Paper for the panel "American Literature and Sound Recording"
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I am currently producing a large-scale critical sound project called *Radio Free Stein* that aims to render at least ten (but possibly more) of Gertrude Stein's approximately eighty plays into recorded dramatic and musical form. While I have several goals for this project--to explore the relevance of music and sound to Stein's poetics, to expand ways of integrating words with other sonic elements--my primary goal is a critical one: to develop intrepretations of Stein's lesser-known plays. My intuition has been that the broadly collaborative effort required to render these plays into radio melodrama will help us understand texts that have been highly resistant to meaningful interpetation. For example, consider the first line of *Photograph. A Play in Five Acts* (1920): "For a photograph we need a wall." Why, exactly, does a photograph need a wall? And, is this a line of stage direction, setting, dialogue, or something else? Those of you familiar with Stein's plays will recognize that these kinds of questions arise with almost every line. For this reason, it seems, few of her plays (*Four Saints in Three Acts*, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, and *The Mother of Us All*) have received more than glancing critical attention as individual works.

In fact, the most significant approaches to Stein's plays have treated them as antitheatrical linguistic experiments meant primarily for the page (either closet dramas or metadramas).[1] This treatment, helpful as textual criticism, does not tend to account for the strong gravitational pull that her famous landscape poetics has exerted on post-WWII non-naturalist theater practices in the United States and elsewhere, how "Landscape

names the modern theater's new spatial paradigm," as Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri put it.[2] Elsewhere I have offered a reading of Stein's lecture "Plays" alongside several theories of affect and emotion in which I suggest that her landscape poetics address fundamental questions of emotional identification in the context of the displacement and integration of theater into newer media forms.[3] Radio, film, and television are precisely theatrical technologies in several senses: one, like theater, they foreground expressive faces, bodies, and voices, the primary physiological mediums of affective communication. Two, they borrowed and adapted the forms and techniques of live theater (what media studies calls "remediation"). And three, twentieth-century media took on the institutional function of representing groups to themselves. This, for Stein, is exactly what plays do:

> I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits.
>
> I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play.[4]

The plays that Stein began writing in the 19-teens took up the project of depicting aggregates or groups, a number of individuals in dynamic relations of mutual knowing.

My paper this afternoon takes up this orientation toward Stein's theater in a partial interpretation of her play *Photograph*. What does the experience of rendering the play in new radio form tell us about the group dynamics that Stein aims to depict? How does photography mediate group dynamics? I do not yet have a full or satisfying answer to these questions because we have not yet completed the recording: it is a premise of this project that only by staging these plays will we arrive at interpretations. My collaborators (Michael Moon, the Americanist literary critic, and the composer Daniel Thomas Davis)

and I held a workshop with a number of graduate students and faculty at Emory University last winter. Based on the workshop experience, I drafted a scenario that moved Stein's play text into a workable script. Daniel Davis is now composing the music and selecting the performers. We intend to rehearse and record the piece this spring and summer, then edit and mix the sound, at which time I will return to write a fuller interpretation. Today I offer a report on what, so far, we think, the play is doing.

Photograph, collected in *Last Operas and Plays* (1949), was one of a half dozen plays that Stein wrote in 1920. Stein was clearly thinking about cinema and photography at this time, the post-war moment offering new opportunities to experience these media on a larger scale. One of these plays, titled *A Movie*, is a detailed sketch or outline of an action comedy about the fictionalized adventures of her friend William Cook, an American painter and taxi driver, during the war. Another, *A Circular Play*, includes the lines: "It is a good idea to stare. We had our photographs taken, not intentionally but we happened to have seats in the front row near the arena and so when a photograph was taken we were in it" (LO&P, 140). Here Stein and (presumably) Toklas, attending and witnessing some event or spectacle, themselves become seen by a camera. Always attentive to this kind of reversal, the unexpected inclusion of audience within a theatrical frame, Stein insists that "it is a good idea to stare." Staring at the camera replies to the photographer's gaze, and challenges any too-easy separation of face from feeling that accompanied her remarkable celebrity in the 1930s and would pose a challenge to her writing and sense of identity. These are not yet exactly her concerns in 1920, but it is notable that *Photograph* makes much of the idea of twins and twinning, a subject she returns to in her late novel *Ida* and its exploration of the self-splitting effects of celebrity.[5]

There is not a lot of commentary on this play. Ulla Dydo observes that it "raises the question of representation by exploring photographs as reproductions, copies, or twins."[6] She quotes the entirety of Act III, the center or hinge of the play, which she asserts "was provoked no doubt by a snapshot" (16):

> A photograph. A photograph of a number of people if each one of them is reproduces if two have a baby if both the babies are boys what is the name of the street.
> Madame.

Dydo writes: "On rue Madame, a few steps from rue de Fleurus, lived Michael and Sarah Stein" (17) (Gertrude's oldest brother and his wife); she notes that "Act IV continues, 'We say we were warm. Guess McAdam.' Rue Madame was a paved, macadamized street" (17). Here Dydo offers examples of how Stein's writing strips away context, while her own text resupplies it. Such context, useful though it may be, does not itself interpret the play. Sarah Bay-Cheng, arguing for the impact of cinema on Stein's dramatic writing, suggests that the play "explores the relationship between mechanical duplication and human reproduction," and asserts that Stein assimilates these to one another.[7] Certainly, the play brings forward some analogy between biological and mechanical reproduction, but this observation does not explain the specific thematic of twinning: why this unusual or exceptional form of biological reproduction? It also overlooks the (to my mind) more salient analogy, that between a photograph and a play.

Consider, again, *Photograph*'s first line, now in the context of those that follow it:

> For a photograph we need a wall.
> Star gazing.
> Photographs are small. They reproduce well.
> I enlarge better.
> Don't say that practically.
> And so we resist.

We miss stones.
Now we sing.

Unlike when we look at a large oil painting (whether portrait or landscape), we do not ordinarily need a wall to look at a small photograph. But a wall often appears in photographic portraits: an individual or a group may be posed against an interior or exterior wall or other background (such as a studio curtain). The play begins by drawing our attention to the background of what we later find out is "a photograph of a number of people." Keeping in mind the movement between figure and ground that so thoroughly characterizes Stein's poetics, this wall is like the page on which the play is written or printed, or the stage on which it may be performed, and for this reason necessary: some material ground or backdrop is a condition for the foregrounding of inscription or performance.

If the first line unfolds this formal and material space of a photograph, the second line addresses its temporality. Just as gazing at stars literally involves looking at light traveling from a distant past, looking at a photograph involves looking at what has been registered on a light sensitive surface some time anterior to the present. Photography, etymologically writing with light, was once called (by Oliver Wendell Holmes) "the pencil of nature," an idea that appears in Act IV in the lines "I am very sleepy and burned./ Burned by the sun to-day." Photography here becomes a species of writing that shares its properties while also competing with it. What follows these brief gestures toward the space and time of photography is a treatment of its scale, the odd contrast between the size of a photo and that of the person or people it represents. "They reproduce well./ I enlarge better": the play claims to beat photography at its own game of

enlargement, as if its ability to contain multitudes surpasses any photograph's. Here "I" indexes the play itself as either a pregnant container or an otherwise substantial body, like Stein's.

So far my interpretive comments have not depended on any questions of performance or sound recording. But we can ask, what to make of the conversational exchanges that seem to take place here and throughout? How many voices are there in this play, and what is their setting? Michael Moon, in his initial reading, reported that the play had, for him, more the feel of a monologue than a dialogue, despite the many conversational markers. He suggested the idea of subvocalization, the verbal layer of self-talk that tends to go on for many of us much of the time without our always being consciously aware of it. At the Emory workshop, we asked participants to divide the lines between a more extroverted Voice and a quieter Subvoice that elaborates, undermines, or otherwise revises Voice's lines (Subvoice as a species of Voice). This experiment brought out an interesting friction between the various assertions, imperatives, and statements of feeling. We began to hear a third voice as well. In fact, the lines that follow "Now we sing" struck us as three short songs.

> St Cloud and you.
> Saint Cloud and loud.
> I sing you sing, birthday songs tulip belongs to red cream and green and crimson so that the house chosen has a soft wall.
> Oh come and believe me oh come and believe me to-day oh come and believe me oh come just for one minute.

At the workshop the composer, Dan Davis, had three voices intone or sing these together in overlapping lines. By the time I began to prepare the draft scenario, then, we had

agreed that there would be three main players (who would both speak and sing) called Voice, Subvoice, and Third, roughly corresponding to Gertrude, Alice, and a cousin.

Musically, Dan has been planning to use a string quartet, with musicians who occasionally speak: they comprise a chorus of Narrators and Listeners. Towards the end of the play's Prologue, just after the theme of twins is introduced, someone says: "Let me hear the story of the twin." This leads to a second beginning of the play, in what we are thinking of as Act One, which offers a meditation on twins and twinning. If you compare the play text with the scenario that I developed in consultation with my collaborators, you can see how every line distribution implies some interpretive decision. I can justify some of these decisions in critical terms, while some of them are more or less formal consequences of an earlier decision; some, meanwhile, remain (for the moment) intuitions. For example, I would find it difficult to explain the scenario's distribution of lines at the beginning of Act One. And these remain open: I expect that our next workshop with performers will find us trying out different line distributions. Having a chorus of musicians as our Narrators and Listeners offers additional resources for these experiments, and serves to integrate the music with the text in ways that Stein's plays seem to invite.

In terms of the play's setting, I was struck by the observation of one of our workshop participants that the line "We miss stones" is a cross-linguistic pun (in both German and Yiddsh), we miss Steins. Stein's father Daniel and his brother Solomon lived in twin houses in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Shortly after Gertrude was born the brothers dissolved their business partnership (their wives, Amelia and Pauline, had stopped speaking to one another), and Daniel moved his family to Vienna. Recalling the phrase

"the house chosen has a soft wall," I'm willing to speculate that the speakers in *Photograph* are looking at a group family photo from this time, one that includes the house that Stein first lived and was likely born in, and which she liked to identify as a twin house. In *The Autobiography*, for example, she writes (in Alice's voice): "She was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in a house, in a twin house. Her family lived in one and her father's brother lived in the other one" (66). Twin houses are duplications of domestic space, but these spaces failed to contain or manage the hostile relations between the families. And just as Gertrude's father and his brother separated, so did Gertrude and her brother Leo many years later. Brenda Wineapple has clearly shown how brother and sister formed themselves in crucial relation to one another; after their relationship ruptured in 1914 (just after Stein started writing plays), they too stopped speaking to one another.[8] Returning to the idea of subvocalization, it is not difficult to imagine that Stein had Leo's voice in her head for many years, both before their separation and after; and that perhaps it was Alice's voice that Gertrude hoped would replace her brother's. As she puts it near the end of *A Circular Play*:

> Do I sound like Alice.
> Any voice is resembling.
> By this I mean when I am accustomed to them their voices sound in my ears. (150)

The thematic of twins in this play, as I read it, is less about duplication or even biological reproduction than about a self-splitting that, for Stein, appears to be a necessary condition for individuation. However, the success of this psychical trajectory is never entirely assured. Looking at a photograph of one's family (perhaps with an infant Gertrude in it,

and a toddler Leo) can throw all that hard-won individuation and separation into jeopardy.

Our setting for the play, then, is twofold: diegetically, our players are looking at a photograph of a family on the verge of separation, or are inhabiting a psychic space that accompanies this act of looking. Extradiegetically, the phonograph will serve as a setting for our recording. That is, we intend to record parts of the play on vinyl (or to use a digital filter to make it sound phonographic); our players will interact with prerecordings. We anticipate that especially the songs will be on vinyl and serve as a sonic analog for photography. We'll have to be careful in addressing the nostalgia that accompanies this sound, and what this nostalgia is sourced in, the nineteenth-century sentimentalism by which the technology of photography was understood (and, by and large, continues to be understood): the discourses of preservation and revelation enveloped photography from its introduction in the 1840s, powerfully elaborated in the American context of the Civil War. How is Stein engaging with and disengaging from an overwhelming set of meanings, at another post-war moment? We plan to have a voice humming the Star Spangled Banner throughout Act Second of *Photograph*, to introduce the larger national and imperial contexts for the new experiences of graphic reproduction. Stein's half-rhyme--"Two authors....Expression falters"--indicates some difficult changes in the scene of writing itself that accompany photography. My current intrepretation of the play is that these changes in the scene of writing, and their consequences for knowing oneself and others, are fundamentally what the play is about.

As Stein puts it half way through Act One:

> A language tires.
> A language tries to be.

A language tries to be free.
This can be called Twinny.

I am not sure yet how to characterize these consequences for individuals and groups, as the play is assessing them. I am hoping that our future work, on this Stein play and others, will lead to a better understanding. And here my report ends.

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[1] On Stein's plays as metadramas, see Jane Palatini Bowers, *"They Watch Me as They Watch This": Gertrude Stein's Metadrama (*Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991); as closet dramas, see Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
[2] Fuchs, Elinor and Una Chaudhuri, eds. *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2.
[3] Adam Frank, "Loose Coordinations: Theater and Thinking in Gertrude Stein," in *Science in Context* 25.3 (September 2012).
[4] Gertrude Stein, Lectures in America (Beacon Press, 1985), 119.
[5] Logan Esdale, "Gertrude Stein's Twin"
[6] Ulla Dydo wth William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934* (Northwestern Universit Press, 2003), 16. Dydo also includes it in *A Stein Reader* with an introduction that suggests that "The occasion for *Phtograph* appears to be a picture taken at a birthday party, perhaps for new twins" (343).
[7] Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant Garde Theater* (Routledge, 2004), 35.
[8] Brenda Wineapple, *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein* (Johns Hopkins, 1996).