

## Dialectical Materialities:

# PennSound, Early Poetry Recordings, and Disc-to-Disk Translations

Chris Mustazza

Digital Dialogue  
Maryland Institute for Technology in  
the Humanities

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<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>

World's largest archive of recordings of poets reading their work, founded by Professors Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis in 2003. Recordings range from 1913 through the current month.



Apollinaire



Nathaniel Mackey

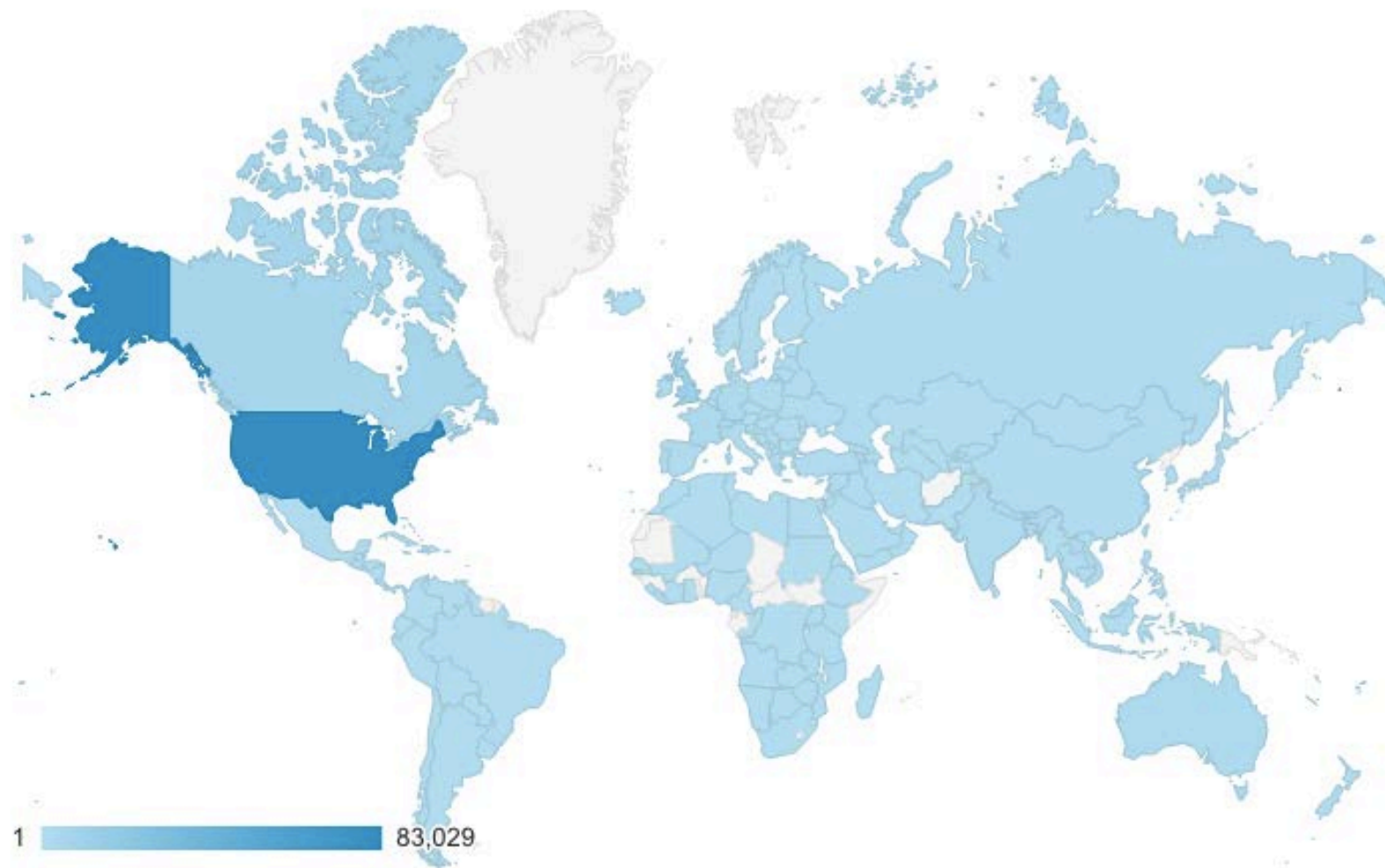
# PennSound by the numbers

- 2,500,000 downloads per year
- 1,000,000 unique visitors per year
- 55,000 mp3 files
- 1,000 video files
- ~6,000 hours of audio

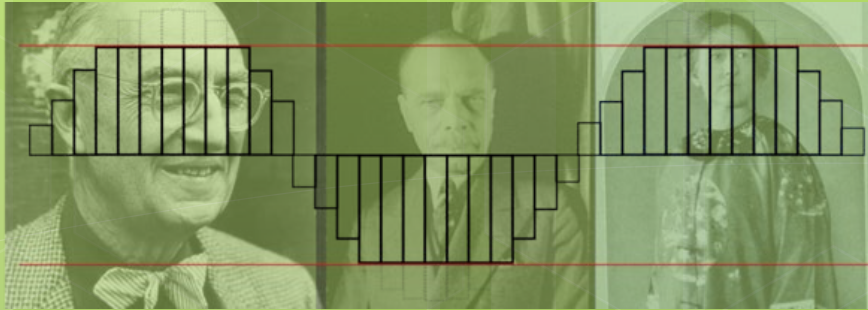
Always downloadable.  
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**Global distribution of PennSound users**  
27 April 2016 - 15 April 2017



## Accessible Poetry Interface (API): PennSound & the Archaeo-Platform

# I. Archive

# Meta-Archive: Phonotextual Bibliography

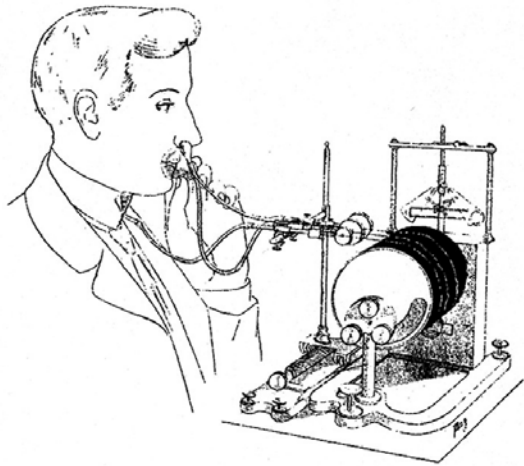
- Reconstructing earlier attempts to record poetry & poetry audio archives
  - Who were the archivists of the earlier archives, and what were their politics & poetics?
  - What were the politics and poetics, both of the archival containers, as well as the physical media?
  - How can we (re)present these archives within PennSound with respect for their prior materialities ?

# 1913: "Modernism meets the phonograph"



- Ezra Pound traveled to the speech lab of Jean Pierre Rousselot to be "recorded" using Rousselot's phonoscope.
- Richard Sieburth: "The ardent vers libristes were presumably eager to find out whether Rousselot's modern recording devices (which produced what look like intricate seismographs of vowels, consonants, pitch, and tempo) could provide scientific proof that free verse was, in its own way, just as 'regular' or 'formal' (in terms of the patternings of accents or quantities) as, say, the traditional alexandrine."





Inscription de la parole.

FIGURE 2. Recording speech, circa 1897. From Abbé Pierre-Jean Rousselot and Fauste Laclotte, *Précis de prononciation* (Paris, 1902), 14.

sensitive instruments capable of capturing entire speech acts—instruments that

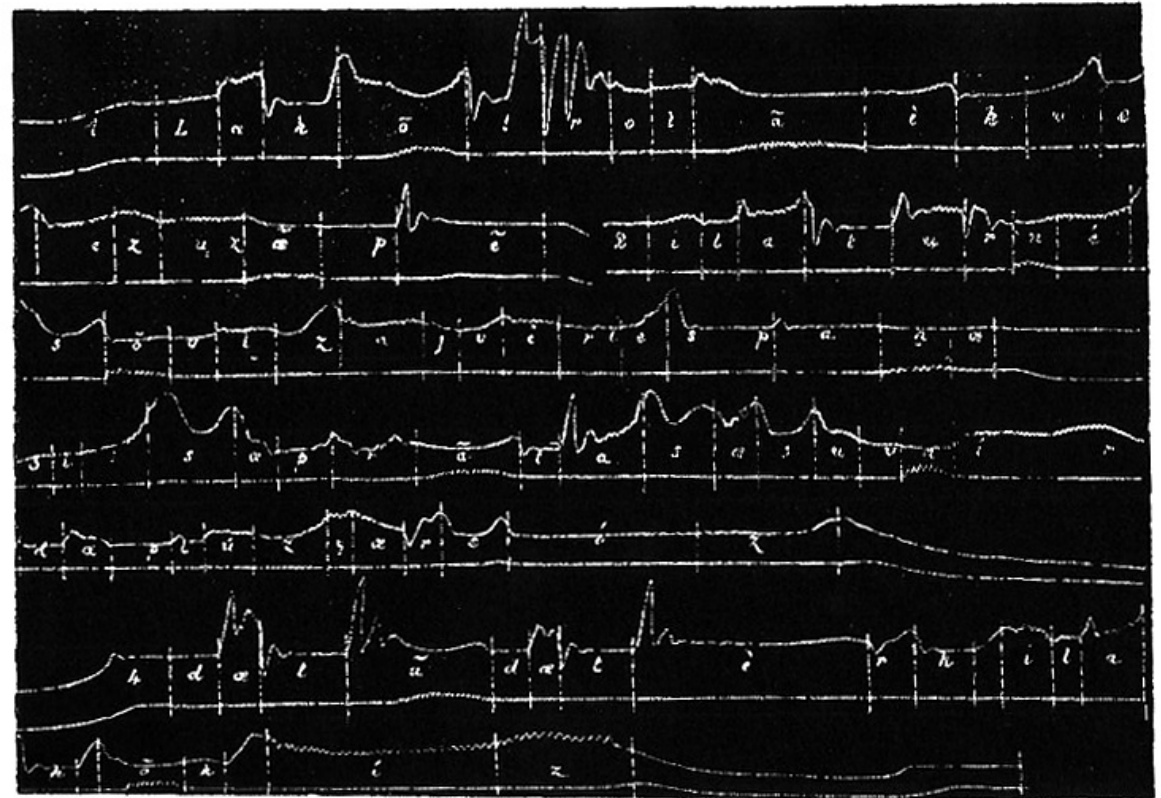


FIGURE 3. The speech act captured: the graphic result of recording an excerpt from *La Chanson de Roland*. (The pictured text in phonetic notation reads: “Le conte Roland est couché sous un pin . . .”) From Abbé Pierre-Jean Rousselot, *Principes de phonétique expérimental* (Paris, 1924), 1058.

# 1913: "La parole au timbre juste"

## **Le pont Mirabeau**

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine  
Et nos amours  
Faut-il qu'il m'en souviene  
La joie venait toujours après la peine

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure  
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Les mains dans les mains restons face à face  
Tandis que sous  
Le pont de nos bras passe  
Des éternels regards l'onde si lasse

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure  
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

- The linguist Ferdinand Brunot partners with Disque Pathé, the largest record label in France, to release recordings of Apollinaire and other poets.



# *Speech Lab Recordings*

- Recording in 1931 at Columbia University by linguists, W. Cabell Greet & George W. Hibbitt.
- Recorded in a lab meant for the study of American dialects
- One of the first composed poetry audio archives in the US

In 1931, the poet Vachel Lindsay approached Barnard Professor of Speech W. Cabell Greet and requested that Greet record Lindsay reading his poetry





- Greet records five hours of Lindsay's poetry
- Lindsay dies later that year, before he could fulfill his plans to make "brand new tunes."



# *The Speech Lab Recordings*

The series runs through the 1930s and '40s, available to schools on a subscription basis.

- Vachel Lindsay
- Harriet Monroe
- James Weldon Johnson
- T.S. Eliot
- Robert Frost
- Gertrude Stein
- William Carlos Williams
- Edna St. Vincent



# Greet's Oppositional Poetics

"[Creating recordings of poets] is finally accomplished through the energy and vision of an 'impractical' poet, and the inexpensive research apparatus of a professor of English - without the perfection of machinery which is at the service of every ephemeral movie, without benefit of the technical experience of recording engineers."

-William Cabell Greet, writing in *The Elementary English Review*, May 1932

# CFP: Call for Poets (to record)

What poems of present-day authors lose most when transferred to the printed page, and should, therefore, be preserved as the poet reads them?

What poets and what poems would I and my friends like most to hear?

What poems would be most useful in emphasizing for students that all poetry, not only the so-called lyric, exists first as song, in aural terms, before it is reduced to print?

W. Cabell Greet, writing in *American Speech*, 1934



# Oppositional media: aluminum records



To be played with cactus needles (!)



# "Make Your Own Recordings"

- This technology was marketed for home use and one-time recordings.
- Also used by services that recorded ads from the radio for later examination by ad agencies.



# Cutting Wax

- Professional record companies would cut their recordings into wax because its softness allows for greater frequency response.
- Later, a metal master matrix is grown over the wax



# Aluminum Records



- Are cut directly by the machine.
  - Very durable
  - Sound fidelity is worse due to the metal's hardness.
  - Distinctive sound
- Few extant, as most were melted down for WWII munitions

# Coming soon...

- A new collection of T.S. Eliot recordings, presented for the first time together and with historical context

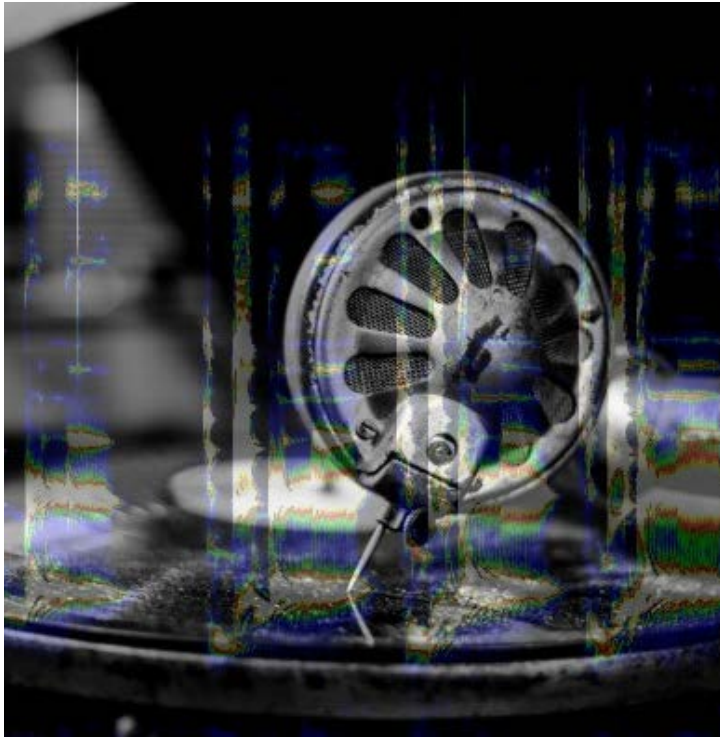
Wow, these  
downloads  
are fast...



Platform



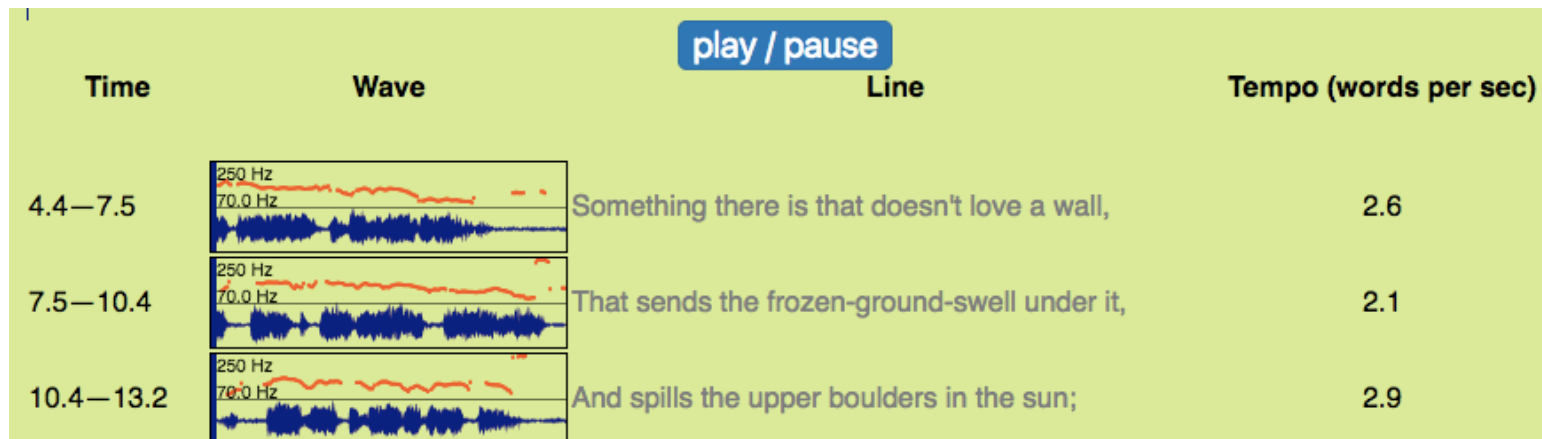
# PennSound as Dataset



- Ability to download all of PennSound en masse for distant listening research (cf Tanya Clement)
- Next steps toward accessibility, on a large scale



# Machine-Aided Close Listening



- Tool to align 3 dimensions: **text** (visual arrangement), **audio**, and **visualization** of audio.
- Aid in making empirical claims about the interplay of sonic and visual forms with content

# Poetry Audio Lab: Pedagogy

[courses](#) > [undergraduate](#) > [2018 fall](#)

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## JRS Poetry Audio Lab: Modern Poetry and Sound Studies

ENGL 200.301

instructor(s): [Chris Mustazza](#)

TR 4:30-6

fulfills requirements:

[Sector 1: Theory and Poetics](#) of the Standard Major

[Sector 6: 20th Century Literature](#) of the Standard Major

[Junior Research Seminar Requirement](#) of the Standard Major

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How would we understand the development of modern poetry differently by studying it through sound recordings of poets reading their own work, rather than primarily through the texts of the poems? Going beyond works that feature the written word and into the realm of oral or unwritten works, we will also listen to recordings of folk songs, African-American spirituals, blues, and vaudeville to understand the inter-development of sonic poetics during the period.

In our poetry audio lab, we will make extensive use of recordings from the PennSound archive and work with the materials in a hands-on fashion: recording podcast episodes of close listenings to poems in the Wexler Studio of the Kelly Writers House, and learning how to do remix and collage work with audio files (in the vein of Cassandra Gillig's *Put Me In Charge of Poetry Magazine*). The course includes a precis of some of the newest digital tools for studying poetry recordings, considering voices as data that can be visualized. No prior experience in these areas is necessary, just an interest in how sound shapes meaning.

Using the audio files, we will work to hear in new ways the development of several different strains of American poetic modernism (e.g. the High-Modernism of Eliot, the Afro-Modernism of James Weldon Johnson, the proto-postmodernism of Gertrude Stein) as they developed alongside key works from European avant-gardes, like Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* and works from Italian and Russian Futurisms (heard in translation). This course is a Junior Research Seminar, and it will culminate in a research project that will contribute to scholarship on the performed poem.

# access facilitates access

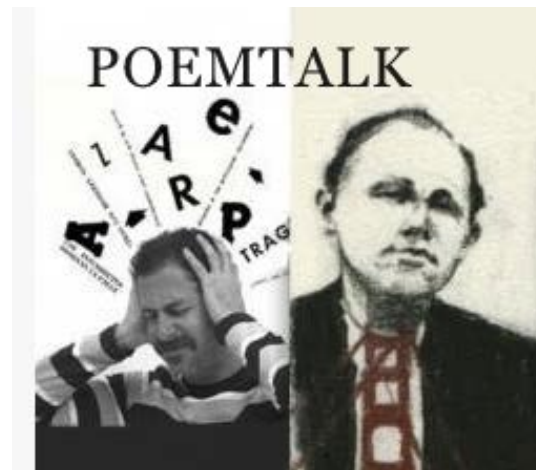


**PENNSOUND**



## Modern & Contemporary American Poetry

ModPo is a fast-paced introduction to modern and contemporary U.S. poetry, with an emphasis on experimental verse, from Dickinson and Whitman to the present. Participants (who need no prior experience with poetry) will learn how to read poems that are supposedly "difficult."



# Contact

Chris Mustazza

University of Pennsylvania

[mustazza@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:mustazza@sas.upenn.edu)

@mustazza

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>