More than a third of the way through *The Grandis-simes* (1880), his classic novel of racial politics in nineteenth-century New Orleans, George Washington Cable reaches off of the page toward his readers, lamenting his inability to reproduce the sounds of the Louisiana Creole vernacular in writing. “Alas,” he exclaims at the beginning of chapter 25,

> the phonograph was invented three-quarters of a century too late. If type could entrap one-half the pretty oddities of Aurora’s speech,—the arch, the pathetic, the grave, the earnest, the matter-of-fact, the ecstatic tones of her voice,—nay, could it but reproduce the movement of her hands, the eloquence of her eyes, or the shapings of her mouth,—ah! but type—even the phonograph—is such an inadequate thing!1

Even if Cable’s aside about the phonograph’s archival insufficiency was more of an editorial afterthought than a true statement of conviction, the sequence is arresting, almost shocking, buried as it is in a novel that goes to such inordinate lengths to reproduce the sounds of the human voice.2 What nineteenth-century readers found compelling about Cable’s work wasn’t his vivid portrayal of Louisiana’s social geography or his controversial view on racial inequality in the post-Reconstruction South, but his apparent facility with the strange sounds of French Creole and African American speech. According to contemporaneous reviews, the quality of Cable’s orthography was unmatched. Contrary to Cable’s claims about the shortcomings of the written word, commentators regularly asserted that *The Grandis-

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simes—not unlike Thomas Edison’s phonograph, invented only three years prior to its publication—reproduced vernacular sound with nothing less than perfect fidelity. The *Atlantic Monthly* had praised Cable’s early fiction for the way “French and Spanish creoles, negroes, half-breed Indians, and *Américains* of every grade circulate gaily through the pages . . . and ‘we hear them speak each in his own tongue,’ for the author’s mastery over mongrel dialects is something marvelous. Surely never before were such novel and varied vocal effects represented by the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet and a few italics and apostrophes.” An anonymous writer for the *Literary World* testified that “a close enunciation of [Cable’s] words as spelled will be found to bring out the dialect with wonderful precision, and to set the mongrel-blooded speakers before the imagination with the reality of life.” When reviewers dissented, they typically did so on the grounds that novels like *The Grandissimes* invested in dialect at the expense of easy reading. It wasn’t that Cable’s orthography was in any way unrealistic. His approximations were so true to life, the logic went, that they taxed the patience of the casual reader and bordered on the unintelligible.

In short, nineteenth-century readers seemed to find few qualitative differences between Cable’s talking text and Edison’s talking machine, and given such a narrow range of critical responses it seems surprising that Cable would take pains to underscore the insufficiency of his attempts to “entrap” and “reproduce” sound at all. Why, then, does Cable’s novel turn to sound technology in the way that it does? When, and on what aesthetic basis, did judgments of orthographic accuracy and auditory fidelity begin to matter to the U.S. literary public? And more generally, how and why did we come to recognize the wax cylinder of the phonograph as a reliable documentary medium, while the printed page of the dialect novel—a representational technology that clearly existed in a contiguous cultural field during Cable’s day—now seems to embody something far less trustworthy?

In what follows I offer answers to these questions by examining an important set of modern debates about the nature of sound and the limits of written representation. At bottom, I argue, our ongoing faith in the phonograph’s documentary authority owes an enormous debt to a complicated network of ideas about media technology, auditory perception, and cultural difference that emerged during the 1880s and
1890s, just as American writers began listening across cultural boundaries and recording what they heard there. Cable’s seemingly digressive aside in *The Grandissimes* in particular both reflects and refracts what I call “literary hearing loss”: the inherently unfaithful relationship between the written word and its cultural sound sources—a problem that a diverse group of American intellectuals discussed with increasing urgency as the nineteenth century drew to a close, one that ultimately played a pivotal role in establishing qualitative documentary differences between realism “on wax” and realism “on paper.”

On the surface, the print archive’s auditory failings could only have seemed pressing at a time when the reproduction of empirical “sense data” was gradually becoming the province of new media technologies like the phonograph. Cable began making arrangements for the serialization of the manuscript that would become *The Grandissimes* in the summer of 1878, just months after Edison had unveiled his “acoustical marvel of the century.” To be sure, Edison’s invention had alerted a number of writers across the United States and Europe to the limitations of the old medium: type cannot hope to “entrap” speech, as Cable puts it—mechanical reproduction trumps human intervention. Looking beneath the surface, however, the turn away from print in *The Grandissimes* may also register a latent understanding of the human ear’s cultural limits: the “pretty oddities” of the vernacular voice, their resistance to standard methods of phonetic listening and written documentation, are presumably what motivate the novel’s interest in the possibilities of the phonograph in the first place. Cable wasn’t alone in his thinking. Hastened by a widespread sense that many of the world’s cultures were on the brink of extinction, the sentiments were echoed in varying strains across a range of documentary discourses—from anthropology to linguistics, ethnomusicology to folklore studies. This essay focuses on the ways these two possibilities might have been linked in the late-nineteenth-century context, adopting a methodology that operates at the intersection of literary history and media history. Cable’s anxieties about the reproducibility of cultural sound weren’t exclusively the product of the phonograph’s emergence. Hearing loss—even the documentary promise of phonographic sound fidelity itself—was also tied to an equally fraught set of post–Civil War transformations in literature and anthropology surrounding the advance of what U.S. historians have termed “cultural realism.”
As I will demonstrate, these seemingly divergent arenas—the technological and the cultural, the phonographic and the ethnographic—actually evolved in mutual implication over the course of the 1880s and 1890s. It was only in the context of emergent understandings of cultural difference that early dialect writers, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists could establish the phonograph as an authentic documentary reproducer of the real. More to the point, it was only after nineteenth-century intellectuals began to recognize the extent to which the acts of listening and writing are culturally situated that the new technology of mechanical sound reproduction could make the old medium of the printed word seem, in Cable’s phrase, “an inadequate thing.”

With this end in mind, the first half of this essay addresses Cable’s writing and its immediate historical context, placing The Grandissimes alongside an array of late-nineteenth-century literary and ethnographic writings that call attention to the challenge of documenting the sounds of speech and music cross-culturally. For Cable, as for a number of American intellectuals working at the time, the auditory limitations of the print archive merely seemed to represent a symptom of a far more basic problem: humanity’s inability to comprehend the realities of racial and cultural difference objectively, on their own terms. The work of anthropologist Franz Boas will become pivotal in my account, particularly his landmark 1889 essay “On Alternating Sounds,” which posits that ethnographic observers are unable to hear the sounds of cultural groups outside of their own without filtering them through a predetermined set of perceptual biases. What Boas had discovered (and Cable had seemingly intuited) was that cultures are effectively deaf to each other. The documentary preservation of language, dialect, and music thus seemed to represent a failed enterprise from the very start: how could one “write culture,” to borrow James Clifford’s terminology, without the ability to hear it faithfully in the first place? This question would eventually become central to popular debates about the merits of cultural relativism during the first half of the twentieth century. But in earlier Gilded Age texts like The Grandissimes, the basic ideas behind it surfaced in more subtle ways, both formal and thematic.

It was primarily against this set of issues that ethnological thinkers across the United States and Europe began to turn their attention to the phonograph, a new and somewhat controversial media technology
that seemed to offer a degree of objective cultural detachment the written word could not. In the second half of this essay, I examine the emergence of the late-nineteenth-century discipline of audio ethnography, which sought to harness the phonograph’s archival possibilities and capture the so-called “fugitive sounds” of difference—an intellectual mission that both Cable and Boas prefigured in crucial ways.11 Within the parameters of audio ethnography, cultural sounds that had long been regarded as resistant to written notation (African American dialects, for instance, or North American Indian languages and musical forms) were instead preserved mechanically, by a new form of listening and writing that appeared to be uncontaminated by the intrinsic cultural biases of the ear and the pen. The work of Jesse Walter Fewkes and Benjamin Ives Gilman, two American audio ethnographers not ordinarily examined in dialogue with more canonical figures such as Cable and Boas, will become important here as well. As I demonstrate, both Fewkes and Gilman were instrumental in framing the newly invented phonograph as an ideal cultural listener: as a value-neutral “unmediated medium” that could objectively preserve the auditory sense data of difference, even as much as its mechanically reproduced product remained severed from the presence of human sources situated in time and space.12 When compared to the limitations of the dialect novel and the ethnographic field note—limitations as much cultural as technological, as much a pitfall of the message as of the medium—the phonograph appeared to embody a more universal form of mimesis.

More broadly, this essay tells a story about the relationship between documentary realism and the sound of culture—between competing technologies of cultural preservation and the systems of speech and music that an era marked by foreign immigration, divisive racial politics, and global imperial expansion had rendered all the more audible. For late-nineteenth-century subjects, culture’s “lower frequencies” (to borrow Ralph Ellison’s phrase) exposed the documentary limits of human language and perception.13 This forced writing to give way to writing technology; art to give way to science; and the human, ultimately, to give way to the machine. The intellectual affinities between Cable and Boas represent an ideal point of departure for charting this series of transformations.
Hearing Lost: Cable, Boas, and the Ethnographic Ear

Although set in New Orleans at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, *The Grandissimes* was conceived as an artistic response to the rise of the Jim Crow South after Radical Reconstruction. As Cable repeatedly admitted in later writings, the novel was primarily intended to dramatize the realities of the color line that the majority of the nation’s intellectual public had failed to address in an honest way. “It was impossible that a novel written by me [in the late 1870s] should escape being a study of the fierce struggle going on around me,” he wrote in an unpublished autobiographical essay. “I meant to make *The Grandissimes* as truly a political work as it had ever been called . . . . I wrote as near to truth and justice as I knew how, upon questions that I saw must be settled by calm debate and cannot be settled by force or silence.”14 By 1882, according to the artist and illustrator Joseph Pennell, the novel had made Cable “the most cordially hated little man” in Louisiana.15

The political significance of the *Grandissimes* project has generally tended to overshadow the novel’s ethnographic dimensions.16 Cable conceived of the book’s basic architecture around 1877, just as he began making formal research forays into the local culture of southeastern Louisiana with noted folk historian Lafcadio Hearn.17 Above all else, Cable’s curiosity seems to have centered on the region’s multilingual identity and racially mixed vernacular folkways, particularly as they were expressed in the French and African Creole languages and musical forms that surrounded him. As Hearn colorfully put it several years later, the strange sounds that visitors heard in the streets and parlors of New Orleans were the product of ongoing “linguistic miscegenation.”18 Cable formalized this view in the novel by attempting to reproduce a startling array of local dialects and hybrid linguistic deformities, each one in dynamic conflict with the next—ranging from “standard” English and French to French Creole appropriations of English, African Creole patois (a mix of French and West African tongues popularly referred to as “Gumbo”), and a version of “black English” derived from philological renderings of slave dialect in Virginia.19 The final product embodies a form of what one could call “literary polydialectalism,” at times attempting to switch back and forth among several different speech codes in the span of mere sentences.

Of equal ethnographic import are the novel’s varied attempts to
reproduce traditional African Creole music, which Cable began, in his words, to “reduce . . . to notation” while working with Hearn on the history and legacy of New Orleans’s celebrated Congo Square district. These “Creole slave melodies,” as they were called at the time, played a complicated role in Cable’s early intellectual output; he had sought a formal outlet for them as early as February 1878. In preparation for the publication of his first collection of stories, *Old Creole Days* (1879), Cable wrote to his editors at Scribner, Armstrong, and Company that he possessed “a lot of old Creole songs gathered with great difficulty . . . strangers to printer’s ink” and wanted to “quote from these at the head of each story.” The musical headnotes idea—one that anticipates W. E. B. DuBois’s oft-discussed introductory technique in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—never materialized. But the melodies would find their way into the manuscript of *The Grandissimes* two years later, both as fragments of italicized lyrics contained in Cable’s prose and as staff-notated musical transcriptions spilling out into the margins of the page (see fig. 1).

More important, perhaps, Cable’s Congo Square research would eventually form the backbone of two landmark ethnographic essays written for the *Century* in 1886, “The Dance in Place Congo” and “Creole Slave Songs,” both of which furnished crucial material for twentieth-century efforts in the historiography of jazz and modern African American music. Yet it was primarily in reference to Cable’s early recourse to the Creole slave transcriptions that Hearn would call *The Grandissimes* “the most remarkable work of fiction ever created in the South” and “a genre study of inimitable verisimilitude” in an 1880 review for the New Orleans *Item*, even with the knowledge that Cable’s final manuscript had not actually lived up to its full ethnographic promise. (Cable had apparently planned on scattering as many as fifty of the Congo Square transcriptions throughout the text; the published version contains only nine.) “We must specially call the attention of our readers to the Creole songs and refrains, published with the music, throughout the work,” Hearn writes. “They are very curious, and possess a special philologic [sic] value. One, in particular, an African chant, sung by the negroes in cutting down the cane, deserves special notice.” The influential twentieth-century anthropologist Melville Herskovits echoed Hearn’s sentiments in 1941 when he hailed Cable’s ethnological work for the *Grandissimes* project as “one of the richest stores of data pertaining to Negro custom . . . hold[ing]
Figure 1  George Washington Cable, printer's copy of *The Grandissimes*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1288.4.
special significance for research into the ethnography of United States Negroes. Based on intimate knowledge of the locality and its history,” he continues, the novel “must be accepted as a valid document if only on the basis of comparative findings. It is thus a real contribution to our knowledge of life in this area during the time of slavery, and a book which investigations into present-day custom should take into careful account.”

Perhaps more so than any of his contemporaries, then, Cable’s engagement with cultural sound had fundamentally documentary aspirations. As recent reevaluations of American literary realism have suggested, the nineteenth-century U.S. dialect movement was “politically various.” Not all of its practitioners made use of vernacular culture in the same way, or for the same underlying purposes. Whereas “Plantation School” writers like Thomas Nelson Page effectively employed dialect out of nostalgia for the antebellum racial order, segregating minority culture from the white mainstream on the level of language itself—and whereas African American writers such as Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in dialect in order to gain access to, and subtly signify on, a popular literary marketplace from which their work was otherwise severed—Cable’s “mongrel-blooded speakers” straddled both sides of the color line and were much more in keeping with anthropological inquiries into the nature of human language and sound that were ongoing during the second half of the nineteenth century. As we will see, Cable’s work may have had more in common with the newly emerging enterprise of audio ethnography than with the regional realist literary tradition as such.

Unquestionably, novels like The Grandissimes display much more than the usual regionalist “obsession with linguistic exactness,” as Michael Elliott has called it. Recent philological studies of Cable’s orthography have found that his written approximations of French-Creole English and African-Creole patois were inordinately accurate given his lack of training in phonetics, though some evidence suggests that he was at least marginally familiar with the two pioneering studies in the field, Alexander Melville Bell’s Visible Speech (1867) and Henry Sweet’s A Handbook of Phonetics, Including a Popular Exposition of the Principles of Spelling Reform (1877). Despite publicly taking up the position that “it is probably best that dialect should be sketched rather than photographed” (perhaps more to deflect questions about the readability of his fiction than to discount its true-to-life fidelity),
Cable also wrote a series of anonymous editorial letters to the *Critic* railing against a host of orthographical inconsistencies in Page’s 1884 plantation story “Marse Chan.” Cable argues, “It does not appear to me to require much skill or art to string a lot of outlandish words and phrases together—or togedder—often as destitute of sense as of orthography, and call it a dialect.” Crucially, the matter was as much a question of racial politics as it was of phonetic accuracy. The main problem with Page’s dialect writing, according to Cable, was not simply that it misrepresented African American speech. Page had also committed the cardinal documentary sin of having his black characters speak in a stereotyped dialect, while his white characters somehow managed to stay in perfect tune with the King’s English: “Why is it that [dialect writers like Page] spell phonetically words which a Negro pronounces exactly the same as a white man does? For instance, the Caucasian will be made to say ‘enough said’; the African, ‘'nuff sed.’ Why shouldn’t they both be written alike, at least as far as they go? They are pronounced so. . . . This is one evidence of how much nonsense there is in the whole system of dialect (?) writing.”

As Gavin Jones has shown, perhaps Cable’s most subversive literary gesture—one that is certainly consistent with his documentary interests—was his tendency to approximate the “real” speech sounds of his fictional characters regardless of their racial origin or social status. On the whole, however, Cable left behind few clues as to how he conceptualized his orthographic practice. One of the glaring exceptions to this rule comes toward the end of *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884), where Cable gives an extended account of French-Creole English as a seemingly endless series of phonetic substitutions, omissions, and deviations:

[N]ew Orleans’s] languid airs have induced in the Creole’s speech great softness of utterance. The relaxed energies of a luxurious climate find publication, as it were, when he turns final k into g, changes th, and t when not initial, to d; final p to b, drops initial h, final le, and t after k; often, also the final d of past tenses; omits or distorts his r, and makes a languorous z of all s’s and soft c’s except initials. On the other hand, the old Gallic alertness and wire-edge still asserts itself in the confusing and interchanging of long e and short i—sheep for ship, and ship for sheep—in the flattening of long i, as if it were coming through cane-crushers, in the prolonging
of long $a$, the intrusion of uncalled-for initial $h$’s, and the shortening and narrowing of nearly all long and broad vowels.$^{35}$

Outside of the opening pages of “Creole Slave Songs,” which appeared just two years later, this is as close as one gets in Cable’s body of work to a statement of phonetic method. More representative, perhaps, is the paragraph that immediately follows in *The Creoles of Louisiana*; here, Cable shifts his account to the Afro-Creole patois of the region’s former slave population, and with it comes a crucial shift in the text’s mode of ethnographic address: “No knowledge of scholarly French is a guarantee that the stranger will understand the ‘Creole’ negro’s *gombo*. To the Creole *sang pur* this dialect is an inexhaustible fountain of amusement. . . . It would make a long chapter to untangle its confused mass of abbreviations, suppressions of inflections, *liaisons*, nasalizations, omissions, inversions, startling redundancies, and original idioms.”$^{36}$ Notably, Cable makes no attempt to codify or transcribe the vernacular sound he addresses here. The modifying descriptors that animate the first passage—“languorous,” “soft,” “hard,” “long,” “short,” all of which attempt to supplement Cable’s phonetic approximations and further lift the printed text off of the page toward the realm of spoken sound—are entirely absent in the second passage. Black speech is thus literally placed outside of the book’s orthographic system, which may reflect an understanding of the idea—widely held at the time and also present in *The Grandissimes*—that certain cultural sounds resist notation because they cannot be heard accurately. Thus, Cable’s proposed “long chapter” for documenting the distinctive speech sounds of black New Orleans remains unwritable. Here we are witness to a basic formal paradox that animates much of Cable’s work for *The Grandissimes* and the *Century* (and *The Creoles of Louisiana*, for that matter). At the same time that many aspects of Cable’s dialect writing seem to call attention to its documentary fidelity, subtle details suggest that dimensions of the vernacular voice necessarily fall beyond the reach of the outsider’s ethnographic ear, beyond the reach of the print medium itself.

This, in any event, is the predicament that Joseph Frowenfeld, protagonist of *The Grandissimes*, is faced with at the beginning of Cable’s narrative. We first meet Frowenfeld as he travels with his family down the Mississippi River into southeastern Louisiana, “a land hung in mourning, darkened by gigantic cypresses, submerged; a land of
reptiles, silence, shadow, decay” (G, 9). Cable initially lets us in on a conversation between Frowenfeld’s father and a Creole boatman about the figure we later come to know as Bras-Coupé, who eventually emerges as the hidden center of the novel’s plot: “‘Yes, sir! Didn’ I had to run from Bras-Coupé in de haidge of de swamp be’ine de ’abitation of my cousin . . . ? You can hask ’oo you like’” (10). The inclusion of the Creole dialect here is significant, if for no other reason than that it presents the reader with a phonetic transcription of speech sounds, rendered in “a *patois* difficult, but not impossible, to understand” (10), which Frowenfeld cannot himself comprehend. As the exchange continues, we learn that Frowenfeld fails to hear these lines; the conversation remains just beyond the range of his ear. A similar play between sound and silence, hearing and not hearing, surfaces later in the chapter, when Frowenfeld struggles to follow the patois of a nurse who helps him recover from yellow fever: “He was too weak to speak again, but asked with his eyes so persistently, and so pleadingly, that by and by she gave him an audible answer. He tried hard to understand it, but could not, it being in these words: ‘Li pa’ oulé vini ’ci—li pas capabe’” (12).

These are minor details in the scope of the narrative, yet they are the first of several instances in *The Grandissimes* that connect the inability to hear culture with the inability to understand it, both within and against the more obvious issue of translation. Frowenfeld effectively remains in this position throughout the first third of the novel, in fact, and one is tempted to read Cable’s careful staging of these early scenes as an indication of his protagonist’s status as an immigrant outsider in the New Orleans Creole community. A few chapters later, as Frowenfeld listens to his primary local informant narrate the history of the Creole “race” in Louisiana, he finds himself similarly shut out: “To Frowenfeld—as it would have been to anyone, except a Creole or the most thoroughly Creoleized Américain—[the] narrative, when it was done, was little more than a thick mist of strange names, places and events . . . . Frowenfeld’s interest rose—was allured into this mist—and was there left befogged” (15). Later he is told that he must learn the “language” of the Creoles, both black and white, in order to close this cultural gap—he must listen to the unfamiliar rhythms of their speech and uncover the hidden psychology behind their falling social order: “‘You must get acclimated . . . not in body only, that you have done; but in mind—in taste—in conversation . . . . They all do
George Washington Cable and the Phono-Ethnographic Ear

it—all who come’” (37). But despite his best efforts, certain aspects of the local culture—usually those that raise the specter of the color line—forever seem to elude his comprehension. When he encounters the “weird, drowsy throb of the African song and dance” ongoing in Congo Square, for instance, his train of thought is disrupted and he is forced to close his ears. At this point he can hear only “discord, faint but persistent” (96), which ultimately prevents him from discovering what Cable would later call the “affluence of bitter meaning” hidden beneath the music.37

In part, Cable includes these details to signal Frowenfeld’s status as a participant-observer in the drama that unfolds—an archetype of the cultural outsider that was just beginning to take shape as the fledgling discipline of ethnology struggled to leave behind its so-called “armchair phase” and institutionalize the practice of fieldwork.38 Crucially, though, his position also mirrors that of Cable himself as he worked with Hearn to find ways to preserve the sounds of New Orleans and Congo Square. Just as the fictional Frowenfeld eventually gives up his attempts to capture the community’s daily life in an all-encompassing almanac—the “newly found book, the Community of New Orleans . . . [written] in a strange tongue,” an “unwriteable volume” (G, 103; 137)—Cable’s narration, too, often openly founders when attempting to transcribe vernacular sounds he deems too unfamiliar for the ordinary ear: “Who could hope to catch and reproduce . . . the sweet broken English with which she now and then interrupted him . . . these things, we say, we let go,—as we let butterflies go rather than pin them to paper” (91–92). Cable’s doubling of author and protagonist suggests that writing culture is not merely a matter of language and translation, a matter of signifiers and signifieds. It is, at times, a more elemental matter of hearing and subjective perception, a matter as fragile and evanescent as a butterfly in flight.

In historical context, the rhetoric here is largely consistent with an important network of theories about the nature of sound that were beginning to take shape in American intellectual circles as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The language surrounding Frowenfeld in particular calls to mind debates about auditory perception and cultural difference that were at the forefront of anthropological thought during the 1880s and 1890s. Possibly the closest point of intellectual contact here is Boas’s 1889 essay “On Alternating Sounds,” which George Stocking has identified as one of the foundational documents
in the tradition of cultural relativist thought, containing “in germ most of Boasian anthropology.”

On the surface, the “Alternating Sounds” thesis examines a phenomenon that real-life Joseph Frowenfelds encountered with increasing frequency as the salvage ethnographic imperative began to take hold at the end of the nineteenth century: the tendency for so-called “primitive” languages to contain variable—or “alternating”—phonetic pronunciations of simple words and phrases. Boas first noted these sorts of variations during his initial efforts to catalog North American Indian languages in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest during the mid-1880s. As he recounts in the essay, his own orthographic approximations of the Tsimshian word for “fear” tended, somewhat inexplicably, to fluctuate between two discrepant pronunciations: \( \text{päc} \) and \( \text{bas} \). Similarly, his field notes on Eskimo speech contained an inventory of words that had apparently been pronounced in slightly different ways by the same ethnographic informant: \( \text{opernívíc} \), \( \text{uperdnívíc} \), \( \text{kikertákdjuä} \), \( \text{kekertákdjuak} \), \( \text{kekertáktuak} \). Alternating phonetic sounds of this sort—almost imperceptible to the casual reader’s eye, but of vital importance for language preservation projects ongoing well into the early twentieth century—were pervasive in ethnographic field data on vernacular speech during the 1870s and 1880s. At the time, the phenomenon was interpreted through the lens of cultural development. The effective consensus among ethnologists then operating under the dominant “evolutionist” paradigm (which Boasian relativism would eventually work to unseat) was that variations in dialect and phonetic pronunciation were holdovers from a more elementary phase in the history of human communication.

The more phonetically consistent a speech system is, the logic went, the higher the stage of its evolutionary maturity—the more advanced it is on the historical continuum from orality to literacy, savagery to civilization.

Boas’s essay was conceived as an attempt to refute this kind of ethnocentric doctrine, marshalling an impressive range of evidence to suggest that evolutionist interpretations of the alternating sounds phenomenon were actually the product of a faulty ethnographic methodology. The thesis was based on two related observations. First, after a painstaking examination of his field notes, Boas found that there were clear patterns in the variable pronunciations that seemed so perva-
sive—patterns that depended not on the “primitive” form of speech under consideration but on the native language of the ethnographic observer attempting to commit it to paper: “It is found that the [transcribed] vocabularies of collectors, although they may apply diacritical marks or special alphabets, bear evidence of the phonetics of their own language. This can be explained only by the fact that each apper- ceives the unknown sounds by the means of the sounds of his own language” (“AS,” 51). This pivotal finding suggested, second, that inbuilt cultural biases may in fact influence the act of listening: speech sounds are not always heard in the same manner in which they are spoken—they are mediated, and at times distorted, by the languages and cultural sounds we already know. Boas thus famously concluded that “there is no such phenomenon as synthetic or alternating sounds, and . . . their occurrence is in no way a sign of the primitiveness of the speech in which they are said to occur . . . . [A]lternating sounds are in reality alternating apperceptions of one and the same sound” (“AS,” 52). In other words, the alternating sound is a mere illusion—a fault in perception brought about by an ethnographer’s inability to hear outside of his or her own cultural language system. Simply put, the realities of language and cultural difference place strict limits on our ability to “listen” cross-culturally.

Boas would term this perceptual impasse sound-blindness: the inability to hear “the essential peculiarities of certain sounds” situated in certain cultural contexts (“AS,” 47). He elaborates on the idea more fully in his 1911 preface to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, with recourse to a mode of address that resembles Cable’s account of the peculiarities of patois in *The Creoles of Louisiana*:

[C]ertain sounds that occur in American languages are interpreted by observers sometimes as one European sound, sometimes as another. Thus the Pawnee language contains a sound which may be heard more or less distinctly sometimes as an *l*, sometimes an *r*, sometimes as *n*, and again as *d*, which, however, without any doubt, is throughout the same sound, although modified to a certain extent by its position in the word and by surrounding sounds. . . . This peculiar sound is, of course, entirely foreign to our phonetic sys- tem . . . . The different impression is brought about by the fact that the sound, according to its prevailing character, associates itself either with our *l*, or our *r*, *n*, or *d*.42
The basic problem here is one of enculturation; ethnographic observers are unable to hear the speech sounds of cultural groups outside of their own without mapping them onto the speech sounds to which they are already accustomed. The net result is a form of auditory interference or deafness—a form of hearing loss. In an intellectual context, the idea also presents a theory of the relationship between hearing and cultural understanding hauntingly similar to Cable’s in *The Grandissimes*. Without the ability to strip the ethnographic observer of his or her cultural predispositions, efforts to preserve speech sound cross-culturally seemed fatally compromised from the very start.

The importance of the alternating sounds thesis to the development of documentary approaches to cultural sound during the late nineteenth century, from the dialect novel to the phonograph, cannot easily be overstated. By the turn of the twentieth century, on the heels of Boas’s methodological intervention, the effective consensus among U.S. ethnographers was that the divide between sound and text, speech and writing, had become a problem of perception—a pivotal shift not only in the intellectual emergence of cultural relativism, but also, as we will see, in the formation of new modern techniques for preserving sound itself. Cable was thus hardly alone in his sense that print media like the dialect novel were at times unable to “capture” vernacular sound, and in his sense that problems of cross-cultural hearing and problems of cross-cultural understanding were somehow linked. So when Cable complained of the written word’s auditory failures—even when he made the seemingly minor choice to supplement the written manuscript of *The Grandissimes* with musical staff notation—he was tapping into a much more complicated set of debates about the cultural limits of human perception and written mimesis. Perhaps nowhere in the text is this more apparent than in his rendering of the “dark story” of Bras-Coupé (G, 168).

The “Story of Bras-Coupé,” the point in *The Grandissimes* at which all of Cable’s divergent narrative strands converge, appears in chapters 28 and 29 of the novel, interrupting what is an otherwise linear plot structure. Preceded by a chapter that contains no less than three of the book’s nine Creole slave song transcriptions—the last, “Dé Zabs,” is accompanied by extensive musical notation (see fig. 1, above)—Bras-Coupé’s tale enters, somewhat surprisingly, in relative silence. Instead of “hearing” the story firsthand, we are afforded an account in indirect discourse, which literally distances us from the sound of
its original speech sources: “‘A very little more than eight years ago,’ began Honoré—but not only Honoré, but Raoul also; and not only they, but another, earlier on the same day,—Honoré, the f.m.c. But we shall not exactly follow the words of any one of these. Bras-Coupé, they said, had been, in Africa and under another name, a prince among his people . . .” (G, 169). On the surface, this rather unwieldy narrative device merely seems to be the product of artistic convenience. By “not exactly follow[ing] the words,” Cable of course saves himself the work of having to write the entire tale in dialect, which might have seriously jeopardized its readability. Moreover, since “Bras-Coupé” was written as a stand-alone narrative as early as 1873, framing the tale in this way also helped Cable incorporate what was already a fully formed piece of fiction into the novel’s overall trajectory. But the fact that the tale is told multiple times—once by Honoré, once by Raoul, and once by Honoré’s mixed-race half-brother—is itself formally curious, and a closer look suggests that the entire story is structured as a large-scale episode of ethnographic hearing loss. More to the point, we do not “follow the words” here, because Cable cannot reproduce them in full.

This lack becomes more evident as the Bras-Coupé legend progresses throughout The Grandissimes. Recall that we first hear of Bras-Coupé in a brief conversation between Frowenfeld’s father and a Creole boatman at the beginning of the novel. His name appears at several other early points in the text, always in passing, and when he finally appears in the flesh at the outset of chapter 28, Cable suddenly switches to a distant free indirect discourse, even going so far as to inscribe the sound of his name as a graphic absence in the body of the text: “His name, he replied to an inquiry touching that subject, was ————, something in the Jaloff tongue, which he by and by condescended to render into Congo: Mioko-Koanga, in French Bras-Coupé, the Arm Cut Off. . . . He made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and blood the truth that all Slavery is maiming” (G, 171–72). As Bryan Wagner has argued, Cable here reveals both the speech sound of Bras-Coupé’s name and the racial violence for which it stands as wholly “unavailable to representation.”44 The fragment of song that Bras-Coupé sings to his bride, Palmyre Philosophe, later in the same chapter reads just as suggestively when its phonetic sounds are compared with a similar transcription that Cable published five years later in “Creole Slave Songs”: 
Clearly these versions of “Ah! Suzette” differ in lyrical address, which accounts for some of the more obvious variations between them. But the phonetic discrepancies in what appear to be the same patois constructions in lines 3 and 6—“i’a’zen’”/“l’a’-zent” and “l’aimé”/“lai-mein”—directly bear witness to the general sound-blindness hypothesis, suggesting that the fugitive “partials” in Bras-Coupé’s voice fail to map onto the orthographical techniques that Cable has at his disposal. Thus, even on the level of phonetics, Bras-Coupé’s story turns out to be the documentary truth that Cable cannot tell. To tell it, ultimately, a more “pure” form of cultural listening and a new form of cross-cultural writing were somehow necessary.

### Hearing Found: Fewkes, Gilman, and the Phonographic Ear

Intellectual historians and literary critics have made passing note of the similarities between Cable’s work and Boas’s early ethnographic theories, yet they have generally failed to consider the wider network of “media relations” both within and against which their shared interest in cross-cultural listening took shape. Working in the wake of the alternating sounds thesis, anthropologists and early ethnomusicologists proposed a variety of solutions to the sound-blindness problem—nearly all of which revolved around the assumption that the ethnographic observer would have to be liberated from the perceptual “shackles” of difference in order to preserve the auditory dimensions of language and culture in full. The answer that eventually emerged on both fronts—and not without considerable controversy—was the use of new sound reproduction technologies as culturally neutral substitutes for the ears of the human observer: the use of phonographs as...
ethnographs. By the turn of the twentieth century, the practice had taken off within the anthropological subdiscipline of audio ethnography, led by figures such as Washington Matthews, Gilman, Alice Cunningham Fletcher, James Mooney, Frances Densmore, and even Boas himself, who had turned to the talking machine as early as 1893 to document Kwakiutl and Thompson River Indian dialects. As Fewkes, the pioneer in the field, claimed in an 1890 essay for the journal *Science*, “[W]hat specimens are to the naturalist in describing genera and species, or what sections are to the histologist in the study of cellular structure, the cylinders made on the phonograph are to the student of language. . . . The phonograph renders it practicable for us to indelibly fix [American] languages, and preserve them for future time after they become extinct or their idiom is greatly modified.” This archival shift—which owed as much to longstanding Western beliefs in “mechanical objectivity” as to conflicted anxieties about cultural variety and the imminence of its disappearance—had a number of important intellectual implications.

On the subject of the phonograph’s documentary promise, *The Grandissimes* adopts a slightly more guarded stance. Yet if the idea of the phonograph as a more perfect form of sound preservation seems somewhat self-evident by today’s standards, it bears emphasizing that the talking machine’s relative ability to “talk” remained in question throughout the 1880s and 1890s, even amid widespread fascination with the technology’s possibilities. As media historian Jonathan Sterne has demonstrated, popular understandings of phonographic sound quality in fact varied widely during the initial phases of the device’s social life. Despite Edison’s repeated claims about the phonograph’s ability to reproduce “all manner of sound-waves heretofore designated as ‘fugitive’ . . . . with all their original characteristics”—and despite Cable’s cautious endorsement in *The Grandissimes*—many early listeners felt that it was almost impossible to decipher the sources of the unintelligible “scratches” and faint “noises” that the apparatus tended to bring forth. Moreover, archival permanence was no guarantee. Well into the 1890s commentators in the United States and Europe complained about the fragility of the phonograph cylinder itself, which rarely withstood more than a few uses.

When ethnologists and dialect writers began to look to the talking machine as a potential solution to the speech/writing (and music/
writing) divide during this same period, it was hardly because the device appeared to embody a more faithful form of sound reproduction in and of itself. The shift actually had far more to do with the device’s apparent mechanical neutrality: the fact that the phonograph wasn’t human and therefore, more importantly, wasn’t cultural—and the fact that it seemed to be able to short-circuit the perceptual biases of phonetic listening and dialect writing, objectively reproducing cultural sounds on their own terms rather than otherwise. One clearly sees this set of assumptions at work if we turn to figures like Fewkes and Gilman, who implicitly framed their earliest audio-ethnographic efforts as responses to Boas’s ideas about cultural sound-blindness.

Fewkes first came to the phonograph in 1889 while heading Harvard University’s Hemenway Ethnological Expedition, which had been conducting ethnographic and archaeological research on Indian lifeways in the U.S. southwest since the early 1880s.55 The project’s financial patron, Mary Hemenway, was at the time a minority shareholder in the Edison Company, which may partially explain her decision to support initial efforts to outfit Fewkes’s expedition team with phonograph cylinders.56 Threatened by foreign competitors (especially Emile Berliner, whose more durable gramophone was patented in 1887), the phonograph was still struggling to find an economic foothold in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Scientific research must have seemed as likely of a potential market as any. But the initial group of researchers had also reported back that efforts to document southwestern Native American dialects had been slowed, once again, by the absence of “stenographic characters” that could fully “represent and reproduce the sounds of [languages] so remote from ours.”57 So the phonograph may well have appeared to offer a new methodological solution to a more long-standing documentary problem. Accordingly, early experiments with the device’s archival capabilities had motivations that were in equal parts economic and ethnographic. After assuming direction of the Hemenway Expedition’s research agenda, Fewkes set to work with the talking machine almost immediately: first in a trial run documenting Passamaquoddy tribal music and folklore in Calais, Maine, during the winter of 1889–1890 (almost exactly a year after the publication of Boas’s “Alternating Sounds,” notably), and later in the recording of Zuni and Hopi music and language in the territory that would eventually become New Mexico and Arizona. Fewkes liked to refer to his phonograph cylinders as “little magic wax tablets”
in his field reports to Hemenway. Given the foundational theory of phonographic objectivity that evolved out of his findings, the description was much more than a metaphor.

There is some debate over the extent to which Fewkes was in fact the first ethnographer to use the phonograph for fieldwork purposes; his predecessor, Frank Hamilton Cushing, may have actually beat him to the punch just before relinquishing his post with the Hemenway Expedition. What is certain is that between May and November of 1890, Fewkes produced a flurry of publications that would redefine the phonograph’s cultural potential and establish the theoretical foundation for anthropological, ethnomusicological, and even literary engagements with sound reproduction technology that would hold sway well into the late twentieth century. Fewkes’s main contention, articulated in a series of research updates written for the *Journal of American Folklore*, *Science*, and *American Naturalist*, was that the phonograph offered ethnography “a most valuable auxiliary in linguistic researches.” Crucially, this was more a matter of the machine’s check on the vagaries of human hearing than its ability to reproduce sound faithfully—or rather, more precisely, the latter because of the former. “Even with the assistance of the admirable system of letters and conventional signs which have been proposed for the purpose,” Fewkes notes, conjuring Boas’s theory directly,

[T]here are many difficulties besetting the path of one who would accurately record the aboriginal languages, which are but imperfectly met by [the written] method. There are inflections, gutturals, accents, and sounds in aboriginal dialects which elude the possibilities of phonetic expression. . . . The study of folk-lore can never stand on a scientific basis as far as Indian tales are concerned until we reduce to a minimum the errors of interpretation which may creep in through the translator. . . . The phonograph records the story exactly as the Indian tells it . . . . In this way the phonograph imparts to the study of folk-lore, as far as the aborigines are concerned, a scientific basis which it has not previously had.

Fewkes makes use of a rhetorical strategy that is common within the discourse of early audio ethnography: the personification of the phonograph (“the phonograph records the story exactly as the Indian tells it”) as a disinterested third party in the observer-observed relationship—a third party unhindered by language, culture, and human per-
ception. One sees some such logic at work in Cable’s aside about the phonograph in *The Grandissimes* as well. In both cases, whereas phonetic transcription introduces the unavoidable possibility of sensory misrecognition, phonography isolates the ethnographic encounter with language and music from the unstable realm of human subjectivity. Since the machine is inherently able to “do away with the errors of the translator,” as Fewkes repeatedly emphasizes, it can “record any language with precision” and bring forth the “exact words of the speaker” indefinitely.

The larger methodological point here, and in Fewkes’s other 1890 essays, is that the phonograph is a phonograph, nothing more. As a hearing and writing machine, its workings would seem to abolish residual traces of human influence on the collection of auditory data, intrinsically divorcing the documentation process from the racial and cultural differences that cause sound-blindness to occur in the first place. In other words, Fewkes’s idea is that the phonograph offers ethnography the methodological assurance of what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have termed “mechanical objectivity,” or the ability to reproduce the world with as little human intervention as possible, avoiding the “subjective distortions” of an “observer’s personal tastes, commitments, or ambitions.” Boas would echo this same logic, positioning that the new sound medium was a transparent and universal substitute for the ethnographic listener: “The writing of single individuals cannot replace the dictated [phonograph] record because the individual characteristics of the writer become too prominent, and may give a false impression in regard to syntactic and stylistic traits.” Ultimately, these sorts of claims about the phonograph as a culturally unmediated medium—one that transformed cultural sounds into documentary texts without the intervening biases of the human ear—begin to suggest that reproduced sound was accurate for audio ethnographers only insofar as it was objective. If phonetic writing was seen as an imprecise art, phonographic inscription embodied, at least in theory, the promise of an exact science.

In practice, however, Fewkes’s ideas about a disinterested phonographic methodology were more difficult to carry out. Without a viable apparatus for the reproduction and distribution of cylinder recordings, and without a central archive that assured some semblance of material permanence, audio ethnographers still had to revert back to the written word in order to process and preserve their documen-
tary material. For instance, Fewkes’s seminal 1890 essay “A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folk-Lore,” the first to adhere to a completely “phonographic method” for collecting linguistic field data, follows repeated claims about the phonograph’s revolutionary accuracy with extended written summaries of the contents of each cylinder recording. For Fewkes, these kinds of “derived” transcriptions were no less objective than the phonograph recordings, since they were the product of an analytical procedure that included repeated listening and undistracted auditory attention. Sound is by definition evanescent, the logic went, but the phonograph makes it both repeatable and portable. Ideally, this quality enabled the listening observer to check against cultural mishearings and block out the sensory distractions of fieldwork.

It was Gilman, another member of the Hemenway research team, who would take Fewkes’s early ideas about phono-ethnographic listening to their logical conclusion. Widely considered to be one of the foundational figures in the history of ethnomusicology, Gilman was in charge of cataloging and analyzing the musical material that Fewkes had collected in the field. In so doing, he became the first to use the phonograph as an aid to cross-cultural musical study. In “Zuñi Melodies” (1891), Gilman’s chief object of inquiry was Fewkes’s recordings of Southwestern Native American music—which, like Cable’s Afro-Creole songs before it, seemed to frustrate conventional methods of hearing and writing. But the phonograph’s potential safeguard against subjective perceptual distortion nonetheless persisted as an animating issue:

The apparatus proves to be a means by which the actual sound itself of which a music consists may, even in many of its more delicate characteristics, be stored up by the traveler in a form permanently accessible to observation. . . . By the aid of the phonograph what would appear to be a very accurate reproduction of the music to which it has been exposed can be brought to the ears of any observer to be examined at his leisure. It can be interrupted at any point, repeated indefinitely, and even within certain limits magnified, as it were, for more accurate appreciation of changes in pitch, by increasing the duration of the notes. A collection of phonograph cylinders like that obtained by Dr. Fewkes forms a permanent museum of primitive music, of which the specimens are comparable, in fidelity
of reproduction and convenience for study, to casts or photographs of sculpture or painting.67

As with Fewkes’s account in “A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folk-Lore,” Gilman’s understanding of documentary accuracy is rooted not just in a mechanization of the cross-cultural ethnographic encounter (the use of the phonograph), but also in a new mechanical technique for analyzing its recorded product (the practice of phonographic listening). He underscores that the reproduced record can be “interrupted,” “repeated,” and “magnified,” which supposedly makes the disruptive “habitudes of melodic invention” in Zuni music—the product of a tonal system that fails to map onto the Western diatonic scale—less fugitive to the outside ear and more reducible to objective transcription.68

Here the apparatus of sound recording merely represents a means to a documentary end rather than a documentary end in and of itself. The phonograph provides the audio ethnographer with a sort of culturally sealed container with which one might collect auditory specimens for further study. Through mechanically repeated listenings, isolated from the distractions of the field encounter, a more accurate and scientific reproduction of cultural sound is rendered possible.

Gilman’s early theories in “Zuñi Melodies” sparked controversy among intellectuals who remained skeptical of the talking machine and its attendant listening practices.69 He responded almost fifteen years later in Hopi Songs (1908), the final report on the Hemenway Expedition’s cultural sound studies. Gilman’s title was in many ways misleading; more than an analysis of the music collected by Fewkes and others, the true subject of Hopi Songs is phonographic ethnography itself. Gilman devotes well over three quarters of the report’s 68-page introductory section to theorizing his recourse to the phonograph and explaining an elaborate series of methodological steps to ensure its objective accuracy. The most important of these—an improvement, seemingly, on Fewkes’s written summary technique in “A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folk-Lore”—was that his final transcriptions of Hopi music paired examples of conventional Western musical notation with new experiments in “phonographic notation” (see figs. 2–3), structured not just to capture the subtle microtonal departures from the diatonic norm that had frustrated outside listeners for so long, but also to yield a more “impartial record” of the songs themselves.70 Comparing these two forms of sound-writing, Western and phonographic, Gilman concludes that
the diatonic form of the present [Western] notations by ear is in part the invention of the observer. The accurate observation of a [Hopi] musical performance of any length is beyond the power of the unaided ear. . . . The invention of the phonograph has given to science a new field of observation, that of music in the making. Fixed on a wax cylinder in reproducible form, the sequence of tone concerned in a performance of music can now be observed and recorded to within minute intervals.71

Again, accuracy and objectivity go hand in hand: Gilman contends that phonographic staff notation is more faithful than Western staff notation both because it takes into account the “minute intervals” of Hopi song and because it remains, like the talking machine itself, uncontaminated by cultural expectations, “invention[s] of the observer.” The phonograph; the phonographic listening method; phonographic notation—figures like Gilman considered this methodological trajectory as sound-sight to the problem of sound-blindness. “[T]he widest lesson of the whole inquiry,” he writes in conclusion, “is the discovery of how great a part is played by the mind in apprehending a work of art; and how little of the veritable creation can often be grasped by an alien. . . . It is our own ears that are oftenest at fault when we hear in exotic music only a strident monotony or a dismal uproar to be avoided and forgotten.”72

More broadly, the phonographic notation in Hopi Songs—indecipherable to the average reader but, as Gilman repeatedly emphasizes, an “undistorted copy” of the original sound source nonetheless—underscores just how far documentary ethnography seems to have gone in the search for auditory neutrality, the incredible pains it took to abstract analytical encounters with cultural sound from human influence and perceptual bias.73 To be sure, Gilman’s interest in objectivity occasionally borders on the obsessive; the intricacies of his new phonographic notation system essentially make Hopi music unreadable. Yet in important ways, Hopi Songs embodies both the realization and the failure of a documentary fantasy about perfect auditory preservation that was clearly common during the turn-of-the-century era—a fantasy that Cable’s The Grandissimes seems to share.

The formal similarities between Hopi Songs and The Grandissimes are striking when seen in this context, despite their divergence in genre and their distance in time and subject matter. Both texts attempt
to recreate sound in the “standard” transcriptional practice (Cable’s, in literary dialect; Gilman’s, in Western staff notation), yet both find their respective media inadequate for the task at hand. Cable, for his part, supplements *The Grandissimes* with elaborate orthographical flourishes and snatches of melody that would become central to his work for “Creole Slave Songs” and “The Dance in Place Congo.” Yet he often further marks their phonographic insufficiency by including musical staff notation throughout the text. Gilman seemingly takes the matter one step further. In *Hopi Songs* hearing loss becomes the occasion for a new form of sound notation—one that attempts to match the phonograph’s objective accuracy, but perhaps devolves into unintelligibility. Both texts—Cable’s and Gilman’s—thus might ultimately be read as failed phonographs. In crucial ways, cultural sound seems to have demanded an unwritable writing. At the turn of the twentieth century, at least, it demanded the workings of a machine.

Cable’s utopian fantasies about the “universal language” of phonography in chapter 25 of *The Grandissimes* have a long and complicated history: one rooted in a contested set of modern texts and technologies that made powerful claims on the promise of documentary sound preservation. Cable’s dialect orthography; Fewkes’s wax cylinders; Gilman’s phonographic sound notation—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all of these representational inventions were part of an emergent auditory-cultural field taking shape as media technologies like the phonograph began to assume new social roles and as the modern enterprise of cultural documentation struggled to come to terms with the global realities of human diversity. In the end, the turn toward mechanical sound technologies presaged in *The Grandissimes* was not a turn toward auditory fidelity. It was, instead, an attempted turn away from culture; a turn away from what many U.S. intellectuals recognized as the written word’s built-in cultural bias. Rather than “connecting” America, as so many accounts of mass media and mass culture have suggested, the modern logic of the phonograph in fact depended on—even upheld—the racial and cultural boundaries that it was purportedly dissolving into the grooves of the wax cylinder.

Harvard University
Notes

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2 Cable’s final draft copy actually omitted the admission of phonographic inadequacy—the original line merely reads, “[A]h! but type is an inadequate thing.” Yet his editor at Scribner’s quipped in the margins that “even the phonograph” was insufficient for the task at hand, apparently in lighthearted reference to the complexity of the novel’s orthographical system. Cable, seemingly tickled, followed suit. See “Printer’s Copy of *The Grandissimes,*” George Washington Cable Papers, MS Am 1288.4, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 261.

3 “*Old Creole Days and Other Novels,*” *Atlantic Monthly,* January 1880, 44.

4 “*Madame Delphine,*” *Literary World,* 30 July 1881, 259.

5 See, among many examples, “*The Grandissimes,*” *Harper’s Magazine,* December 1880, 153, which deems Cable’s orthography accurate but ultimately “tedious by [its] excess.”


16 Gavin Jones’s excellent *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* represents an important exception to this rule [(Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 98–133].


24 Lafcadio Hearn, letter to Henry Krehbiel, (circa 1881), Edward Larocque Tinker Papers, bMS Am 2196, Houghton Library, Harvard University, File 38.


31 Ibid., 217–18.

32 George Washington Cable (G.W.C.), “‘Negro English’ in Literature,” *Critic*, 18 April 1885, 68. The anonymous letter occasioned a defensive response from Page himself; see “Mr. Page’s Negro Dialect,” *Critic*, 4 July 1885, 79. Still unsatisfied, Cable sent an almost hostile rejoinder a few weeks later; see G.W.C., “A Protest against Dialect,” *Critic*, 1 August 1885, 83.

33 G.W.C., “A Protest against Dialect,” 83.


36 Ibid., 318–19.

37 Cable, “Creole Slave Songs,” 808. See Jones for more on the difficulty of translating the meaning of the Creole slave melodies in Cable’s work (*Strange Talk*, 115–33).


39 George W. Stocking Jr., *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), vi. Boas’s “Alternating Sounds” thesis has been proposed as an important context both for the regional realist tradition of dialect writing in general (see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 5–7, 312–13) and for Cable’s work in par-
ticular (see Wagner, “Disarmed and Dangerous,” 130), but its implications have not yet been examined in full, especially in terms of its wider afterlife in audio-ethnographic discourse.

40 Franz Boas, “On Alternating Sounds,” *American Anthropologist* 2 (January 1889): 52. Further references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text as “AS.”


44 Wagner, “Disarmed and Dangerous,” 130.

45 Cable, “Creole Slave Songs,” 825–26. See Jones for an explanation of the subversive meaning behind Bras-Coupé’s lyrics and for an account of the vexed issue of translation in Cable’s work more generally (*Strange Talk*, 126–30). As Jones points out, the “mountains” (montagne) in both versions of the song are an important, if heavily veiled, allusion to the San Domingo slave rebellion of 1791.


J. Walter Fewkes to Mary Hemenway, 15 March 1890, Hemenway Southwest Expedition Records (1886–1914), Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Box 9.


Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 121.


Ibid., 89.


Ibid., 7.
