.

In addition, vocal exchanges bookend Walter's sexual experiences, serving as one of their conditions of possibility, as well as one of their most pleasurable aspects for him. A sizeable amount, if not the majority, of sex acts are initiated by what Walter refers to as "baudy talk" or "lewed talk," among other terms – sexual speech becomes a prerequisite for sex itself. He then devotes ample space to recalling these conversations and committing them to the page, the transcription of speech often eclipsing the description of sex. One of Walter's earliest sexual partners shares her history with him between their sexual encounters and he includes "many of our conversations [. . .] in her very words, others as nearly as I can recollect them".²² He claims a preternatural ability to recall and document conversations, provided they are temporally adjacent to sex. In short, speech and other erotic sounds precede, feature during, and succeed the dizzying array of sexual encounters that comprise *My Secret Life*.

Walter's excessive linguistic and sexual recollections result in a text of unwieldy length. Its intimidating scale would be mitigated by its index – if it were a traditional index. The 50-page index begins with a note informing readers that "Erotic deeds and suggestions may be found under unexpected letters [. . .] Many subjects are no doubt omitted. Pages and volumes given are likely enough to be often incorrect [. . .] The index therefore is certainly incomplete". Along with admitting the uselessness of the index in a typical sense, the author suggests its redemptive value: it "presents almost at a glance the large number and variety of amusements which the sexual organs afford to both men and women".²³ The scope of the index is apparent in a sampling of entries under its first letter – "abortion", "abstinence", "adultery", "armpits", and "aromas of male and female" – a variety of sexual practices, body parts, and sensations that persists throughout the alphabet.

Indices are arguments by their compilers about important patterns and notable moments within a text. Among the arguments made by *My Secret Life*'s index are the overall centrality of sound to sex as well as the specific power of erotic speech to destabilize social inequalities. Both the noises accompanying sexual acts – "screeching with the pleasure" from oral sex – and the conversations that take place before, during, and after sex – ranging from "carnal confessions" to "erotic, questions put to women" – are indexed.²⁴ The latter are prominent, with direct quotations from dialogues between Walter and his sexual partners receiving their own entries: "Don't call me aunt", "Don't cry so master", "You'll fuck

²² *My Secret Life*, 2019, 65.

²³ "Index," 1966, 2316.

²⁴ "Index," 1966, 2334, 2321, 2327.

my bottom out”, etc.²⁵ Speech is used as an organizing category for the events of the text, as a shorthand for sexual experiences.

The references to speech and other sounds convey Walter’s belief that sexually charged conversation should be an ordinary part of human experience as it is agreeable and arousing. Two entries encapsulate this philosophy: “Baudy, talking is natural and proper” and “Lewed talk stimulates lust”.²⁶ The index features several gendered variations on this theme, a microcosm of the repetitiveness of *My Secret Life* as a whole, with “Baudy talk, all harlots like it”, “Baudy talk, excites and seduces women”, “Harlots, like baudy talk”, and “Women, like baudy talk” appearing separately.²⁷ This insistence on the immutable yoking of erotic speech and sexual desire reveals the structuring tension of *My Secret Life* writ large. The text is remarkable in the diversity of sexual acts it details, as well as the diversity of the participants in those acts: Walter has sex with women and men, young and old, across the class spectrum, including, he claims, people of “twenty-seven different empires, kingdoms or countries, and eighty or more different nationalities”.²⁸ Despite the variety of his literally voluminous sexual experiences, he makes sense of this diversity by collapsing it into portable, universalizing truths. Therefore, his understanding of the power of sex talk to unite people across social divides becomes the only understanding, despite the counterclaims within his own text.

Local instances of the patterns noted in the index populate the eleven volumes. Early on, Walter describes how he “greedily listened to all the lewed talk” and “incessant talk of fucking” he encounters from other youths at school.²⁹ This introduction to sexual speech informs his subsequent experiences as “lewed talk” enhances his physical gratification – “the words of lust as they escape me, add to my pleasure” – and features prominently in his encounters with others: “We never fucked without talking about pricks and sperm and making all sorts of lewed suggestions to each other”.³⁰ The sexual and sonic trajectories of Walter’s encounters often map onto each other, his physical orgasm accompanied by a vocal climax. The final chapter of a total 184 finds Walter “encouraging [his partner] and my-self by baudy words”; indeed, formulations of this nature are so consistent throughout that *My*

25 “Index,” 1966, 2322, 2359.

26 “Index,” 1966, 2319, 2430.

27 “Index,” 1966, 2319, 2336, 2357.

28 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 1301.

29 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 19, 35.

30 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 1050, 1271.

Secret Life could be accurately summarized in Walter's reference to "a confusion of bawdy deeds and bawdy talk".³¹

However, Walter does not stop at asserting that sexual speech is arousing. In his encounter with a working-class upholstress he calls Jane, his claims intensify:

[I] gave bawdy hints, smutty suggestions [. . .] till her eyes twinkled, and she laughed much. I had now broken down the barrier, had brought myself to her level, and she as every other woman would have done, took advantage of it, and began to return my chaffing and banter, every woman feels instinctively that when a man is chaffing her [. . .] about fucking, that she may safely return it: both are at once on a common level. A washer-woman would banter a prince, if the subject was cunt, without the prince being offended. To talk of fucking with a woman is to remove all social distinctions.³²

For Walter, discussing sex effaces gendered differences as well as their intersections with the most dramatic of class inequalities. Marcus picks up on the same moment, though misses a crucial detail when he paraphrases that, for Walter, "fucking is the great humanizer of the world".³³ Rather, to talk of fucking is the great humanizer: not the sex itself, but the discussion of it brings the washer-woman and the prince into social equilibrium, flattening the power differentials between them. Herein lies the utopic fantasy of *My Secret Life*, one that is premised on both "sexual and linguistic freedom".³⁴ Walter believes that frank dialogue about sex enhances everyone's pleasure and replaces social barriers with intimacy. In other words, not only does sex talk feel good, but it is also a radical refusal of the vocal decorum dictated by Victorian social mores and an especial release for women who are socialized to be "the quieter if not silent sex".³⁵

Walter's constellating of sex, speech, and social equality does play out in his encounters with others, and is even relished by many, with the important caveats that the disruption to power hierarchies does not always occur and, when it does, it is only temporary. The privileged place Walter inhabits for most of the text as a white British man of ample financial means is undisturbed by these encounters, as is his control – physical, economic, and gendered – of his partners. This reveals a "gap between transgressive sexuality and social change" in which Walter can indulge in the tantalizing blurring of intersubjective distinctions "without any final loss of social position".³⁶ The persistent inequities between Walter and

³¹ *My Secret Life*, 2019, 1449, 957.

³² *My Secret Life*, 2019, 403.

³³ Marcus, 1966, 152.

³⁴ Rosenman, 2003, 173.

³⁵ Bailey, 1998, 209.

³⁶ Rosenman, 2003, 93.

others are most brutally apparent in the scenes of rape and sexual assault within *My Secret Life*, a facet of the text critics seem hesitant to engage with directly.³⁷

In several encounters, Walter's sexual talk and actions are both non-consensual assaults on their recipients. In his second preface, he outlines what could be construed as his sexual methodology: "kiss, coax, hint smuttily, then talk bawdily, snatch a feel, smell [. . .] fingers, assault, and win".³⁸ His usual verbal tactics – hint, talk – are succeeded by more aggressive verbs – snatch, assault – the proximity of these "steps" suggestive of the violence of both his speech and touch. Walter's idealized notion of the egalitarian power of sex talk is further punctured by his frequent refusal to listen to what others say to him. In the first volume, he recounts his initial experience with vaginal intercourse: he harasses his mother's housemaid, referred to as Charlotte, "talking smuttily" and physically assaulting her, as she screams, cries, and begs him to desist.³⁹ He eventually rapes her and declares "had she said she was dying, I should not have stopped".⁴⁰ This chilling assertion demonstrates that while Walter believes his sex talk can efface social boundaries, it is actually facilitated by them: he talks to Charlotte in this way because she is a working-class woman whose speech he considers to be powerless, refusing to listen to her assertions of autonomy.

In this moment and others, *My Secret Life* presents a violent schism between a theory and practice of erotic orality, between the radical fantasy of sex talk's democratizing effects and the reality of its reinforcement of patriarchy's ordinary power structures. Walter is right about sexual speech's relationship to power, but its ability to mitigate social distinctions is, at best, inconsistently evinced in his experiences and, at worst, the opposite manifests as sex talk becomes a tool of brutality. The contradictions around sexual utterances characteristic of the book are echoed in contemporaneous material. Marcus describes Walter's writing as "long phonographic accounts of his thoughts and words" associated with sex – an apt characterization that conjures the phonographic cylinders recorded simultaneously to the publication of *My Secret Life*, cylinders featuring words that Walter, for one, would be glad to hear preserved.⁴¹

37 Marcus, 1966, 94. Rosenman, 2003, 171. Morrison, 2006, 16.

38 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 6.

39 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 37.

40 *My Secret Life*, 2019, 41.

41 Marcus, 1966, 174.

“Virgin Plates”: Fin-de-Siècle “Pornophony” in the United States

The same year, 1888, saw the publication of the first portion of *My Secret Life* and of Thomas Edison’s essay “The Perfected Phonograph”.⁴² In the latter, Edison details the current improvements and future uses of his sound-recording technology. As Walter’s exploits continued to be released in subsequent years, the phonograph’s commercial availability increased. Edison declared his machine will “teach us to be careful what we say – for it imparts to us the gift of hearing ourselves as others hear us – exerting thus a decidedly moral influence”.⁴³ Contrary to Edison’s assertion, it is a truism that new technologies are rapidly mobilized to create and disseminate products decidedly outside of the realm of conventional morality; in a word, pornography. As Jody Rosen puts it, “smut peddlers have always been among the earliest and savviest adapters” of emergent technologies and the phonograph was no exception.⁴⁴ Hints of a sensual use for the phonograph populate the extensive journalistic coverage of the device. *The New York Times* writes of a “wax cylinder” that “details an interview between two lovers [. . .] the kisses were reproduced with tantalizing accuracy and fervor”; weeks later, on the other side of the Atlantic, *Punch* magazine jokes that Edison can “transmit kisses by phonograph,” a disappointing experience as “man prefers / Direct and labial contact”.⁴⁵

The phonograph was envisioned as a tool to record and replay sexually charged actions, as well as to prevent them. Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Voice of Science” (1891) follows the scientifically inclined Mrs. Esdaile as she hosts a *conversazione* featuring the attraction of a phonographic recitation of a recent zoological lecture. The invited guests include both suitors of her young daughter, Rose. Rose’s preference is for the handsome, though rakish, Captain Beesly, while her brother, Rupert, wants her to marry the ugly, though sedate, Professor Stares. Mrs. Esdaile and her children flow from discussing the phonograph’s functionality to Rose’s marriage prospects, intertwining the two. At the story’s climax, just as Rose is on the cusp of committing herself to Beesly, the phonographic recording is played. Instead of a droning scientific paper, a voice

⁴² I take the term “pornophony” from Feaster and Giovannoni who use it to indicate “phonographic precursors to the stag film that documented sex acts for vicarious enjoyment.” Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 52. Quotations from the recordings featured in *Actionable Offenses* are indebted to their transcriptions. I also quote from their invaluable contextualizing essay that is included with the album.

⁴³ Edison, 1888, 650.

⁴⁴ Rosen, 2007.

⁴⁵ “Kisses by Phonograph,” 1888, 8. “Kissing Goes By – Phonograph,” 1888, 298.

recites Beesly's conquests with women and penchant for gambling, causing him to flee, leaving a reluctant Rose to become "Rose Stares."

This twist is orchestrated by Rupert, who meddles with the phonograph to discipline his sister's desire and force her to overcome her aversion to the unattractive professor. The diction of Rupert's interference as he records his condemnation of Beesly is telling: "Into the slots he thrust virgin plates, all ready to receive an impression, and then, bearing the phonograph under his arm, he vanished into his own sanctum".⁴⁶ After thrusting the virgin plates into the phonograph, Rupert makes a vocal impression on them in his bedroom, one that guarantees that the sexual impression made on his virgin sister will be of his choosing. Doyle presents a tale where the phonographic voice of science and the patriarchal voice of sexual control are one and the same.

The phonograph's connection to sex was not merely a figment of journalistic and fictional imagination, however. Abstract accounts of the "controlled erotics of modern sound technology" and the "autoerotic implications" of phonographic listening can be supplemented with recourse to actual phonographic recordings that discuss sex, both obliquely and explicitly.⁴⁷ Archeophone Record's *Actionable Offenses: Indecent Phonograph Recordings from the 1890s* (2007) brings together the Walter Miller Collection of phonographic cylinders, from the Edison National Historic Site and featuring professional recording artists of the day, and the Bruce R. Young Collection, a personal archive of anonymous amateur recordings, into one compilation. Some of the featured pieces hold the debatable honour of being the first recordings in the United States to be censored as "audio indecency".⁴⁸

The phonograph's perceived ability to intervene in everyday intimacy was not limited to capturing kisses and shepherding sanctioned courtships into marriage. The Chicago Central Phonography Company encountered cylinders "of a Rabelaisian character," the North American Phonograph Company reported ones "which contain matter of a vulgar, obscene and improper nature," and the attendees of the 1893 Phonograph Convention railed against this proliferating use of the device, declaring it is "a disgrace that a great invention like the phonograph should ever be prostituted to such uses".⁴⁹ Prosecution of those distributing "obscene" cylinders was initially challenging as existing indecency statutes were designed to monitor print materials; eventually, however, the recordings were targeted under the Comstock Act of 1873 and its legal inheritors which imposed a range of consequences on anyone mailing, selling, or possessing "obscene, lewd,

⁴⁶ Doyle, 1891, 315.

⁴⁷ Sterne, 2003, 172. Picker, 2003, 135.

⁴⁸ Rosen, 2007.

⁴⁹ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 5–6, 53–54.

and/or lascivious” materials.⁵⁰ While the fear of hefty fines and even imprisonment curtailed the commercial dissemination of sexually charged recordings, the phonograph’s dual capacity as a recording and playback device – it “would listen to – and say – *anything*” – left it available for the private creation of erotic audio.⁵¹ This is embodied in the anonymous speaker on the Young cylinders who, akin to Walter, experiments with a technology of inscription to leave a record of the intertwining of sound and sex.

The recordings are diverse in form and content, featuring poems, songs, skits, jokes, riddles, and more that range in subject from the treatment of sexually transmitted infections to a thinly veiled account of a presidential consummation of marriage. What these recordings do not capture, despite their range, is audio from sex itself. The compilation – featuring a misguided attempt to masturbate a cow’s udder and the painful urination caused by gonorrhea – lacks what most would consider conventionally “sexy.” Instead, they are a marked contrast to the tone of *My Secret Life*, a text full of violence, anxiety, and lust: they remind us that one of the central purposes for speaking about sex is to entertain, though they do so while retaining a sinister edge.

To take the second example from above, “Hamlet’s Soliloquy, otherwise called Gimlet’s Soliloquy” replaces Hamlet with a gonorrhea sufferer pondering “To pee or not to pee, that is the question . . . To drug, and pee; to pee! Perchance to burn”.⁵² The bawdy satire of Shakespeare aims to amuse while at the same time deriving that comedy from the reality that pervasive sexually transmitted infections in the nineteenth century involved unenviable conundrums. Sex is at once something to laugh at and no laughing matter. Though humour is the dominant tone of the recordings, it is not the exclusive one. The final piece from the Young Collection adopts the perspective of a woman looking back longingly on her first sexual experience with a man named Will, recalling in particular “what sweet words of love [he] spoke”.⁵³ From the ridiculous to the achingly nostalgic, these recordings are indicative of the range of affective responses sex was understood to elicit.

To accomplish their aims, the recordings make strategic use of sound in both the narratives and composition of the ribald material. To begin with the former: as in *My Secret Life*, speech frequently anticipates and follows the sexual acts gestured to in the recordings. In one vignette from a woman’s point of view, she chastises her beau for his “bad” talk that eventually leads to their intercourse; in

⁵⁰ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 10.

⁵¹ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 12.

⁵² Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 22.

⁵³ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 43.

a second from a man's point of view, his sexual partner "laughed a soft ha-ha" before throwing his sperm in his face and saying "Go, son, and kiss your papa".⁵⁴ Another recording stars an Irish police officer testifying in court about the public indecencies he has arrested people for, including sex, nudity, and defecation. After the judge's injunction to "Always [. . .] speak to the court plainly" and the officer's subsequent use of colloquial expressions, he finds himself sentenced to 30 days of prison time for "indecent conduct" instead of the perpetrators he arrested.⁵⁵ The comedy here, firmly grounded in the racialization of Irish people and their speech, suggests that sexual indecorum is outweighed by linguistic indecorum. To expose oneself in an "inappropriate" public setting is a lesser social transgression than to speak "inappropriately" in the setting of the courtroom.

Of course, sound is more than just an aspect of these narratives: it is the very stuff that comprises them. In addition to linguistic utterances, the recordings feature laughter, throat-clearing, singing, filler sounds, and even harmonica music. In one vivid instance, urination is onomatopoeically rendered as "*whssst*" and compared to the noise of "the rocket's flight, sent heavenward on a gay Fourth of July".⁵⁶ Other performances work to flesh out the soundscape of their scenes. During the character Slim Hadley's visit to a brothel, the listener encounters "pioneering approaches to audio theatre" as Slim's exchanges with the proprietress and the prostitute Maud are accompanied by the sounds of knocking, doors opening and closing, footsteps, and climbing stairs – or at least audible renderings of these actions.⁵⁷ The recording gives us the mundane, quotidian sounds of a brothel as a reminder that lewd exchanges and ecstatic moans are not the only sonic ingredients of sex – much of the attendant noise of sexual encounters is unremarkable. Collectively, the recordings underscore the everyday linkages between sound and sex, using sound both as a tool to better tell sexual stories and a key part of those stories.

Amidst the variety of the compilation, one commonality is notable: all recordings are performed by the voices of white American men. Reminiscent of *My Secret Life's* narration of the sexual experiences of diverse individuals filtered through the voice of a middle-class white British man, the authoring voices ventriloquize other experiences through their position of social power. The mockery of Irish dialect in the courtroom scene is echoed in other recordings: imitations of a German accent, the "rube" dialect of rural laborers, and the idiolect of a Black woman populate the recordings, indicative of the "reliance upon and reinforcement of ethnic

⁵⁴ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 38–39.

⁵⁵ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 29.

⁵⁶ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 40.

⁵⁷ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 30.

stereotypes” and the “mimicry of ethnic speech” endemic to American comedy of the era.⁵⁸ As in *My Secret Life*, speech within several recordings serves to buttress and perpetuate common and unequal power structures rather than trouble them.

In addition to the vocal appropriation of racial and ethnic identities, the performers adopt the voice and perspective of women in several recordings through variable attempts to change the cadence and pitch of their speech, particularly when trying to differentiate between distinct speaking characters. One recording stands out in this regard, both for its suturing together of sound and sex into storytelling and its troubling engagement with social power dynamics. “Dennis Reilly at Maggie Murphy’s Home After Nine O’Clock”, a tête-à-tête dialogue between the titular personas performed by one speaker, earns the distinction as “the most graphic phonoplay in the collection”.⁵⁹ It begins as a scene of sexual assault, as Maggie refuses Dennis’s sexual advances telling him to “stop” multiple times and asserting “Denny, don’t. Don’t, Denny”. After Dennis forces himself on her, Maggie’s response switches to an ostensibly agential one as she literally “directs” his actions: “Oh, Denny! Now a little on the east side. Now a little on the north side”. As the two seemingly approach a climax they begin alternately exclaiming “Oh, Denny!” and “Oh, Maggie!,” their voices accompanied by other ambiguous sounds: what could be construed as moaning, as well as sounds reminiscent of the rhythmic creaking of mattress springs.⁶⁰ Despite some unclear ambient noises, the scene is unmistakably a sonic simulation of intercourse.

As the singular performer accelerates his oscillation between the voices, the distinctions between them begin to blur. The higher pitch used for Maggie’s voice and the lower pitch reserved for Dennis’s reach a level of indecipherability and the tenuous illusion of two speakers collapses into a kind of vocal masturbation. With it collapses the patriarchal fantasy of rape transformed into desire and pleasure that structures the recording. The sound of a bell ringing at the door interrupts them and Dennis cleans himself on his shirt, a comic conclusion that attempts to diffuse the opening violence of the scene. The final sound – Dennis amiably chuckling – is an overdetermined insistence on the skit’s humorous content. The limitations of both the performer and the technology conspire to create this anti-climax, as the former is unable to maintain his distinct vocal personas at a rapid pace, whereas the latter was “notorious” for its inability to record women’s voices well.⁶¹ The vanishing or absence of the “female” voice, then, underscores the violence of this comedy, the unreality of this fantasy. The recording, and the compilation, explicitly argue for

⁵⁸ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 52.

⁵⁹ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 36.

⁶⁰ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 36–37.

⁶¹ Feaster and Giovannoni, 2007, 36.

the entertainment value of ordinary sexual sounds – it is funny to listen to dirty jokes, to urination, to silly people panting and moaning. Implicitly, they show the involvement of these sounds in prevailing dynamics of consent and power.

Coda

These late-nineteenth-century sexual articulations have resurfaced in our contemporary soundscape. Composer Dominic Crawford Collins has spent much of the last decade adapting *My Secret Life* into what he calls an “audiofilm”, pairing original musical compositions with dramatic readings of the source text.⁶² Similarly, *Actionable Offenses* made its bawdy phonographic recordings available to the general public for the first time in 2007. These Victorian voices are now in dialogue with – and part of – our own era’s pervasive commodification of sexual oralities, where the “erotic effect” of sound continues to be mobilized in texts ranging from pop music to pornography, and issues of reality and fantasy remain vexed in practices such as phone sex.⁶³ In a time of increasing public vocalization around issues of sexual autonomy and misconduct, more analyses of “the sexual potential of the auditory sphere”, and, I would add, the sonic dimensions of the sexual sphere, are necessary – particularly from diverse periods and contexts.⁶⁴ By doing so, we can craft new insights into the evolving relationship between sound, eroticism, and power in our daily lives.

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⁶² Collins.

⁶³ Corbett and Kapsalis, 1996, 106.

⁶⁴ Taylor, 2018, 2.

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