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Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism and Popular Media

DISSERTATION

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for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

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DEDICATION

To

my parents

whose voices are more powerful than they know

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		PAGE
LIST OF FIGURES		iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		v
CURRICULUM VITAE		vii
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION		viii
INTRODUCTION:	Anachronism Effects	1
CHAPTER 1:	Bicentenniality and Black Noise: Richard and Willie's Vinyl Ventriloquism	26
CHAPTER 2:	Milli Vanilli and the Cultural Logic of Synchronization	61
CHAPTER 3:	Puppet Love: Documenting Ventriloquism in Nina Conti's *Her Master's Voice*	110
CHAPTER 4:	Speaking and Singing for the "Silenced Majority": Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator's "American" Ventriloquism	148
EPILOGUE:	Trump's Voice	194

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1.1	*Red, White & Blue—From A Black Point of View* album cover (1976)	40
1.2	*Bicentennial Nigger* album cover (1976)	59
2.1	*All or Nothing* album cover (1988)	91
2.2	Fab's hair, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	100
2.3	Rob's hair, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	100
2.4	Triangulation scene, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	102
2.5	Rob and Fab, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	102
2.6	Rob and Fab elsewhere, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	104
2.7	Rob elsewhere, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	104
2.8	Rob and Fab dancing, "Girl You Know It's True" music video still (1989)	105
3.1	Conti and Monk, *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	125
3.2	"Striptease," *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	127
3.3	Conti in bed with "Campbell," *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	128
3.4	Conti with Campbell's puppets, *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	132
3.5	Johnson performing, *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	139
3.6	Johnson "bifurcating," *Her Master's Voice* video still (2012)	139
4.1	Dunham and Sweet Daddy Dee performance still	179
4.2	Dunham and Bubba J performance still	181
4.3	Fator publicity material	184
4.4	Fator as Jackson and Walter T. Airedale performance still	190
4.5	Fator and Julius performance still	191
4.6	Fator and "Trump" performance still	197

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism and Popular Media

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

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Associate Professor Annette Schlichter, Chair

Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism and Popular Media, argues that the seemingly outmoded cultural phenomenon of ventriloquism is a key site for understanding Western anxieties about media and mediation at the turn of the twenty-first century. Ventriloquism achieved mainstream popularity in the Vaudevillian era through its comedic dramatizations of the foibles of everyday communication. Subsequently translated into the audiovisual contexts of phonography, film, and television, the art boasts a growing plethora of media afterlives, while also serving as political shorthand for the mechanical reproduction of another's speech. *Anachronism Effects* insists that ventriloquism's circulation as a popular metaphor, and continued prevalence as a form of contemporary entertainment, offers a unique template for tracing the transmissions of power and knowledge through diverse media platforms, as well as through racialized, gendered, and queer bodies, in the information age—even as the practice continues to evoke the cultural detritus of a prior historical moment.

Anachronism Effects thus attends to the myriad ways in which ventriloquism has evolved as a distinct cultural object, as the art of "saying what people want to say but can't say" by displacing this unspeakable or unsavory speech onto a dummy. From the radically race-critical

1970s vinyl record albums of the African-American ventriloquist duo Richard and Willie; to the late 1980s-early 1990s lip-synch scandal wrought by the "ventriloquism" of the Afro-German pop group Milli Vanilli; to the contemporary televisual, cinematic, and multimedia performances of the self-deprecating British ventriloquist Nina Conti and her jingoistic American counterparts Terry Fator and Jeff Dunham, the project's case studies illuminate what it means to "vent" in both senses of the term, particularly in the context of the perceived dynamics of silencing or "correctness" that often accompanies contemporary political discourse. The dissertation's initial case studies notably coalesce around highly politicized celebrations of national history (the mid-1970s U.S. Bicentennial, the early 1990s "reunification" of Germany), while its later chapters take up post-9/11 U.S. fantasies of a return to a folkloric national past. In each instance, ventriloquism's play with the alignments and disconnections between body and voice enacts a material working-through of the temporal contradictions elided by national historical discourses.

INTRODUCTION
Anachronism Effects

> I'm the misdirection, dummy! While we're bull-shittin', you could bring an elephant on the stage!
>
> FATS (Dennis Alwood), *Magic*

> Progressively, ventriloquism has become creepily or even embarrassingly archaic. It is a blockage in the system, a catch in the throat of media technology, the awkward sign of the workings of the works. But its archaism is characteristic of the archaism attaching to the voice itself.
>
> STEVEN CONNOR, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*

> Do they know it's ventriloquism? Do they know how I feel about it? I think it's a dead art.
>
> MONK (Nina Conti), live performance

The 1978 horror film *Magic* (dir. Richard Attenborough) chronicles the precipitous rise to fame and homicidal downfall of a professional ventriloquist. Now a cult classic, *Magic* stars a youthful Anthony Hopkins in the role of Corky Withers, a failing magician whose career in show business finally takes off when he incorporates ventriloquism into his stage act. With the help of his nasal, potty-mouthed dummy Fats, who amuses the crowd by making crass comments about women's breasts and otherwise speaking the conventionally unspeakable, Withers deftly employs the "creepily or even embarrassingly archaic" art of ventriloquism to distract his audience while he stages card tricks, drawing viewers' wandering eyes back to his magical feats

only after these sleights of hand have been immaculately executed.[1] Far from getting him booed out of the house, Withers' antiquated ability to contort his voice and illusorily channel it through Fats' puppet body expertly misdirects the crowd's gaze, leading spectators to look away from the ventriloquist-magician and toward his altered voice's apparent source, just as film and television viewers reflexively look to the bodies they see onscreen as the origins of the recorded voices they hear emanating from TV and theater speakers. As Withers' agent opines, "Magic is misdirection—that's all it is. And misdirection is getting the people to look in the wrong place at the right times."[2] What the agent doesn't say, but what Withers' ventriloquism makes abundantly clear, is that the voice is a key player in the gaze's misdirection, a special effect that can invisibly send the "look" to "the wrong place at the right times."[3] Thus, no matter how anachronistic the spectacle of his ventriloquism may at first appear—no matter how dated and vestigial the ventriloquist-dummy pair may seem in the context of the rapidly mediatizing United States culture of the late 20th century—Withers' knack for vocal manipulation, his skill at synchronizing voices and bodies, sounds and images, that are, one presumes, "wrong" for each other, retains an allure and an effectiveness (effect-iveness?) that lives on beyond the alleged death of stage ventriloquism as a cultural form.

Because *Magic*'s own success as a sound film depends on its effective synchronization of separate audio and visual tracks, the film's representation of, and at times didactic commentary on, the audiovisual misdirections involved in stage ventriloquism self-reflexively references the metaphorical ventriloquism of film itself, as well as that of sound and image media more generally. Building out the film's Russian doll-like structure of concentric ventriloquisms is

[1] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 404.
[2] Richard Attenborough, *Magic*, Film, 20th Century Fox, 1978.
[3] As Michel Chion puts it, "In one sense the voice is the first of special effects—the one requiring the fewest accessories, the least technology and money." *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 169.

Magic's central plotline, which arcs around Withers' eventually murderous anxiety over taking his career to the next level and putting his ventriloquist magic act on primetime television—a feat that would necessitate, among other bureaucratic activities, a medical examination. Fearing the exposure of his schizophrenic dependency on Fats, whose license to say what Withers himself wants to say but can't makes the dummy increasingly indispensable to his master both on and off the stage, the unbalanced ventriloquist flees his agent and seeks refuge with an old flame. The triangle that ensues between Withers, the unfortunate love object, and the ventriloquist dummy who won't let his ventriloquist get a word in edgewise, has deadly consequences. But the story also speaks to the common assumption, in the contemporary moment, that ventriloquism is an anachronistic form that will inevitably fail to retain its magical purchase in the context of a more implicitly ventriloquial modern audiovisual medium like television. As Withers' agent puts it, "magic has had a little trouble on the tube…[b]ecause you can't misdirect the goddamn camera."[4] Thus Withers not only fears putting his act on TV because the physical exam might expose his "split personality," his pathologically bifurcated subjectivity; he also fears bringing his live performance to a medium whose alleged sophistication—the camera's immunity to misdirection—might expose his own all-too-human maneuvers. Yet Withers' double fear of exposure (or is it fear of double exposure?) is both confirmed and made ridiculous by *Magic*. For as a synchronized sound film in the horror genre, *Magic* uses all the weapons in its audiovisual arsenal to convince us of Fats' eerie autonomy from his master, in the process demonstrating ventriloquism's continued—if "creepy"—appeal to the viewer. In other words, in this film—as in the other 20th and 21st century case studies carried out in *Anachronism Effects*—the "newer (ventriloquial) medium" of cinema does not undermine the "older (Vaudevillian) form" of ventriloquism, rendering it moot or disposable. On

[4] Attenborough, *Magic*.

the contrary, ventriloquism's remediated appearance, its surfacing, in *Magic*, as an "awkward sign of the workings of the works,"[5] opens us to novel ways of thinking both the film and the ventriloquist act, the "newer" audiovisual medium and the "older" audiovisual practice, the relations between sound and image, and the dynamics between body and voice.

Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism and Popular Media argues that the seemingly outmoded cultural phenomenon of ventriloquism is a key site for understanding Western anxieties about media and mediation at the turn of the 21st century. For ventriloquism publicly stages a scenario of mediation: before an audience, an actor trained in the art of lip and tongue manipulation synchronizes her imperceptible speech to the moving lips of a dummy, whose voice, having seemingly passed from one body through another, emerges distorted, and yet still recognizable. Ventriloquism first achieved mainstream popularity in the Vaudevillian era through its comedic dramatizations of the foibles of everyday communication. Subsequently translated into the audiovisual contexts of phonography, film, and television, the art boasts a growing plethora of media afterlives, while also serving as political shorthand for the mindless, mechanical reproduction of another's speech. *Anachronism Effects* insists that ventriloquism's circulation as a popular metaphor, and continued prevalence as a form of contemporary entertainment, offers a unique template for tracing the transmissions of power and knowledge through diverse media platforms, as well as through racialized, gendered, and queer bodies, in the information age—even as the practice continues to evoke the cultural detritus of a prior historical moment. As the project's title suggests, the special "effect" of ventriloquism's archaic manifestation in the media-saturated cultural contexts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is to prompt us to think and feel—as well as think and feel otherwise—about the misdirections and bifurcations that both sustain and undermine contemporary audiovisual media and practices.

[5] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 404.

At the core of *Anachronism Effects* is a preoccupation with the problematics of synchronization, a temporal term often used to describe the process by which the sound and image components of audiovisual media are made to operate "in time" with one another. With its first English usages dating back to the early 17th century, the verb "to synchronize" can be colloquially translated as "to occur at the same time." In the U.S. and Western European popular cultural contexts with which *Anachronism Effects* is primarily concerned, "synchronization" is typically shortened to "synch" (sometimes "sync"). Indicating a moral judgment, as well as suggesting the paradoxical polarity that underlies the very notion of "synch," the term tends to be used in either a positive or a negative capacity. It can be approvingly deployed to describe the timely, "in synch," relation between (film, video, television) recorded image and sound, or between the lips of a pop (or a drag) performer and the vocal track to which she, he, or they "lip-synchs." Alternatively, it may be disapprovingly mobilized to indicate how "out of synch," say, a film image is with its accompanying soundtrack, an asynchrony that becomes audio-visible when onscreen lips do not "match up" with their assigned voices. As these examples make evident, when one talks about audiovisual synchronization in the contemporary (Western) popular domain, one is predominantly talking about the (positive) timeliness or the (negative) untimeliness associated with certain mediated pairings of the human body and the human voice.

In *Anachronism Effects*, I argue that it is this cultural tendency to moralize—to racialize, to gender, to sexualize, or, indeed, as *Magic*'s mental illness plotline illustrates, to pathologize—the perceived synchronies or asynchronies of particular bodies and voices that lends ventriloquism, a practice that uses a non-human (yet human-shaped) dummy body to dramatize the voice's disembodiment and re-synchronization, its anachronism as well as its continued purchase. Ventriloquism, as Steven Connor observes in his 2000 book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural*

History of Ventriloquism, seems archaic because the voice itself seems archaic. The era of the voice's privileging as presence, deconstructed by Derrida in *Grammatology*, would appear to have ended, and to have been succeeded by a modernized, even contemporized, consciousness of the voice's artificiality, its mediated lack of grain.[6] Palpable in both culture and academic scholarship, this shift is diversely registered by music-listeners' indifference to Auto-Tune and in-concert (i.e. live) lip-synching; film, media, and more recently, sound theorists' various emphases on the voice's technicity and the engineering (as opposed to natural occurrence) of audiovisual synchronicity;[7] and contemporary philosophers' declarations that the voice, linguistic or non-, is not the outpouring of an originary source, but is itself ventriloquial, always already disembodied, never fully belonging to the body, such that one never "owns" her "own voice."[8] At the present moment, it would seem, the privileging of "the voice" as an abstract, transcendental, transhistorical, indicator of authentic subjectivity as well as category of judgment and analysis is, well, *over*. Yet—and this is part of Connor's point, too—one can't lose what one never had in the first place. In other words, as many scholars currently studying both "the voice" and the more capacious category of *voice* (absent the universalizing "the") concur, the "rapid naturalization of the technologically mediated voice" that occurred in the wake (or really, in the

[6] Ibid; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998); Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-189.

[7] Among other examples, see Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*; Rick Altman, "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 67-79; Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), 47-60; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Nina Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre," *Trans: Revista Transculturel de Música* 13 (2009); James Tobias, *Sync: Stylistics of Hieroglyphic Time* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010); Alexander Weheliye, "Desiring Machines in Black Popular Music" and Jacob Smith, "Laughing Machines," both in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 511-19 and 533-38; Mara Mills, "Media and Prosthesis: The Vocoder, the Artificial Larynx, and the History of Signal Processing," *Qui Parle* 21, no. 1 (2012): 107-149; and Lucas Hilderbrand, "Sex Out of Sync: *Christmas on Earth*'s and *Couch*'s Queer Soundtracks," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 2 (2013): 45-75. Once again, the list is much longer than space allows.

[8] See, among others, Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), and Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

throes) of the development of sound reproduction technology did not result in the literal gut-wrenching of voices from the bodies that housed them.[9] Put more simply, the voice's technologization did not provoke mass panic, because the voice was already a technology; the voice's reproduction as recorded sound did not instill mass grief, because the voice was already a reproduced sound, a sound whose sound was and is conditioned by the sounds of other voices. Indeed, not only speech is performative. As Annette Schlichter has crucially argued, the voice—the material means by which speech is typically sounded—is itself performative.[10] The voice takes its cues from the world outside of the body, rather than emanating from an originary, unassailable source. The voice, as Lacan's followers are eager to tell us, is disembodied before it exits the body.[11] The voice is not original, but ventriloquial.

In the face of the voice's "archaism," its status as a ventriloquial anachronism that continues to preoccupy scholars who wish to "recapture [the] lost estrangement" of voice and body seemingly represented by the advent of sound reproduction,[12] *Anachronism Effects* argues that, like bodies, *ventriloquial voices matter*.[13] The dissertation breaks from Connor's cultural history of ventriloquism—which, its author argues, ultimately constitutes a "history of the voice"—as well as from more recent philosophical and theoretical accounts of the voice's untimely ventriloquism, by concerning itself with key moments in which specific ventriloquisms, practiced by racialized, gendered, and queered bodies and voices, have mattered.[14] *Anachronism Effects* also intervenes in film and media studies conversations about the overarching ventriloquial qualities of audiovisual media by asking how these ventriloquial media are

[9] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 411.

[10] See Annette Schlichter, "Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity," *Body & Society* 17, no. 1 (2011): 31-52.

[11] I refer to Dolar and Žižek here.

[12] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 411.

[13] See Schlichter, "Do Voices Matter?," and Annette Schlichter and Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Introduction: Voice Matters," *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 3 (2014).

[14] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 43.

transformed, not by their interactions with ventriloquial practices in general, but with the particular range of ventriloquisms mentioned above. For as recent scholars of voice have demonstrated, voices, like bodies, are racialized and gendered.[15] Thus the perceived synchrony or asynchrony of voices and bodies occurs not at random, or within a philosophical vacuum, but is, in contrast, directly contingent on these voices and bodies' racialization and gendering. This basic observation is frequently ignored by many who study voice, sound, ventriloquism, and audiovisual media, yet we can easily see the structural forces of racialization and gendering at work in the frequency with which certain voiced and embodied subjects are punished for their asynchrony, their untimely or, to use Connor's word, "awkward," combinations of voice and body. Critical race theory and queer theory have long documented the positioning of racialized and gendered subjects as "behind the times" or "out of time"—as not adhering, either corporeally or conceptually, to a normative linear temporality.[16] *Anachronism Effects* accordingly connects the anachronism of the racialized and gendered subject with the anachronism of the remediated ventriloquial voice to see what the literalization of this layered relationship and its various "anachronism effects" can tell us about the problematics of and possibilities for vocality, audiovisuality, and mediation in contemporary Western culture.

Each of the dissertation's transatlantic case studies hones in on a remediated enactment of ventriloquism at the turn of the 21st century, examining its chosen object at the textual level

[15] See, among others, Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race"; Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 119-39; Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to* Hedwig (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005); Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013); and Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), once again, among many others. See also "Gendered Voices and Social Harmony," a forum on *Sounding Out!*, accessed October 6, 2016, https://soundstudiesblog.com/category/gendered-voices-forum/.

[16] See, among others, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007); and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

while also placing it in historical and cultural context. In this way, *Anachronism Effects* seeks to bridge reigning scholarly divides between theory and practice, metaphor and materiality, to provide a rooted analysis of ventriloquism as both a distinct cultural object and a less tangible cultural figure. The dissertation begins with an examination of the radically race-critical 1970s comedy albums of the African American ventriloquist duo Richard and Willie, which use the "anachronism effect" of ventriloquism remediated through phonography to vocalize the noisy doubleness of black responses to the effacement and silencing of the history of U.S. slavery. Subsequently, *Anachronism Effects* addresses ventriloquism's mobilization as racialized and queered metaphor through an analysis of the late 1980s-early 1990s lip-synch scandal wrought by the vocal and bodily asynchrony of the Afro-German pop group Milli Vanilli. In its later chapters, the dissertation turns to the contemporary cinematic, televisual, and multimedia performances of the self-deprecating British ventriloquist Nina Conti and her jingoistic American counterparts Terry Fator and Jeff Dunham. *Anachronism Effects* argues that Conti's ventriloquial forays into documentary film undercut the paternalism of the genre's frequent claims to "give voice" to marginalized subjects by foregrounding the bifurcated relations between ventriloquists and dummies, as well as those between documentary filmmakers and their subjects. Fator and Dunham's dominant and highly lucrative ventriloquial practices, on the other hand, use ventriloquism's "anachronism effects" to channel different versions of an imagined *vox populi*, a "voice of the people" that hearkens back to a fantasized prior U.S. cultural moment when (white heterosexual) men could "say what they wanted to say" directly, and without the need for ventriloquial mediation. The materialization of this metaphorical *vox populi* in the voices of representative dummies, whose "politically incorrect" utterances provide a kind of crowd catharsis, underscores ventriloquism's endurance as a performance practice

even—and especially—in a cultural period in which the "archaic" art's sublimation into metaphor is persistently taken for granted.

VOICE STUDIES, VENTRILOQUISM STUDIES

Anachronism Effects' abiding focus on both the material dimensions of contemporary remediated ventriloquial performance (on what, in conversation, I often bluntly term "actual ventriloquism") and ventriloquism's continual metaphorization to serve a variety of cultural and political ends, reflects a central concern of the emergent field of voice studies—the field to which the dissertation perhaps most directly contributes. For as Annette Schlichter and Nina Eidsheim note in the introduction to their recent special journal issue, "Voice Matters," the voice, while understood as a material and physiological entity in scientific contexts, has been largely "devocalized," or divested of its sonic materiality, by Western philosophy and theory.[17] "*Voice*," they write, "has been cast as a central *metaphor* in critiques of dominant regimes of representation—for instance, in the uses of the tropes of speech and voice versus silence, deployed to represent gendered and/or racialized relations of power. Yet the voice remains disembodied in such critiques."[18] In describing the voice as both "devocalized" (a term coined by Adriana Cavarero) and "disembodied," Schlichter and Eidsheim not only lament that the voice, having lost both its body and its voice, has become "nothing more" (to invoke Mladen Dolar) than a floating signifier for an ineffable agency in the Western cultural context. They also implicitly take to task the voice's metaphorization as *ventriloquism*—as a disembodied operation—in recent theory (and elsewhere). Exemplary instances of the voice's ventriloquial metaphorization, or what we might call its double-disembodiment, can be found in the oft-quoted

[17] Schlichter and Eidsheim, "Voice Matters." The authors borrow the term "devocalization" from Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 14.

[18] Schlichter and Eidsheim, "Voice Matters."

works of Dolar and his interlocutor Slavoj Žižek, both of whom use the figure of ventriloquism to argue against the dualistic inscription of voice as either/or (either on the side of language and meaning or on the side of objecthood or inchoate materiality).[19] These scholars' theorizations of the voice as ventriloquism "by its very essence" are indeed compelling, but could be made more so were they to consider what ventriloquism actually *does*: how ventriloquism functions as both embodied and disembodied performance practice, what ventriloquism sounds like, what ventriloquism feels like, what ventriloquism makes us feel.[20] Like the metaphorization of voice, the metaphorization of ventriloquism (in the service of theorizing the voice, no less!) has little to offer us absent a consideration of ventriloquism's "material heterogeneity" (to repurpose Rick Altman's description of recorded sound)—not to mention the art's performative temporality. It is *Anachronism Effects*' dual contention that 1) if, as Dolar and others have claimed, the voice is essentially ventriloquial, the practice of ventriloquism has much to contribute to our understanding of the voice, and 2) if, as Schlichter and Eidsheim argue, the voice has been theoretically and philosophically devocalized and disembodied, we might proceed to enrich the growing field of voice studies by studying ventriloquism, that age-old embodiment of the disembodied voice, in all its literalistic shame and glory. Further, I contend, in *Anachronism Effects*, that the study of ventriloquial materiality offers new critical approaches to thinking the "gendered and/or racialized relations of power" that Schlichter and Eidsheim rightly claim are often inadequately explained (away) by the binary of "speech and voice versus silence."

As I have, I hope, already made clear, *Anachronism Effects* is far from alone in proposing ventriloquism, not to mention the many other, more modern instantiations of the disembodied voice, as a prime starting point for the voice's scholarly reconsideration. Connor's influential

[19] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70; Žižek, *On Belief*, 58.
[20] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70.

cultural history of ventriloquism, published before the advent of voice studies, traces the art's Western iterations chronologically, beginning with the Delphic Oracle, who mythically operated as Apollo's "mouthpiece,"[21] and ending with a chapter on 20th century sound art and other technological manifestations of the ventriloquial—including "[v]entriloquist films" like *Magic* that represent ventriloquism in its latter-day incarnation of man-with-dummy.[22] As I mentioned earlier, the overarching goal of Connor's psychoanalytically and phenomenologically oriented project is to foment a "history of the voice" by charting the "history of the particular kind of spatial-sensory exception represented by the fantasy of the ventriloquial voice,"[23] a fantasy that, *Dumbstruck* demonstrates, anteceded sound reproduction's technological rending of voice from body. In the wake of the voice's technological disembodiment, Connor argues, new and familiar feelings were dredged up as "some of the powers of the uncanny and the excessive with which the dissociated voice had long been associated" were brought back to life.[24] This might explain some of ventriloquism's enduring anachronism—its at once anticipatory and antiquated appearance—in the turn-of-the-21st-century period spanned by *Anachronism Effects*. However, Connor explains, while ventriloquism's anachronism has remained a paradoxically consistent feature of the art over time, the practice's material exhibitions have varied widely over the centuries. In explaining the art's winding, inconsistent transition from oracular utterance, through (and I am indeed fast-forwarding through a great deal here) the polyphonic stage ventriloquisms of the early 19th century, to the "ventriloquial duality" of the still-Vaudevillian ventriloquisms of today that typically feature the isolated pairing of ventriloquist and dummy (which had become "standard" ventriloquial practice by the close of the 19th century), Connor cites ventriloquism's

[21] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 47.
[22] Ibid., 412.
[23] Ibid., 43.
[24] Ibid., 40.

growing "implicat[ion] in the eye," its turn toward a more visual mode of expression and interest.[25] In doing so, he implicitly invokes what has been extensively theorized as a broader Western cultural shift toward the "hegemony of vision."[26] In concert with this shift, he implies, ventriloquism transitioned into a practice that audiovisually synchronized the now iconic body of the ventriloquist's dummy to the previously disembodied voice. This process of synchronization emblematized the material embodiment of what Connor calls the "vocalic body": "the idea…of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice."[27] Ventriloquism had always furnished a "repertoire of imagings or incarnations" for the vocalic body,[28] a variant set of containers for the uncanny disembodied voice (the "acousmêtre," in Michel Chion's terminology).[29] But the ventriloquist's dummy in particular was characterized, Connor argues, by its increasingly archetypal representation of "the deviant or particularized [physical characteristics and] voices of class, region, race, or physical condition, which are wholly, even excessively embodied."[30]

As *Anachronism Effects* demonstrates, the ventriloquist's dummy as we know it today still constitutes a heavily racialized and gendered anachronism in the form of a wooden puppet. In contrast to Connor's cultural history, however, which posits the late 19th century as the defining moment of ventriloquism's imbrication with processes of racialization and gendering (processes he refers to as "sociological fixing") only to gloss the century that followed, *Anachronism Effects* argues that an analysis of the art's more recent "anachronism effects" in

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[25] Ibid., 399.

[26] See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley, U of California P, 1993); and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, U of California P, 1994), for examples/critiques of this tendency.

[27] Ibid., 35.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21.

[30] Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 400.

and on Western culture demonstrates the extent to which ventriloquism as both practice and metaphor has a mutually constitutive relation to such processes.[31] Rather than grasping ventriloquism's vocal disembodiments and bodily re-synchronizations as appeals to a primal or universal sense of the uncanny, *Anachronism Effects* argues that ventriloquism and its metaphorization give us a window into the means by which certain voices and bodies are themselves codified as "uncanny" or asynchronous—a window, in other words, into the audiovisual dynamics of dominant structures of racialization and gendering. In the dissertation's second chapter, I refer to these dynamics as indicative of a reigning Western "cultural logic of synchronization." Yet we have only to revisit, say, the Mechanical Turk of the late 18th century to glimpse the extent to which racialization and the "uncanniness" of the ventriloquial voice have long been coextensive.[32] Indeed, Connor provides us with many examples of the ways in which gender (as a binary construction) has both dictated and been dictated by the voice's "uncanny" dis- and re-embodiment.[33] Additionally, in its focus on remediated ventriloquisms, *Anachronism Effects* insists that technological mediation both echoes and alters ventriloquism's codification of so-called "deviant" voices and bodies, presenting possibilities for alternative ventriloquial practices, as well as practices that attempt to reinforce dominant schemes of codification.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] The Mechanical Turk was a chess-playing automaton constructed by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1770. The "player" that sat before the chessboard was a "Turk" in Orientalist dress. The automaton hid inside its bowels a human chess-player who actually made all the moves. See Edgar Allan Poe, "Maelzel's Chess-Player" (1836), in *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Tales and Poems* (Edison: Castle Books, 1985), 373-88, for Poe's "exposure" of this fraud. Walter Benjamin also opens his 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History" with a reference to the Mechanical Turk in which he observes that the Turk is a "puppet in Turkish attire…with a hookah in its mouth." See *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-64.

[33] For instance, when Connor locates ventriloquism's point of origin as the Delphic Oracle (a location that is debatable, but which I do not have the space to challenge in the present dissertation), he observes, "The Delphic oracle becomes as important as it does because it invents the ecstatic voice, invents the idea of prophecy as the effect of the female body torn apart, through a frenzied, violent, inhuman voice, a voice that at once tends and dismembers the body and yet forms out of this a new kind of vocal body, a body-in-pieces." *Dumbstruck*, 74. In Connor's reading, ventriloquism begins as the dismemberment of a specifically female body, whereas later, in the 19th century, the adolescent male body will become the primary "suffer[er]" of this "annihilat[ion]." *Dumbstruck*, 409. For my part I do not believe that the historical record supports this alleged shift.

As I will soon detail, in pursuing the above lines of inquiry, *Anachronism Effects* is deeply indebted to contemporary critical race scholarship, black studies, feminist theory, and queer theory. Following Schlichter and Eidsheim's call for a "transdisciplinary" approach to studies of the (disembodied) voice, the dissertation also recognizes the crucial contributions of film and media theoretical excavations of the voice, as well as those of the newer—yet related—field of sound studies. It should again be stressed that in engaging with these media-centric fields, the project affirms that voices are always already technological—that they are, in the Foucauldian sense, "technologies of the self," as well as material entities shaped by culture.[34] In other words, *Anachronism Effects* understands voices as mediated phenomena, which means that studying, say, the (ventriloquial) voice in cinema, is, as Chion and Altman show us, a valuable approach to studying the (ventriloquial) voice itself. Similarly, the dissertation takes inspiration from Jonathan Sterne's work on the importance of attending to the full materiality of sound in the post-"Ensoniment" period—to conceptualizing and hearing sound as so much more than the raw material of the voice or music.[35] As Schlichter and Eidsheim point out, this central aim of sound studies crucially challenges those of us interested in the historically privileged category of the voice to thoroughly consider *voices as sounds*. Accordingly, *Anachronism Effects* treats voices as both sounds and media, and thus as sound media. Yet this approach means nothing in the absence of a joint consideration of the ways in which sound media are directly enmeshed with structures of power. *Anachronism Effects* thus begins not with the assumption of sound, media, the voice, or ventriloquism as deracinated or neutral objects that are then racialized or

[34] Writes Foucault, "technologies of the self…permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Boston: U of Massachusetts P, 1988), 18.

[35] The period Sterne terms the "Ensoniment" dates roughly between 1750 and 1925. During this span, he asserts, "sound itself became an object and a domain of thought and practice, where it had previously been conceptualized in terms of particular idealized instances like voice or music." Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 2.

gendered. Rather, the dissertation positions critical race, feminist, and queer theory as the central analytics through which *Anachronism Effects* approaches its study of the ventriloquial voice.

RACIALIZATION AND VENTRILOQUISM

Anachronism Effects does not only argue that we cannot talk about ventriloquism without talking about race. The dissertation contends that ventriloquism's frequent critical invocation, particularly in contemporary scholarship and commentary on black popular culture, demonstrates its unique value as an analytic for conceptualizing racialization as an audiovisual process tied to dominant regimes of synchronization. As *Anachronism Effects* insists and as scholars of African-American media, culture, and performance such as Daphne Brooks, Glenda Carpio, Paul Gilroy, and Alexander G. Weheliye have suggested, the ventriloquial may also serve as the condition of possibility for alternative lines of flight, asynchronous subjectivities, and sonic materializations of what Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best have called "black noise."[36]

When ventriloquism is invoked in discussions of race and popular culture, it is often deployed as a metaphor for minstrelsy.[37] Like ventriloquial performance (a practice historically synchronic with minstrelsy in the U.S. cultural context), the minstrel show was an audiovisual practice, involving the presentation of "blacked up" white bodies speaking in racialized voices. In "ventriloquizing" blackness, the white minstrel performer synchronized blackness' alleged visual and auditory components, which is to say, constructed an audiovisual racial caricature rooted in the fantasy of the fixed, yet aberrant nature of black skin and black voice, whose respective transposition onto and vocalization from the throat of the white performer at once

[36] Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92.1 (2005): 3. Best and Hartman's concept of "black noise" will be explained later in the introduction and will be further unpacked in Chapter 1.

[37] For an example of this usage, see Mita Banerjee, *Ethnic Ventriloquism: Literary Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008).

underscored the neutrality and supremacy of white skin and white voice. Minstrelsy, like ventriloquism, produced a dualism: it audio-visualized a color line, a separation of "black" and "white" as a means of consolidating whiteness.[38] The practice, which Eric Lott refers to as "a case of popular racial ventriloquism," accomplished a great deal of this purpose through the sartorial, gestural, and—notably—vocal positioning of black people as puerile and underdeveloped, as engaging in "nonlogical modes…of speaking" pronounced in exaggerated vernacular accents.[39] Minstrelsy, according to Lott, had "the infantilizing effect of arresting 'black' people in the early stages of childhood development."[40] In other words, before a white audience, blackness was imaged and sounded as stunted, asynchronous, ill fitting, untimely. The disjunct between the minstrel's adult-sized body, visibly re-pigmented, and his contorted voice, speaking in baby talk, appeared anachronistic.

There is an abiding connection, *Anachronism Effects* argues, between the "anachronism effects" of the racializing practices of blackface minstrelsy and ventriloquism's historical and contemporary "anachronism effects" as alluded to by Connor and others—a linkage that has been ignored and effaced in dominant histories and theories of ventriloquism.[41] For as Connor largely fails to acknowledge in his seminal cultural history, ventriloquism and blackface minstrelsy were "skills" often mastered by the same performers, "talents" often performed alongside one another on the same 19th century stages. One cannot isolate the history of blackface from the history of ventriloquism; both practices involved racial mimicry and

[38] See Jennifer Lynn Stoever's recent work on the "sonic color line," which explores the acoustic dimensions of the imagined boundary between the racialized categories of "black" and "white" first referenced by Frederick Douglass, later popularized by W. E. B. Du Bois, and typically interpreted as a visual metaphor. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

[39] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 106; 147.

[40] Ibid.

[41] For an example of blackface's effacement from substantial histories of ventriloquism beyond Connor's, see Stanley Burns, *Other Voices: Ventriloquism from B.C. to T.V.* (Sylvia Burns, 2000).

impersonation; the ventriloquist was as much a minstrel as the minstrel was a ventriloquist. Thus the blackface or otherwise racialized, nearly always diminutive and infantilized, ventriloquist dummy was and is, *Anachronism Effects* maintains, not merely the result of a process of "sociological fixing" that occurred with the increased dummification of the transcendentally uncanny voice, but must be understood as the ventriloquial materialization of a racist ideology that configured and that continues to configure blackness as profound anachronism. Put otherwise, arguments for the universal uncanniness of the voice, exemplified by its never-quite-fitting-together with the body, fail to acknowledge the extent to which racialization so often functions through the configuration of an embodied, voiced subject as uncanny—as always already ventriloquial. In sum, if we are "all" ventriloquial, some of us are more ventriloquial than others—and those latter are reprimanded accordingly. Chapter 2 of *Anachronism Effects* considers a case in which the "ventriloquism" of racialized pop music performers provoked especially severe levels of public punishment, while Chapter 4 of the dissertation examines the blackface and other minstrel acts of contemporary mass-mediated ventriloquial performance.

As both Chapters 1 and 2 of *Anachronism Effects* demonstrate, however, African-American and Afro-European cultural practitioners have powerfully critiqued, resignified, and redeployed the "anachronism effects" of ventriloquism and its audiovisual racialization. Fundamental to the dissertation's exploration of black ventriloquial cultural production, as well as to its theorization of what ventriloquism can do (or undo, as the case may be), is W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," which he defines as a "twoness" experienced by African-American subjects simultaneously engaged in self-sensation and the disembodied act of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[42] While Du Bois uses the metaphorics of the visual to describe the "second-sight" one possesses in this split capacity (a doubled state

[42] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 5.

literalized and materialized in black ventriloquial practice), I read Du Boisian double consciousness and its ventriloquial manifestation through Weheliye's "phonographic" treatment of the former in his book *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2005). In this brilliant study, Weheliye argues that the splitting of sound and source that is often said to have been instantiated by the sound-recording technology of the phonograph has provided unique opportunities for black cultural producers to create new sonic forms, explore asynchronous temporalities, and challenge the persistently (audio-)visual dynamics of racialization.[43] Materially and metaphorically, ventriloquism's separation of voice and body is deeply phonographic. Thus in contrast to minstrelsy's "racial ventriloquism" and ventriloquism's minstrelsy, which together negatively position blackness as anachronism, the phonographic ventriloquism examined in the initial chapter of *Anachronism Effects* marches to the beat of a different drummer, making its own noisy contribution to what Weheliye calls "sonic Afro-modernity"—a temporality whose nonlinear, non-progressive, bent in fact runs through Western modernity as we know it.

QUEER ASYNCHRONIES

Acknowledging that, "in modernity's various self-representations, racial difference has operated as the sign of anachronism *tout court*," the queer literary scholar Elizabeth Freeman argues that feminist and queer cultural practices, too, foreground and recodify anachronism's aberrance to suggest asynchronous "queer temporalities."[44] Part of a constellation of queer scholars whose work responds to the historical positioning of LGBT bodies and collectivities as out of step with normative temporality—whether behind the times, ahead of the times, or, as

[43] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 6.
[44] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 80.

Connor argues of ventriloquism, at once (and thus uncannily) behind *and* ahead of the times—Freeman helpfully furnishes the notion of what she calls "chrononormativity" to explain this positioning. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, among other critical frameworks, she defines the term as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity," later describing chrononormativity as "an enforced synchronicity" that is differentially classed, gendered, and, we must reemphasize, raced.[45] While Freeman's theorization of "enforced synchronicity" casts the "human body" as the principal unit of this enforcement, *Anachronism Effects* listens for the ventriloquial voice, bringing this voice into the analysis to allow for a finer focus on the audiovisual dynamics of chrononormativity (what I refer to in Chapter 2 as the "cultural logic of synchronization"). Particularly in its second and third chapters, but really, in each of its chapters, *Anachronism Effects* asks what the temporal "organization" (Freeman's word) of voice vis-à-vis body and sound vis-à-vis image tells us about the processes of racialization and gendering as they are both mapped onto and mediated through vocalizing bodies. The dissertation also—in an approach modeled by Freeman in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*—uses its primary object, ventriloquism, to chart voice-body and sound-image relations that reconfigure dominant modalities of synchronization, and that thus suggest not only alternate temporalities, but also spatialities.

Among these relations is the ventriloquial positionality of "bifurcation," discussed in detail in Chapter 3. While this term generally connotes the branching of something into two adjacent parts, in the ventriloquism community, "bifurcation" is used to describe a specific practice wherein a ventriloquist, sans dummy, moves her own lips out of synch with her speech. The concept can, however, also be applied to dummy ventriloquism, wherein the ventriloquist keeps her lips as still as possible while otherwise speaking legibly, so that the puppet beside her

[45] Ibid., 3; 39.

appears to do the talking—another kind of asynchrony. Contradictory as the claim may at first seem, ventriloquial bifurcation can, *Anachronism Effects* argues, be understood in relation to anti-dualistic and nonlinear feminist and queer theories of relationality, temporality, and spatiality. For in the queerer iterations of ventriloquism *Anachronism Effects* explores, one speaks not either "as oneself" or "as another." Rather, in the words of the feminist documentarian Trinh T. Minh-ha, one "speaks nearby," such that the other is neither possessed ("given a voice," "spoken for"), nor impossibly self-possessed ("speaking in her own voice").[46] Or, as queer theorist Eve Sedgwick might concur, ventriloquism opens us to the possibility of speaking beside or alongside both self and others, in lateral relation, creating an expanded field of possibilities.[47]

In the context of the contemporary, media-saturated West's orientation toward the metaphors of progressive motion and spatial collapse, ventriloquism's "archaic" play with the alignments and disconnections between body and voice enacts a material working-through of the spatiotemporal contradictions often elided by normative, national historical discourses. As the pop cultural trajectory charted in *Anachronism Effects* demonstrates, ventriloquism is exceptionally positioned to both reinforce and reconfigure reigning transatlantic fixations with audiovisual synching across media—including the "human medium" of the vocalizing body.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 of the dissertation, "Bicentenniality and Black Noise: Richard and Willie's Vinyl Ventriloquism," examines the phonographic ventriloquism of the Los Angeles-based

[46] Trinh T. Minh-ha and Nancy N. Chen, "'Speaking Nearby:' A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 87.

[47] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 8-9.

African-American comedian Richard Sandfield, a contemporary and self-professed admirer of Richard Pryor. While the latter's vocal impressions and self-objectifying comedic style made him a household name, Sandfield and his dummy Willie's anachronistic deployment of stage ventriloquism attained far less commercial success. Both the ventriloquist and the famous comedian were especially prolific in the 1970s, reproducing and distributing their many live performances on vinyl records for repeat consumption. These acts of remediation, the chapter argues, muted (but did not erase) the visual dimensions of both performers' comedy, allowing for the sonic aspects thereof to be differently heard. The chapter listens especially closely to Richard and Willie's 1976 album, *Red, White & Blue—From A Black Point of View*, on which the dialogical voices of ventriloquist and dummy combine to lampoon the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations of the year of the record's making. In its sharp critique of the Bicentennial's glaring erasure of the history of slavery, Sandfield's album vocalizes a performance of Du Boisian double consciousness, wherein the characters of Richard and Willie enact a tug-of-war between acquiescence and resistance to white supremacy. Further, in the audible gaps between the linguistic expressions of these respective polarities, the chapter argues, sonic materializations of Best and Hartman's figuration of "black noise" may be apprehended. As Carpio has brilliantly argued, this "extralinguistic mode" of response to white supremacist historicization can also be traced through Pryor's comedy.[48] The chapter concludes with a brief rereading of Pryor's own Bicentennial comedy as a specifically ventriloquial exercise, one literalized, materialized, and, indeed, ventriloquized by the adjacent duo of Richard and Willie.

Chapter 2 of *Anachronism Effects*, "Milli Vanilli and the Cultural Logic of Synchronization," focuses on ventriloquism's deployment as metaphor in the case of the

[48] Best and Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," 3; Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 73.

excessively publicized Milli Vanilli lip-synch scandal of the late 1980s/early 1990s. Visually fronted by the Afro-German performer Robert "Rob" Pilatus and the Afro-French performer Fabrice "Fab" Morvan, Milli Vanilli was a pop music act conceived by the German record producer Frank Farian, who enlisted Pilatus and Morvan to serve as the public "faces" of the group—whose voices and music were, unbeknownst to their fans, generated by an assemblage of unseen vocalists and musicians. When audible skips in audio playback compromised the duo's lip-synch act during a live performance, Pilatus and Morvan were widely accused of "ventriloquism." Notably, Farian's career suffered little. Through an analysis of Milli Vanilli's music, music videos, and accompanying cultural contributions, the chapter argues that the extremity of the denouncements leveled at Pilatus and Morvan for their participation in this complex "ventriloquist act" directly correlated with U.S. audiences' interpretations of the duo's members as queerly racialized Afro-European subjects out of step with normative temporality. Borrowing from Gilroy's work on the non-synchronousness of Black Atlantic experience and cultural production, and taking into account the production of Milli Vanilli's vocals and music by African-American artists on the other side of the Atlantic, the chapter reads the punishment of Pilatus and Morvan as the enforcement of chrononormativity qua the policing of audiovisual synchronization.[49] In closing, the chapter examines Milli Vanilli's often ironic re-presentation in contemporary U.S. art and media projects, which both critically redeploy and fetishize the group's enduring "anachronism effect."

Chapter 3 of the dissertation, "Puppet Love: Documenting Ventriloquism in Nina Conti's *Her Master's Voice*," argues that the material practice of ventriloquism has more to offer to documentary cinema than a convenient (and typically negative) metaphor for the deceptive

[49] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 57.

synchrony of sound and image or the embattled relation between subject and object. Detailing some of the ways in which film, as an audiovisual medium rooted in processes of synchronization, has been metaphorized as ventriloquism, the chapter also observes the extent to which, at the levels of film genre and form, documentary cinema in particular has been called ventriloquial, owing to its frequent emphasis on giving voice to voiceless—or underrepresented—persons or things. Through a close examination of the contemporary British ventriloquist Nina Conti's 2012 documentary film, *Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice and the Legacy of Six Bereaved Puppets*, the chapter argues that the above-described ventriloquial technique of bifurcation gives us a unique model for rethinking the pairings of film sound/image and documentary subject/object not as irrevocably divided but as operating alongside one another, albeit in an uneven and instable manner. Conti's film introduces us to this technique via didactic demonstrations of ventriloquism that, through their foregrounding of audiovisual asynchrony, cue us in to the bifurcations of film as medium and documentary as genre and form. Taking inspiration from Minh-ha's feminist concept of "speaking nearby" and Sedgwick's queer notion of "besideness," the chapter additionally suggests that Conti's ventriloquial documentary opens us to the possibility of a puppet love distinct from heteronormative constructs.

The fourth and final chapter of *Anachronism Effects*, "Speaking and Singing for the 'Silenced Majority': Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator's 'American' Ventriloquism," reads the contemporary "American" (by which I mean to signal not only the geographically North American but also the American nationalist) ventriloquial practices of Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator in relation to both historical practices of stage minstrelsy and the "anti-PC" discourses of the present-day United States (i.e. Trump's America). Both hailing from Texas, these self-styled down-home, white American ventriloquists frame their respective transmedia practices—which

encompass film, television, and live multimedia performance—as good old-fashioned entertainment with modern bells and whistles. Their updated, anachronistic acts garner huge success among non-coastal and non-urban white U.S. audience demographics for their use of substantial casts of dummy archetypes to "say what people want to say but can't say" in what they construct as a political climate that stifles and represses the speech of average (read: white) Americans.[50] Through detailed analyses of both ventriloquists' modus operandi, the chapter argues that these performers' polyvocal acts paradoxically attempt (as did blackface minstrelsy) to consolidate an ambiguously classed white American masculinity, one that speaks in the singular voice of the *vox populi* or "voice of the people." However, like all attempts at consolidation, Dunham and Fator's differential yet interlinked performance strategies persistently fail to furnish a unified voice under whose umbrella "America" might take refuge. Yet the "anachronism effects" of these complicated performances produce nostalgia for the fantasy moment of such a voice's unbridled expression.

The chapter, and the dissertation, ends with a brief epilogue that considers the recent popular discourse surrounding Donald Trump's voice, which has lately been metaphorized as *the* voice that "gives voice" to those who have been "left behind" by America. As the voice that "says what people want to say but can't say," Trump plays the role not of ventriloquist, but of ventriloquist dummy, that wooden body with moveable jaw whose painted lips emit the impossible truth.

[50] Jessica Williams, "Donald Trump 'saying what we all want to say, but can't say': St. Tammany, Jefferson supporters praise frontrunner," *The Advocate*, last modified March 9, 2016, http://theadvocate.com/news/neworleans/neworleansnews/15116677-93/donald-trump-saying-what-we-all-want-to-say-but-cant-say-it-st-tammany-jeff-supporters-praise-gop-f.

CHAPTER ONE
Bicentenniality and Black Noise:
Richard and Willie's Vinyl Ventriloquism

> The things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave.
>
> W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk*

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing of the development of the Negro spiritual, W. E. B. Du Bois stages an act of ventriloquism. The process he describes, and which is rendered in the above passage, is only deceptively thus: Bible verses are "borrowed" and put into song by U.S.-enslaved Africans, whose singing changes their original meaning.[1] Yet this performance of what is so often cast as cultural appropriation is transmogrified when rendered through Du Bois's suggestive language. For Du Bois frames the borrowed Bible verses as worldly "things": weighty—albeit amorphous—objects, rather than ephemeral texts. And these things, which are only "*evidently* borrowed from the surrounding world" by the slave, also actively "*enter* the mouth of the slave," undergoing not just a change in meaning but a "characteristic change," i.e. a fundamental, qualitative shift.[2] Borrowing and entering: Du Bois's slave does the former, and the things do the latter. In other words, slave and things each possess a troubled kind of agency. What remains clear, however, is that no matter how the things get into the mouth of the slave, it is there, in that mouth, that those things are transformed.

Published at the turn of the twentieth century, when by state-sanctioned accounts slavery had become an American national memory, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* speaks in multiple voices to render the distinctly African American phenomenon of "double-

[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 212.
[2] Ibid. My emphases.

consciousness."[3] The volume comprises a sociological analysis, a series of (personal) vignettes, a political polemic, and a cultural history that—rather than steering clear of contradictions—foregrounds the stark juxtapositions and bifurcations at the core of U.S. culture, riven as it was and is by the "color-line."[4] These splits and doublings, however, are only perceptible to some, as Du Bois famously declares:

> [T]he Negro is…born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[5]

In the much-quoted excerpt, Du Bois uses visual metaphors ("second-sight"; "see himself"; "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others") to describe the "peculiar sensation" of double-consciousness coextensive with the optics of racialization, framing this sensory/sensational ability as a "gift" paradoxically linked to mechanisms of power and control.[6] Writes Alexander Weheliye, "Du Bois only discusses how vision is at the root of 'double consciousness': the black subject observes her/himself as split and doubled because of the look of the white subject."[7] And yet as *Souls*'s frequent references to Negro spirituals, or "sorrow songs," suggest, there is more to double-consciousness than vision, which is but one of several senses that might figure in to Du Bois's "peculiar sensation." Weheliye's important work urges us to consider how "[h]earing and sound, references to which serve as

[3] Ibid., 5.
[4] Ibid., 1.
[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] For a close analysis of the particular relation of "sensation" to raced and gendered embodiment within structures of domination, see Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: NYUP, 2014).
[7] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 40-41.

recto and verso of Du Bois's *Souls*…, contribute differently to the fractured subjectivity of double consciousness."[8]

For each of *Souls*'s fourteen chapters is notably preceded by a poetic selection of white Western provenance (Byron, Schiller, Tennyson) and attributed as such, which is followed, directly underneath, by wordless musical notation from a particular Negro spiritual (unattributed as such). Only at the beginning of the book's fourteenth and final chapter does Du Bois translate the musical notation he has selected for that chapter's epigraph into words, writing out the lyrics to the chosen "Negro Song" before he reproduces its notation, ultimately synchronizing words to music. He goes on, in the same chapter, to reveal (to unveil) the lyrics that would have accompanied the notational passages from previous chapters, had they not been superseded by the linguistic dominance of the white Western canon. It is in this concluding section that Du Bois details the ventriloquial process of borrowing and entering that culminates in the spiritual, drawing a crucial distinction between the "imitations" and "caricatures" of minstrelsy—which, he writes, have "filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real"[9]—and the "haunting echo[es] of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" activated by his text.[10] Spirituals, he maintains, are in fact "the sole American music," utilizing "original" "method[s] of blending"[11]—a strategy mirrored, Weheliye observes, in the "structural mixology of *Souls*'s epigraphs."[12] Like Du Bois, Weheliye distinguishes the kind of blending, or mixing, captured in and by *Souls* from "mere…mimic[ry]."[13] Just as worldly things are reconstituted in the mouth of the slave, Du

[8] Ibid., 41.
[9] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 206.
[10] Ibid., 204.
[11] Ibid., 205, 209.
[12] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 104.
[13] Ibid., 95.

Bois's sonico-textual, or what Weheliye would call "phonographic,"[14] experiment in black cultural production, takes into its metaphorical mouth the sounds and words of the surrounding world in order to spit them back out, characteristically changed.

Skipping forward in time, from Du Bois's ventriloquial work in *Souls* to a less well known, late twentieth century African American cultural experiment in ventriloquism (this time of the comedic variety), this initial chapter explores the connections between double consciousness, ventriloquism, and noise. For in Du Bois, the spiritual is a ventriloquial form arising from the operation of double consciousness, whose bridging of two worlds releases a "naturally veiled and half articulate"[15] missive. Put otherwise, the spiritual's ventriloquism culminates in a noisy transmission. While the form remains legible as beautiful music within a dominant cultural frame, its message is "naturally," and all too necessarily, coded, as its sonic expression "grope[s] toward some unseen power."[16]

II. BLACK NOISE ON THE RECORD

1976 marked a moment of self-professed reflection for the United States of America, which had, by this fateful year, existed as an "independent" nation for two centuries. The year was thus the occasion for the much-anticipated U.S. Bicentennial, greeted with national fanfare, especially by the country's governing bodies. Booming fireworks, garish red-white-and-blue product packaging, and copious Bicentennial-themed television programming assaulted American eyes and ears, in a noisy attempt to drown out the recent atrocities of Vietnam and scandals of Watergate. Echoing these crescendos of patriotic nostalgia for futures past was yet more noise: the ROARs of white anti-desegregation protestors in Boston, for example,

[14] Ibid., 38.
[15] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 209.
[16] Ibid., 210.

unabashedly fighting to thwart black Americans' access to the rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" the Declaration had deemed inalienable.[17] 1976, however, was also the year of Richard Pryor. The late, great comedian had already achieved national recognition, having won the Grammy Award for Best Comedy Recording the previous year for his 1974 album, *That Nigger's Crazy*.[18] Yet in 1976, Pryor won a second Grammy (for the 1975 album *...Is It Something I Said?*),[19] as well as released another new album, *Bicentennial Nigger*,[20] which, alongside film appearances and an upcoming television show, cemented his status as a "crossover star."[21] A knife-sharp response to the overwhelming resonance of state racism and denial in the Bicentennial-era U.S., *Bicentennial Nigger* offered Pryor a rather ironic gateway to institutional validation.

A great admirer of Pryor's, the LA-based African American comedian Richard Sandfield unsurprisingly did not receive a Grammy for his own Bicentennial album, entitled *Red, White & Blue—From A Black Point of View*.[22] Sandfield was, however, a ventriloquist. With its uncanny ability to materialize Du Boisian double consciousness—to give a body and a voice to *each* of the "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals," trapped, per Du Bois, "in one dark body"[23]—ventriloquism as performed by the race critical Sandfield and his outspoken dummy Willie may have proven too niche, or rather, too radical, for mass cultural consumption. Thus, while Sandfield recorded some dozen live albums for the Los Angeles-based

[17] ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) was an anti-desegregation busing organization founded by politician Louise Day Hicks in Boston in 1974.

[18] Richard Pryor, *That Nigger's Crazy*, LP, Stax, 1974.

[19] Richard Pryor, *…Is It Something I Said?*, LP, Reprise, 1975.

[20] Richard Pryor, *Bicentennial Nigger*, LP, Reprise, 1976.

[21] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 549.

[22] Richard [Sandfield] and Willie, *Red, White & Blue—From A Black Point of View*, LP, Laff, 1976. Sandfield's last name is sometimes spelled "Sanfield" by various, mostly online, sources; I am sticking with Sandfield because this is the spelling used on Richard and Willie's album covers.

[23] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.

record labels Laff and Dooto (the former housed in Crenshaw and the latter in Compton),[24] local black audiences were his primary followers—whether they watched him perform live, in LA comedy and jazz clubs,[25] or listened to his ventriloquism on vinyl. And while Pryor (alongside several other famous black comedians of his era) has long-garnered both popular and scholarly attention for his own particular brand of critical race comedy,[26] the Internet reveals that Sandfield has maintained only a small and scattered cult following.[27] I have, thus far, found mention of Richard and Willie in but a single African American comedy anthology.[28]

According to several of Richard and Willie's Dooto Records releases, whose jackets feature identical biographical blurbs labeled "The Richard Sandfield Story," Sandfield was—at least throughout the 1970s—"America's finest young ventriloquist…rising fast in show business, along with his 'cohort in laughter,' Willie." The brief texts detail that Sandfield was born in Memphis in 1938, and that in 1966 (at the age of twenty-eight), he "bought a girlfriend a set of puppets…and made them talk and dance—everyone laughed." Shortly thereafter, the story goes, Sandfield bought a wooden dummy named Willie and embarked on a career in show business. The act, we gather, comprises a "persiflage" (a performance of light and slightly contemptuous mockery or banter), wherein Willie acts as "the 'caper' and Richard the straight man. Richard is the butt of all of Willie's bold and funny retorts." We are then assured that though Sandfield is a

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[24] Richard and Willie's other albums include: *Funky and Filthy*, LP, Dooto, 1970; *The Race Track*, LP, Dooto, 1970; *Snow White & the Black Knight*, LP, Laff, 1972; *Funky Honkey, Nasty Nigger*, LP, Laff, 1975; *Waitin' for Gas*, LP, Laff, 1979; *Richard's Firecracker*, LP, Laff, 1980. This list is not exhaustive.

[25] *Red, White & Blue* was recorded live at the Parisian Room, a Los Angeles jazz club.

[26] Recent biographical works on Pryor include David Henry and Joe Henry, *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World That Made Him* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2013); Cecil Brown, *Pryor Lives!: How Richard Pryor Became Richard Pryor Or Kiss My Rich, Happy Black…Ass! A Memoir* (Berkeley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

[27] For a good example of the piecemeal, yet entertaining, accounts of Richard and Willie's work available online, see "Richard & Willie - Nasty & Naughty 1970s," *Vintage Stand-up Comedy*, accessed May 3, 2015, http://www.vs-uc.com/2014/07/richard-willie-nasty-naughty-1970s.html. Willie Tyler and Lester were a much more well-known African American ventriloquist act, active during the same time period. See "Willie Tyler," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 3, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Tyler.

[28] See Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006).

college graduate, he is still a relatable comedian, with whom "everyday people can identify…and be a part. He talks about the nitty-gritty of life in a language with which most people are familiar."[29]

In these brief excerpts—one of which tellingly sits on the back cover of an album entitled *The Race Track*, whose front cover features an image of Willie, wearing a jockey's uniform suggestively embellished with the number 69, "riding" the back of a smiling, bikini-clad young black woman on all fours—we're assured of Richard's education, respectability, accessibility, and heterosexuality (which is always a crucial reassertion for a man who plays with dolls). Willie, we find, is "the caper": the trickster, the prankster. And indeed, the ventriloquial dichotomy of the reasonable "straight man" versus the resistant dummy has obtained since the Vaudevillian era,[30] as the performance practice crassly dramatizes the often absurd, or unreasonable, outcomes of dialogue and mediation, where what appears "normal" on the one end of a transmission often culminates in a twisted echo of its former self on the other. Accordingly, comedic ventriloquism excels at the production of noise, as its distortions of speech, voice, and language provoke roars of laughter—or the earsplitting silence of a joke falling flat. And when the art migrates into the context of phonography, leaving behind the bodies that anchor the bifurcated voice(s) of ventriloquist and dummy, this noise is amplified.

On Richard and Willie's *Red, White & Blue—From A Black Point of View*, the constitutive scratchiness of vinyl meets the noise engendered by the duo's recorded performance—from audience laughter, to ambient room tone, to the alternating voices of ventriloquist and dummy, which often coalesce in the absence of visible bodies. At once comedic

[29] See the cover of Sandfield, *Funky and Filthy*.

[30] See Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) for numerous allusions to this tendency. Also consult any video of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy currently in circulation.

sound art, raw cultural critique, and historical fantasy, Richard and Willie's remediated Bicentennial ventriloquism evokes what Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman have called "black noise": a specifically "extralinguistic mode" of responding to slavery's unfolding history—the ongoing, state-sanctioned denial, devaluation, and destruction of black life.[31] Like Du Bois's spiritual notations, black noise, write Best and Hartman, "represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality," for the desires it sounds are too utopian, too fundamentally anti-capitalist, for the law to hear them as anything other than "noise" in the pejorative sense.[32] In Best and Hartman's expansive definition, black noise operates across a range of media. In other words, they use "noise" metaphorically, as well as to designate certain material productions of sound. While this chapter's analysis indeed considers Richard and Willie's output with respect to both valences of the term, I exercise a specific focus on the material noise produced by the duo's phonographic ventriloquism. Thus my work in this chapter also draws inspiration from Tricia Rose's important work on rap's transformation into "black noise" in the ears of those who refuse to grant it musical status.[33] For as Jennifer Stoever has written, "noise" comprises "a shifting analytic that renders certain sounds—and the bodies that produce and consume them—as Other…under white supremacist epistemologies."[34] With this in mind, I listen to the parts of Richard and Willie's

[31] Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92.1 (2005): 3.

[32] Ibid., 9.

[33] Rose's important work "examines the polyvocal languages of rap as the 'black noise' of the late twentieth century." Writing of a moment when one of her colleagues, a music department head, casually framed rap music as meaningless noise, Rose relates, "For the music chairman, automobiles with massive speakers blaring bass and drum heavy beats looped continuously served as an explanation for the insignificance of the music and diminished rap's lyrical and political salience as well.… Rap music was…'noise' to him, unintelligible yet aggressive sound that disrupted his familial domain…and his sonic territory." Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994), xiv, 63.

[34] Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color-Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York," *Social Text* 28.1 (2010): 67.

Red, White & Blue that would often be dismissed as unwanted or interferential sounds—as mere "noise"—to see what kinds of "aspirations" (per Best and Hartman) we might locate there.[35]

Richard and Willie's ventriloquial materialization of black noise on *Red, White & Blue* arises directly from the conflict between the divergent political positions they adopt in relation to the Bicentennial. Comically lambasting the bitter irony of celebrating 200 years of American freedom built on chattel slavery, the record is audibly bipolar, as Richard's voice, playing the part of the black liberal progressivist, is repeatedly drowned out by Willie's nasal, cynical musings on the state of post-Civil Rights-era black life. Listening to the duo's ventriloquism on vinyl turns up the volume on black noise, as the competing tones of Richard's liberal assimilationism and Willie's demands for material reparation vie with flights of historical and futuristic fantasy to produce sonic discord and ambiguity. Permeated by comedy club ambiance, the noise of Richard and Willie's performances indexes the limitations of seeking redress for slavery and its ramified effects within the boundaries of the law, the confines of spoken language, and even the ranges of what constitutes legible sound. While Glenda Carpio has already brilliantly analyzed the black noise of Pryor's Bicentennial comedy, my approach to Richard and Willie's parallel output focuses specifically on their vinyl ventriloquism as sound recording.[36] Taking inspiration from Weheliye's work, I will shortly attend to the intensification of the pair's already phonographic "phonic performance of blackness"[37]—their ventriloquism,

[35] For more on the politics of "noise," see Jacques Attali, *Noise: A Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985). See also Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), for an example of reading "the [sonic] break," which is, in some sense, what I do in this chapter by reading the "noisy" moments of Richard and Willie's act.

[36] See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 72-116. The chapter is entitled, "The Conjurer Recoils: Slavery in Richard Pryor's Performances and *Chappelle's Show*."

[37] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 40.

which as a rule "splits" voice from source—in the context of the "audio-visual rift" produced by the phonograph as sound recording and playback technology.[38]

III. "RACIAL VENTRILOQUY" AND PHONOGRAPHY

Though ventriloquism is a viable subject for an expansive history of comedy, the art only appears as a metaphor in Mel Watkins's field-defining volume, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*. Describing how blackface minstrelsy, a stage (and later, cinematic) form hinging on the visible racialization afforded by burnt cork, evolved to fulfill the needs of the nascent auditory medium of radio, Watkins figures the cultural emergence of what he terms, "racial ventriloquy." As they had done on stage and screen, he writes, "whites played Negro roles in nearly all of the early radio shows. In the beginning, when programs were not broadcast before a live audience, this new electronic medium made the pretense much easier. The deception depended entirely on mimicking black dialect and intonation. Thus radio had introduced a new phenomenon: racial ventriloquy."[39]

Resonating beyond the segregated conditions of its initial usage, the "black voice," or "verbal minstrelsy" audible on early radio crystallized into a vocal standard that continued to dominate the medium even after black comedians were permitted access to the airwaves. Thus, and not for the first time, such comedians were exhorted to perform double acts of ventriloquism.

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[38] Ibid. Regarding (though not directly referencing) Weheliye's use of the phrase "audio-visual rift" to describe the phonograph's (fantasized) separation of sounds from their sources, Jonathan Sterne maintains, "Our most cherished pieties about sound-reproduction technologies—for instance, that they separated sounds from their sources or that sound recording allows us to hear the voices of the dead—were not and are not innocent empirical descriptions of the technologies' impact. They were wishes that people grafted onto sound-reproduction technologies—wishes that became programs for innovation and use." Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 8. I agree with Sterne here, and want to clarify that Weheliye's description of the rift doesn't claim to empirically describe an actual separation; rather, it registers a cultural fantasy (though Weheliye might not use that word) of what this new technology might mean vis-à-vis the extant audiovisual technics of racialization.

[39] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 271.

"Ironically," writes Watkins, "African-Americans' entry into radio required that black performers, who had been imitated by whites, once again copy their imitators in order to work."[40] Such copying of copying, as Watkins points out, was not limited to the reproduction of particular words, phrases, and dialogues. Black comedians had, most crucially, to imitate whites' imitations of the sounds of their voices. There was a white sense of and desire for a certain "grain of the [black] voice" that black comedians were tasked with maintaining and satisfying in order to remain employed and employable.[41] Thus the ventriloquism of ventriloquism was the condition for black radio comedy in the early twentieth century.

For Watkins, ventriloquy—a word I use interchangeably with "ventriloquism"—primarily connotes the mimicry of a voice's properties, both linguistic and non-. And while racial ventriloquy, by Watkins's definition, was also practiced on the minstrel stage, it attained phenomenal status on the radio, where the blackface minstrel body was, at least temporarily, rendered invisible. The split between sound and source emphasized by radio as a technology for the transmission of sound, and sound alone, was prefigured by the phonograph's ability to record and reproduce sound, and thus, among other things, cleave voices from the bodies to which they properly appeared to belong. As Weheliye writes, in words equally relevant to the radio medium, "The phonograph disturbed…traffic between the sonic and the visual by denying the audience, at least initially, any way to determine the performer's racial identity. At stake was clearly discerning a white projection of blackness from a black projection of blackness."[42] The context for Weheliye's observation is a brief discussion of the popular "coon song," whose transposition from minstrel stage to phonograph record at the turn of the twentieth century called for a

[40] Ibid., 292.

[41] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-189.

[42] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 40.

recalibration of existing audiovisual techniques of racialization, so that blackface minstrels could remain legibly white even in the absence of their painted bodies. For while the visual aesthetics of burnt cork often imperfectly concealed—so as ultimately to reveal—the "essential" whiteness of those who performed in blackface,[43] neither the phonograph nor the radio initially afforded such a revelation-in-concealment. Consequently, a dominant question posed by the migration of blackface across media, from blackface to "black voice," was how to uphold Jim Crow in the domain of sound—how to effect and maintain what Stoever has called the "sonic color-line."[44] This question was not marginal to the development of the new sound technologies, but integral, just as blackface minstrelsy was not an obscure Vaudevillian curiosity, but rather the most popular theatrical form of its day.

For Watkins, then, racial ventriloquy—which is also often erroneously framed as a holdover from the fringes of Vaudeville—furnishes a direct analog for blackface minstrelsy in the wake of turn-of-the-century sound technologies. The lure of the equivalence exceeds the limited observation that blackface minstrelsy constitutes a predominantly visual practice of imitation, whereas racial ventriloquy constitutes a predominantly sonic, or vocal, one. For like stage minstrelsy, ventriloquism is an audiovisual form. A ventriloquist contorts her "own" voice and lips to synchronize her speech with the movements of another body, so that this other body appears to furnish a visible source for the new, familiar, uncanny voice. The ventriloquial illusion as such is believable and consumable precisely because we, the audience members, feel we "know" where the uncanny voice "actually" comes from—the ventriloquist, whom we can see. Her body is the epistemological bedrock of the performance, the voice's ultimate origin and

[43] See Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 20, for a converse account of whites' beliefs that the blackface minstrels before them were, indeed, African American performers.

[44] Stoever-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color-Line," 65.

final destination. But if the apparent fixity of the ventriloquist's body checks the disturbance of unbounded ludic vocalization, thereby safeguarding the audience from eerie acousmatic haunting, what becomes of ventriloquism when this body is nowhere to be seen?

The above brief discussion of Watkins's use of the concept of "racial ventriloquy" in the context of early radio comedy, as well as Weheliye's work on the racial disturbances occasioned by early phonography's audio-visual schism, underscores the extent to which, as Weheliye puts it, "race figures prominently in the primal historical scene[s] of th[ese] then nascent informational technolog[ies]."[45] In reproducing and projecting voices and sounds far beyond the persons and things that had "originated" them, both radio and phonograph not only made it more difficult to ascribe points of origin (and thus originality) to voices and sounds; they destabilized one of the central mechanisms of the control of populations elucidated by Foucault—the classification and categorization of bodies according to visual characteristics.[46] Accordingly, such technologies were, as many historians of sound have attested, often likened to "a ventriloquist's hoax" upon initial encounter.[47]

IV. *RED, WHITE & BLUE*, RECTO AND VERSO

While clearly not free from the shackles of white supremacist culture (the record's theme, as I mentioned earlier, is the continuation of unfreedom even after Civil Rights), Richard and Willie's vinyl ventriloquism on *Red, White & Blue* is not the ventriloquism of ventriloquism required of black comedians on early radio. On the contrary, *Red, White & Blue* uses

[45] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 40.

[46] See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007).

[47] Mark Katz, "Introduction," in *Music, Sound, and Technology in America: A Documentary History of Early Phonograph, Cinema, and Radio*, eds. Timothy D. Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 11.

ventriloquism to critique the reproduction of racist discourse by both white and black people, doing so from an avowedly "black point of view." This critique begins on the visual side of the phonograph's "audio-visual rift"—the record's front cover (fig. 1.1), where the bodies of ventriloquist and dummy are pictured, albeit in frozen form. The structured, yet jarringly loud, composition featured there sets the stage for the noise we hear when we play the vinyl.

Red, White & Blue features a bifurcated cover.[48] On its left side is a black-and-white image labeled "1776" in elaborate, scrolled font, signifying a national past that preceded photography's popular advent. The staged photograph depicts a broad-shouldered, bearded white slave master in a summer suit with ruffled shirt and banded white hat, bullwhip in hand, ominously looming over a shackled black slave whose braided hair, hoop earring, and simple loin-covering suggest his recent arrival from Africa. Standing behind the slave, the master monitors his human property with downcast eyes, as the slave, fists clenched, makes direct eye contact with the photograph's viewer. Set against the Southern backdrop of a cornfield with white clapboard house and palms beyond, this is a portrait of defiance in the scene of subjection and fear—or so it might be read. For the photograph, like so much of our "history," is an anachronistic fantasy. It imagines what 1776 would look like if it had, indeed, been captured on film; it envisages the 1776 of violent displacement, dehumanization, bondage, unfreedom, and resistance, rather than that of the signing of the Declaration of Independence that the Bicentennial celebrations of the mid-1970s were alleged to commemorate.

But this is only one half of the schismatic album cover, whose diptych is split by a thin blue line. For to the right of the "archival" photograph is a Technicolor image labeled "1976," the year of the album's making amidst abundant Bicentennial festivities. Here, we are treated to

[48] Images of both the front and back covers of *Red, White & Blue* can be viewed at "Richard & Willie - Red White & Blue From A Black Point Of View," *Vintage Stand-up Comedy*, accessed May 3, 2015, http://www.vs-uc.com/2014/08/richard-willie-red-white-blue-from.html.

an altogether different fantasy of African American life: against a pristine white Rolls Royce parked in the driveway of an ivied home leans a dapper, thirty-something black man in a sky blue, three-piece suit and shiny black platform shoes. His crossed arms reveal a gold wristwatch, and he sports an impeccably coiffed Afro. Flashing teeth at the camera, the man is flanked, to his left, by a smiling black woman in a sky blue dress. To his right, behind the car's substantial hood ornament, sits a ventriloquist's dummy, whose skin color, facial expression, and hairstyle mirror those of the man: a *punctum*, if ever there was one.[49]

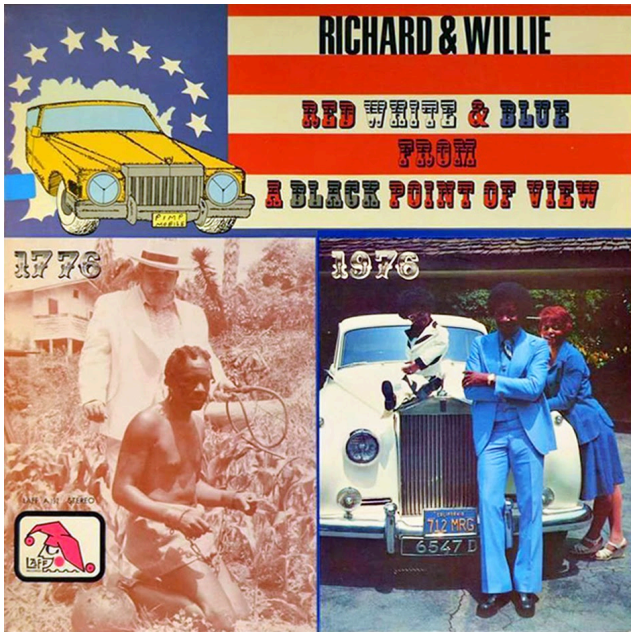


Fig. 1.1 *Red, White & Blue* album cover

Clad in a white three-piece ensemble, the dummy grins. His inanimate legs are crossed at an impossible angle, lending him an air of forced relaxation. Head tilted, his gaze grazes the edge of the frame. His unblinking glance traverses the line separating 1776 from 1976, settling upon the head of the slave in the adjacent image. Coupled with the stark juxtaposition of the two images, the dummy's lifeless gesture paradoxically animates the enduring connection between

[49] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 27. "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Of course, Willie is not an accident; rather, he is the most intentional aspect of the picture. It's his awkward gaze, at once controlled and impossible to control, that strikes me as the image's true *punctum*.

disparate historical periods. This linkage is borne forth by the resemblance between the two men, both of whom are comedian Richard Sandfield. In 1776, a slave; in 1976, a pimp. But while the 1976 Sandfield stares straight ahead, not looking back, Willie, his ventriloquist dummy doppelganger, keeps his eyes trained on the enslaved Sandfield of 1776. This smaller-than-life, man-shaped object alone bears witness to the lies at the heart of American progressivism.

The ruse of American "progress" is of course the subject of Richard and Willie's album, whose track listings include "200 Years of Freedom," "Ku Klux & Klan," "War on Poverty," and even "Progress" itself. Worth quoting in full, the substantial text on the album's back cover fleshes out its primary thematic:

> Thru-out the United States, millions of Americans are honoring our country's 200th birthday. Masses celebrate in legal recognition of our unparalleled progress. Political Leaders and Foremost Respected Citizens describe in detail the multi-achievements made in our 200 years as a UNITED FREE COUNTRY.
>
> Um---some of you question the BI-CENTENNIAL Festivities…some of you ponder--UNITED FREE COUNTRY. Let's join RICHARD & WILLIE in reflective thoughts of this BI-CENTENNIAL as they celebrate with a GALA LIVE RECORDING SESSION at the World renowned PARISIAN ROOM, Los Angeles. In retrospect, they offer you "RED, WHITE & BLUE—FROM A BLACK POINT OF VIEW."
>
> Willie's Historical knowledge would BAFFLE even the most learned Professors and though Willie's knowledge is somewhat opinionated, the Credibility of his Verbal PUNS would leave most Historians in frustrated astonishment.
>
> Every factional event cited by RICHARD in an attempt to convince WILLIE of the gallantry and greatness of our 200 Years is challenged with hilarious reasoning. WILLIE, with intellectual WIT, retaliated with "telling it just like it was…and…STILL IS."
>
> As RICHARD AND WILLIE romp thru this Session debating the "pros & cons"—RICHARD manages to project a unique individuality from WILLIE. RICHARD, with his reverent-like attitude and WILLIE (with an almost human personality) kept the audience attentive except for continuous outbursts of foot-stomping LAFF-ter.
>
> With respect and dignity, LAFF RECORDS proudly presents the "COMEDY DUO" that righteously "tells it like it is." Momentarily, abandon your preconceived Historical opinions and allow RICHARD & WILLIE to entertain you with "RED, WHITE & BLUE—FROM A BLACK POINT OF VIEW."[50]

[50] Richard and Willie, *Red, White & Blue*.

Riffing on the visual aesthetics of a modernist manifesto, this tongue-in-cheek description prefigures the radicality of the album's political content, addressing its exhortations to a predominantly black audience, the "some of you" who "question the BI-CENTENNIAL Festivities," and the "some of you" who "ponder" the irony of the phrase "UNITED FREE COUNTRY." For "some of you" recognize that the 200 years of freedom lauded by the designation "Bicentennial" were built upon the systematic disenfranchisement and murder—the consummate unfreedom—of black Americans.

Thus, and as the album's front and back covers attest, Richard and Willie's *Red, White & Blue* reads the Bicentennial as an anachronism that chronologically misplaces persons, events, objects, and customs in relation to each other, transforming 200 years of U.S. slavery, anti-black racism, and anti-racist struggle into a fantasy era of national freedom and "unparalleled progress." Yet the album mounts this critique through its own noisy performance of anachronism, which encompasses photography and text (album art), recorded sound, and the arcane practice of ventriloquism. Among other things, this means that the media technology of the phonograph, which plays back *Red, White & Blue* so that the listener can hear it over and over again, is replicated by the mediating object of Richard Sandfield's puppet, Willie, whose distinct voice and persona are visually accompanied by his portraits on the recto and verso of the album cover.

As the sole figure in 1976 that actively looks back at the scene of 1776, Willie bridges the historical gap represented on the album's front cover. As the album's back cover matter suggests, he exercises a similar function in Richard and Willie's live and recorded Bicentennial comedy routine. "Every factional event cited by RICHARD in an attempt to convince WILLIE of the gallantry and greatness of our 200 Years is challenged with hilarious reasoning. WILLIE, with

intellectual WIT, retaliated with 'telling it just like it was…and…STILL IS.'" Like many ventriloquist acts, Richard and Willie typically perform a split. Richard plays the straight man (who is, in this case, also a pimp), and Willie plays the mischievous sidekick, the impish alter ego—the potty-mouthed counterpart to the more refined human at his side. On *Red, White & Blue* these roles obtain, with Richard arguing in support of the Bicentennial as a marker of progress, while Willie calls attention to its many elisions. Thus, though Willie is a figurine and Richard a flesh-and-blood person, it is Richard who serves as a mouthpiece for the state's self-aggrandizing celebrations of American achievement, while Willie emphatically rejects the party line.

As a puppet whose destiny it is to be spoken through, Willie is well aware of the structure of bondage that keeps him in his place. Though he, like Richard, sports the trappings of material success, he is not grateful. Rather, he is by turns ironical, enraged, silly, and dirty. Willie has nothing to lose but his voice. And while he has a voice, he is determined to use it.

V. THE BLACK NOISES OF *RED, WHITE & BLUE*

From the beginning of Side A to the end of Side B, *Red, White & Blue* is nearly 35 minutes long. This runtime does not include breaks between jokes or routines; the record features just a few cuts, one of which occurs during the intermission between the two halves of Richard and Willie's stage act. Ventriloquist and dummy perform continuously, so transitions between jokes are sometimes smooth, sometimes rough. The tension of live comedy can be heard in these interstitial moments, in the post-joke pauses during which people laugh too heartily or too weakly, clap too loudly or too softly, or fall silent, filling our ears with the noise that silence makes audible. Distinguishing between Richard and Willie's voices, as well as between what is

and is not a voice, can be challenging. Additionally, though the record is vococentrist in aim—to capture, as clearly as possible, the voices effected by the comedian Richard Sandfield, and thus to reproduce his act for future capitalization—it must treat the voice as a sound, and even a kind of noise, in order to meet this goal. For as Jonathan Sterne and others have observed, sound recording ironically must re-hierarchize its object (sound) in order to make its final product sound like it conforms to audible sound's existing hierarchization.[51] For these reasons, even though *Red, White & Blue* is essentially a stand-up comedy record, its materiality comprises at least as much noise as it does discernible comic voices.

Perhaps this is why the record self-consciously begins by acknowledging its own status as a sound recording, via Willie, who himself is a type of playback device, or phonographic figure, in Weheliye's parlance:

> Willie: Aww yeah, what's all these microphones, nigga?
> Richard: We're recording.
> W: We doin' what?
> R: Recording.
> W: No shit! What you mean?
> R: Well we're trying to make a—a record.
> W: You mean you ain't givin' me a damn dime?
> R [& W]: I mean…be cool, man…. We're not up here for that…[both voices, confusion]…. We're here to talk about the Bicentennial….[52]

Based on the album's back cover text, which gives a sense, however incomplete, of the interaction between ventriloquist and dummy, the listener can probably discern that the high-pitched voice peppered with obscenities and slang, including the N word, belongs to Willie. The dummy has a twangy cadence, though his voice occasionally squeaks and cracks like that of an adolescent boy on the brink of "the change." By contrast, Richard is soft-spoken and responsive to Willie's questions; his deeper, yet meeker, tone projects an ineffectual paternalism. Yet after

[51] See Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 12.

[52] Richard and Willie, *Red, White & Blue*. All subsequent quotations in the section are from this album unless otherwise noted.

Willie indignantly confronts Richard about failing to receive adequate, or any, compensation for his labor, there is a moment of confusion regarding whose voice is whose, during which can be heard a soft, inchoate vocal fumbling, mixed with audience chuckles, out of which Richard's voice emerges to clarify that the subject of their performance isn't monetary gain—it's the United States Bicentennial.

"We're not here for [money]," quips Richard; and yet, why are they there? The indiscernibility of voices that precedes the answer to this question—they are there to talk about the Bicentennial—gives way to Richard and Willie's resolution into a dichotomy whose clarity will nevertheless be noisily disturbed throughout the performance. Like Pinocchio, Willie is a wooden puppet in the shape of a man, but in contrast to his Italian brother, Willie does not aspire to be "a real boy." He does not believe in the possible realization of his essential humanity within a state-sanctioned frame, and so rejects Richard's idealism. The supposedly lifeless thing, the dummy, simply wants to get paid, so that he can go about his quite substantive life, which, from his detailed, later descriptions, does not always entail the presence of Richard's guiding hand or speaking voice. In his crass materialism, Willie sounds more enlivened, impassioned, and sensual than his human counterpart, who lacks the dummy's punchiness, joie-de-vivre, and misanthropic perspective on so-called human dignity. Like a broken record, Richard repeatedly asserts his (indirect) participation in the grand narrative of progress bodied forth by the Bicentennial celebrations of the mid-1970s, which only serves to make him sound more and more like a tool.

As Richard and Willie get their act together following the initial kerfuffle over the purpose of their performance and recording, their dialogue temporarily segues into a stiffer, more structured, back-and-forth. Willie does not know the meaning of the multisyllabic

"Bicentennial," so Richard explains it to him, translating the word as "two hundred years of freedom," to which Willie replies, "two hundred years of what?" When Richard woodenly reasserts that the content of the last two hundred years has been "freedom," Willie loudly retorts, "Who in the fuck you talkin' 'bout…. You can't be talkin' 'bout niggers, 'cause niggers ain't free *yet*!" Delivered as the performance's first full punch line, Willie's hard truth elicits scattered loud claps and guffaws from the audience, as well as a chuckle from Richard—one of the ventriloquist's signature sounds throughout the performance. Soft and low, as if delivered on a single, brief exhale, Richard's chuckle often coincides with the audience's response to a given joke, but his proximity to the microphones to which Willie has already drawn our attention renders his laugh distinct, audible in parallel to the voices and sounds of the attending crowd. This snicker might signal Richard's subtle breaking of comic face; his solidarity with members of his audience and/or his dummy alter ego; his amusement at his "own" joke; or his surprise and delight at what Willie has just quipped in response to the ventriloquist's dry, staid delivery.

But these interpretations are perfunctory, focusing only on what the laugh might mean, rather than on what it does. The first time we hear it Richard's chuckle dies out quickly, replaced by the plodding overtones of his progressivist argumentation. The soft laugh's echo, however, rings in our ears—or at least in mine. And rather rapidly, within the first few minutes of the recording, this snicker comes to stand in for Richard's linguistic voice, to partially replace both his mechanical reproduction of Bicentennial discourse and his speech in general. After Richard responds to Willie's assertion that black people in the U.S. are not *yet* free by explaining to the dummy, as if to a schoolchild, that, "in America, everybody's free. Black people fought for this nation's independence," Willie retorts, "You're goddamn right. The motherfuckers fought on the wrong side!" This punch line unlocks more audience laughter, alongside another chuckle from

Richard that, rather than paving the way for one of the ventriloquist's pro-Bicentennial arguments, merely punctuates Willie's speech. Continuing on unhampered, Willie gets into his own act, hamming it up for the crowd as is his wont. Encouraged by Richard's laughter and occasional verbal prompting, as well as by the audience's easy reactivity—enhanced, perhaps, by the presence of recording equipment—the dummy indulges in an anachronistic fantasy. He imagines the Revolutionary War as if black people had fought on the side of the redcoats, remixing Paul Revere's famous warning about the British encroachment on Lexington to feature the N-word. "Paul Revere been ridin', that motherfucker been sayin', 'The niggers are coming! The niggers are coming!'" Willie crows, giving Richard a few beats to laugh before he adds, "Don't shoot till you see the Afros! With the natural comb."

On the last phrase of this sketch, Richard has trouble containing himself: his laugh emerges louder this time, and flows directly from Willie's commentary. On vinyl we cannot see Richard and Willie's moveable jaws, so when Richard subsequently reclaims an active role in the discussion, his identity does not resolve until his voice has lowered from a sonic hybrid of the two voices back down to its initial pitch. Here, though it is recognizable as belonging to Richard, and thus to ventriloquist rather than dummy, the voice sounds altered. Uncertainty has crept in; the machinic insistence of a mere few seconds prior has been shot through with doubt and skepticism. Destabilized, the voice searches. And ultimately, on the downswing of this ambivalent moment, Richard's voice reverts back to what has become legible as Richard's voice. Yet this pattern, in which the singular voice of progressivism is repeatedly compromised by the nonlinguistic noise of Richard and Willie's momentary fusion, obtains throughout the recording,

which thereby continues to enact the possibility of an uncomfortable coexistence between competing perspectives.[53]

Snapping back into character, the ventriloquist proceeds to make a series of statements about freedom and progress, each of which Willie wittily and efficiently undermines. Every time Richard leans too heavily on the language of American patriotism—which is to say, most of the time—Willie exposes the emptiness of his master's rhetoric by way of his own unfailing adherence to literalism. When Richard insists that, "black men have moved up in America," that they have been "lifted" by the tide of a forward-thinking nation, Willie replies that black men have indeed risen, by way of "a rope," i.e. via lynching. When Richard celebrates black men's contributions to U.S. technological advancement, making special mention of the traffic light, an early version of which was created by Garrett Morgan, an African American inventor born to former slaves in 1877 (which was also the year of the phonograph's introduction), Willie counters that if Morgan had looked at a white woman, he'd have been hanging from his invention. Richard continues to chuckle at such quips, and the hybridized, ambivalent voice of his comedown from Willie and back into Richard haunts the aftermaths of these exchanges. All the while, further vocal registers are introduced into the act, as Willie begins to captivate the

[53] One might call these two perspectives "optimistic" (Richard) and "pessimistic" (Willie). One might also call the latter "Afro-pessimistic" (with thanks to Kara Keeling for this suggestion). Per Frank Wilderson: "Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because…as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation." See Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 59. Wilderson's notion of Blackness as a "structural position of noncommunicability" may indeed be dramatized by Richard and Willie's stage act, which is, not coincidentally, structured around antagonism. Wilderson, again: "Afro-Pessimism asks, How are the political stakes of analysis and aesthetics raised and altered if we theorize the structural relation between Blacks and Humanity as an antagonism (an irreconcilable encounter) as opposed to a (reconcilable) conflict?" See Frank Wilderson, "Afro-Pessimism," *Inconegro.org*, accessed May 4, 2015, http://www.incognegro.org/afro_pessimism.html. Might Richard and Willie's ventriloquism be read as a kind of materialization of Wilderson's "irreconcilable encounter," where on the one hand Richard marks the "Human" and Willie the "Black," while on the other hand, their combined "phonic performance of blackness" (Weheliye) itself stages said antagonism vis-à-vis the heterogeneity of the audience, and, more broadly, the listening world outside of the club?

audience in his substantial capacity as a solo performer. Willie effects the voices of white rednecks, for example: slack-jawed yokels—figures whose ventriloquial iterations I explore in-depth in the dissertation's final chapter—plotting to lynch black people for community entertainment. Sandfield's voice, and indeed his vocal apparatus, undergoes multiple contortions in these moments, as he navigates rapidly between Richard-voice, Willie-voice, and now, white hick-voice, sometimes effortlessly, other times laboriously.

What is happening inside Richard's mouth during such bouts of transition I cannot surmise, though a practiced ventriloquist would have a keen sense of the inner acrobatics required to produce the disparate voices heard on the recording. For as even amateur practitioners know, certain alphabetic sounds cannot be made without the movement of one's lips. And since stage ventriloquism requires that a ventriloquist's lips remain still while her dummy is "speaking," substitutions must be made. In other words, tongue movements (inside the mouth) must be used in place of lip movements to approximate certain sounds. Writes Paul Winchell, in 1954, in his illustrated instruction manual, *The Key to Ventriloquism for Fun and Profit*, "the five letters that are [most] troublesome [for a ventriloquist to pronounce], you'll see are, in alphabetical order, B-F-M-P-V."[54] But, Winchell suggests, "*Just because you learned early in life to pronounce those five letters or sounds in a certain way doesn't mean they can't be pronounced in another way*."[55] Thus, in reproducing a bevvy of disparate voices—which is to say, voices that aren't really disparate but that converge and diverge throughout his act—Richard Sandfield is not only engaged in the production of various vocal archetypes; he's doing so with a different set of tools than the average stand-up comedian, due to the constraints leveled on his

[54] Paul Winchell, *The Key to Ventriloquism for Fun and Profit* (Owings Mills, Maryland: Ottenheimer Publishers, 1954), 37.

[55] Ibid., 38. My emphasis.

particular craft, down to the control ventriloquism-as-craft exercises on the very movements of his lips.

While Sandfield does practice mimicry and imitation in the manner of his inspiration, Richard Pryor, his objective as a ventriloquist is to deflect attention away from his own body and gestures and channel it towards Willie's surrogate body and gestures. Physical dynamism, on his part, would be a distraction. Ventriloquism necessitates a certain frozenness, even beyond the stillness of lips. Sandfield was probably seated for the duration of *Red, White & Blue*'s recording. We can't, of course, see this reversal: the process through which the dummy paradoxically (and every bit intentionally) becomes more animate than his human counterpart. We *can*, however, hear it. As Willie gradually masters the performance, Richard's half of the dialogue simultaneously becomes less necessary and more difficult to sustain. The comedian doesn't stop laughing, however. Each time Willie produces a punch line in his ongoing quest to transform the figurative into the literal, Richard chuckles, then collects himself.

Willie's emphasis on literalism, which sometimes dovetails with his mispronunciations of certain words, isn't specific to Richard and Willie's act; rather, it is a trope of the ventriloquial genre. In coyly self-referential iterations of the art (see Chapter 3), ventriloquists sometimes make their own inabilities to seamlessly ventriloquize certain words—due to the difficulties presented by the letters Winchell mentions, in addition to the general problematics of speaking with one's mouth essentially closed—into opportunities for language play. In Richard and Willie's performance, and as Watkins points out, in black American humor more generally, no opportunity for wordplay goes unheeded.[56] The double-sidedness of words, and indeed, of language, can provide a platform for critique, as the irony built into the simple fact that one word can mean two or more things is wielded in the service of exposing other deep structural ironies.

[56] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 66.

Similarly, the fact that two words or expressions with quite different meanings or implications may *sound* similar—the fact, that is, of *catachresis*—allows for language play at both verbal and vocal levels. And there is always at least a double valence to this kind of play. For when one repeatedly mispronounces another's name, with or without intentionality, the effect can be an obliteration of the subject, a feeling of intimacy or endearment, an increase in the subject's power, or a stripping away thereof. When Willie, in a deliberate slip, calls Muhammad Ali "Cautious"—rather than Cassius—Clay, and Richard immediately corrects him, Willie retorts that if one is in the ring with Clay, one had "better be cautious." On the one hand, Willie's insistent substitution of "Cautious" for "Cassius" admiringly touts Clay's strength as a black male fighter, matching his physical power with a fitting nickname for such a heavyweight. On the other, Willie's implicit refusal to call Clay by his adopted name, Ali, suggests that the dummy does not accept Ali's self-emancipation from what the boxer called his given slave name.[57] In rejecting the liberatory potential of Ali's chosen Muslim name, Willie once again projects a certain Afro-pessimism, while Richard, ever the respectable subject, maintains the propriety of "Cassius" over the punch of "Cautious," eschewing Willie's literalistic, yet also appropriately threatening, renaming. Of course, Richard still laughs at Willie's catachrestic misnomer. After all, he's not only in on the joke—he's behind the joke. And of course, in playing with Clay's/Ali's name, Willie might also just be engaging in the sort of trash talk Ali himself was known for, and which made him that much better of a fighter. The notorious boxer's game in the ring was as much verbal as it was physical—a synchronized double down, rather than the isolated triumph of brute strength.

[57] "Muhammad Ali Press Conference," *San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive*, accessed May 6, 2015, https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/186005.

Elsewhere, Willie refers to Ali by his chosen name, bending narrative history to place the boxer in Africa at the same time as Tarzan, whom, he embellishes, would have been terrified of the American fighter. In this sketch, Willie deliberately mispronounces Tarzan's name, putting the accent on the first syllable rather than the second to comic effect, and in the process taking on colonialism vis-à-vis language and, appropriately, ventriloquism. "Yeah, I hate Tarzan," he proclaims, after a non sequitur that marks a nearly inaudible cut. "Can you understand?" he asks the audience, urging them to indulge his contempt. Willie hates Tarzan, he explains, because "Tarzan make them niggers in Africa look ridiculous. Them niggers hurt their toe: 'What we gon' do? My toe ache.' Go see Tarzan; Tarzan tell you what to do. Niggers can't do shit unless Tarzan tell 'em." Richard remains largely silent as Willie continues to monologue: "Where was Tarzan at when Muhammad Ali was over there? You couldn't find Tarzan's ass…. Tarzan born in the jungle just like the niggers. Because he white, he can speak French, Swahili, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, and all them black niggers can say is 'bubum bubum.'" In this multilayered vignette, the dummy roasts the representation of Africans—whom he callously lumps under the umbrella of "black niggers"—as linguistically impoverished puppets whose very self-care is contingent upon the animating word of the white man. The bodies of the Africans are hurt, become compromised, and only Tarzan possesses the wherewithal, the scriptural advice, to help them heal themselves. The irony, Willie points out, is that Tarzan is African-born, yet his corporeal whiteness magically endows him with the powers of African, European, and Levantine tongues. When Willie imitates the nonlinguistic speech of the Africans for comparison, the sound emerges deep, guttural, and gravelly: "bubum bubum." As a puppet himself, Willie is well positioned to resist the dummification of the Africans, who are forced, in the context of the colonial narrative, to require the intervention of a white savior-cum-puppetmaster dressed in

native clothing to perform the most basic of tasks. Perhaps knowing what it means to be subject to another's voice (having, in other words, to be *given* a voice) fuels Willie's special hatred for this all-too-common colonial fantasy. Willie is able to hear himself through the ears of others via Tarzan, and what he hears is noise: "bubum bubum." But this "bubum bubum" becomes the butt of an entirely different kind of joke in the space created by Richard and Willie's vinyl ventriloquism, as it is engulfed by a swell of laughter—drowned out by black noise.

As *Red, White & Blue* diverges from its Bicentennial focus—though not from its inquiry into the doubling effects of racialization—and as Richard and Willie's initial bifurcations fork into polyvocality, their sonic performance expands to contour the virtual space of the club. No longer firmly centered on the two poles of Sandfield's canny materialization of Du Boisian double consciousness, nor even on Willie's many-voiced monologues, their ventriloquism begins to incorporate distinct audience voices and presences. As the act continues to unfold, spatio-temporally, after a marked intermission, another mediating figure is thrown into the mix: woman. Playing on both the race and gender demographics of the club's diverse, though predominantly black, audience, Sandfield and Willie begin to brazenly employ the sexualized female body as a wedge for detailing cultural differences between black people and white people. This transactional bodily figure does not materialize as wooden flesh, but is ephemerally invoked, and occasionally voiced, by Willie—who himself is a transactional, as well as transitional, object.

Remarking that there are "some ugly motherfuckers in here tonight" at the start of the act's second half, Willie elicits laughter from the crowd, which quickly wanes when it becomes clear that he intends to roast at least one of said ugly club-goers. "What's your name, brother?" he asks no one we can see, soon clarifying, via class humor, "You there, with the Kmart jacket on." More laughter. He then imitates the man's "old lady," who, by the record's account, is

sitting right next to her partner, and whose squeaky voice (as rendered by Willie) admonishes, "I told you not to wear that shit!" Yet more laughter. Interrupting Willie, Richard asks for the man's name a second time. When the brother's faint voice emerges from the hushed crowd to reply that his name is in fact "Tim," Willie responds, "What kind of name is that for a nigger?" Predictably, he christens the man "Tiny Tim," segueing into a dick joke, which once again leads him to mimic the accompanying girlfriend: "You right, it's tiny! Can't find the motherfucker, feel it either!" While during the previous half of the act Richard's laugh skirted a chuckle, proving a generally subtle presence, here, it blossoms into open-throated glee. Richard has jettisoned his buttoned-up personality once and for all; he has surrendered to the flow of Willie's infectious humor. Now Willie is entertaining him, and he and Willie are entertaining everyone, and they're doing it at the expense of a tiny-voiced audience member, another black man, who is largely powerless before their amplified wit. The good-natured Tim accepts the ribbing, no matter how much ventriloquist and dummy collude to provoke him. Even when Willie hits the punch line—or one of them, since there are usually several in these more substantial bits—Tiny Tim retains his composure: "Is that your woman you're with," asks Willie, "or are you her chauffeur?" And the crowd loses it, while Tiny Tim smilingly (from the sound of his voice) insists that *he's* actually *her* better half. The recording allows us to hear his distant protestations emanating from within the tide of laughter, as ventriloquist and dummy continue their act.

The sketch, which ventriloquizes Tiny Tim's (white) girlfriend in the service of his emasculation, twists, at the punch line, to draw explicit attention to her whiteness vis-à-vis his blackness, and through this, to the presumptively gendered and racialized power dynamics of their interracial partnership. Thus, while the bit begins and ends with Tim as the butt of the joke, it's the white woman who remains voiceless, or rather, voiced (by Willie), as the final question

"are you her chauffer?" is addressed to Tim, who is provoked to answer. It's as though Willie, Richard's dummy, is asking, "are you her puppet (too)?" to which Tiny Tim must assert that it is he who is in charge. Through the mediating figure of the white woman, the "Tiny Tim" sketch establishes the club as a black space, within which whiteness is present in the form of a structuring absence, or perhaps an absent presence. The audibility of this presence is, importantly, not a sonic priority; rather, the figure of the white woman gets us from point A to point B, from the beginnings of a joke to a punch line—and ultimately to black noise.

The show goes on, of course, as it always does, as Richard and Willie approach the act's end in the spirit of profound raunchiness, no-holds-barred. They do a bit on how sex has kept black people from going crazy, wherein Richard laughs after every one of Willie's quips—jibe and laugh, jibe and laugh. They transform a lady sheriff in Texas named Bessie Gonzales—"she's a sister," says Richard, "the first black sheriff in Texas"—into a giant vagina, explaining to the crowd that she had to form a posse ("pussy") to catch a criminal named Tricky Dick, in a sketch that both celebrates and erodes this strong black female figure. And they close, in truly Pryor-esque fashion, with a quick account of the differences between the sexual conduct of black people and white people. The comparison hinges on the disjunct between the "emotional[ity]" of black sex, as recounted from a male perspective, and the hygienic, mechanical nature of white sex. Declares Willie, "When white folks get pussy they do things like this: uh-uh, uh-uh, uh-uh…. Is it in? I think it's in." Willie's "uh-uhs" recall the sound of squeaky brakes: the noises of a dysfunctional machine. His description of a black orgasm, which brings the entire act to a close, stipulates that, "When a brother come, the whole motel know it." He unleashes upon the crowd a series of deep-throated growls, which seem to seesaw—as strange as this may sound—between eating and laughter, ingestion and expulsion. The noise of this orgasm is so loud that

someone, perhaps Richard himself, momentarily moves the microphone away from his mouth, so that the orgasm gets fainter, as if disappearing from audible range, only to return with a vengeance, followed by a pause, followed by more growling. Then, the sound of snoring—the final noise that heralds Richard's, and sleeping Willie's, exit from the stage.

VI. CODA: PRYOR INFLUENCES

What are we to make of this Bicentennial record that begins with a tightly structured exchange of voices representing distinct political views, and ends with a thunderous orgasm? I have already suggested that Richard and Willie's ventriloquial performance, as registered on vinyl (i.e. in all its recorded (in)audibility), functions as a sonic materialization of Du Boisian double consciousness culminating in black noise. This does not mean, I want to make absolutely clear, that *Red, White & Blue* is "all just noise in the end," and I hope that Best and Hartman's formulation will clarify that the noise discussed in this chapter is precisely the kind to which I believe tuning in is a political necessity—as it was at the time of recording. Additionally, while Richard and Willie's act does indeed reach its climax on a wave of nonlinguistic vocalization, the full performance stages a shifting relation between voice(s) and noise(s), rather than a complete subsumption or drowning. There is a nonlinear dynamics at play here: a series of splits and parallels that ventriloquism makes visceral. *Red, White & Blue* is not merely rhetorically anti-progressivist; its materiality and structure—its vinyl ventriloquism—circumvents normative chronology.

At this point, it behooves us to remember that just as every dummy has its ventriloquist, every ventriloquist has her ventriloquist. Richard Sandfield appeared to want his audience to know that his comedic inspiration—and, some might say, his (favorite) ventriloquist—was the

other Richard: Richard Pryor, whose own ventriloquial abilities, among other attributes, had already thrown him into the limelight.[58] Not only do Sandfield's albums unabashedly echo some of Pryor's most well known material (indeed, the back cover of *Red, White & Blue* acknowledges that the record's material was "written & stolen" by Richard and Willie); Sandfield even went so far as to dedicate an album to Pryor, entitled *Richard's Firecracker*.[59] Released in 1980, after Pryor, having freebased cocaine and doused himself with rum, set his own body on fire in what he later described as a suicide attempt, *Richard's Firecracker* contains a personal note from Sandfield to Pryor on the album's back cover:

> Only after knowing that Richard Pryor would fully recover from his near tragedy, did I decide to do this album. I dedicate this album to Richard Pryor, his comedy genius, and his will to live. I also do this album in the hope that there are no future interruptions in his career. For the absence of Mr. Pryor from the field of comedy even for a short time is a tragedy within itself.

Signed, "Richard and Willie," the note suggests that Pryor's life, Pryor's animate being, was a prerequisite for Richard and Willie's continuation. When one considers Pryor's well-documented ventriloquial talents, registered even more strongly in recent, posthumous accounts of his practice, Sandfield's missive reads as a love note from one ventriloquist to another.

As cultural historians and critics of comedy, and of Pryor's work in particular, have attested, by 1976, Pryor had fully emancipated himself from the deracinated, Cosby-esque approach that had characterized his stand-up before 1970. Hilton Als, Mel Watkins, and Glenda Carpio, among others, have described Pryor's transformation from a mostly monological stand-up comedian into a gifted vocal mimic, as well as generator of myriad sound effects and nonlinguistic noises. Central to this metamorphosis was Pryor's newfound confidence in his

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[58] Much to Sandfield's delight, Laff Records actually produced a split LP featuring Richard and Willie and Richard Pryor, in 1976 no less. Richard Pryor/Richard & Willie, *Richard Pryor Meets…Richard & Willie And…The SLA!!*, LP, Laff, 1976.

[59] Richard & Willie, *Richard's Firecracker*, LP, Laff, 1980.

"trademark ability to mimic cartoonish but clearly identifiable 'white' and 'black' voices."[60] Thus while Cosby's act continued to cultivate the "disarming, non-ethnic narrative voice" of the "Everyman,"[61] Pryor embraced his own voice's capacity for racialization, channeling a cast of characters whose exaggerated vocal (and gestural) tics evoked the inflations of minstrelsy, yet drew from earlier African traditions of conjure.[62]

Distinguishing Pryor's mode of channeling from the passive possessional practices of voodoo, Carpio argues that, "Pryor takes on the much more active role of the conjurer who brings to life, not the spirit of the dead, but the most outrageous aspects of stereotypes, using an entire arsenal of rhetorical flourishes derived from black humor, from simple signifying to elaborate games of the dozens."[63] On a similar, yet different note, John Limon embellishes, "Pryor…plays not the giant but the ventriloquist, the cypher, Proteus, proto-Esu, finally the mime. He seems fluidity itself rather than its mass producer."[64] However divergent their epistemologies, Carpio and Limon seem to agree that Pryor's ventriloquial performances echoed the raced and racialized dynamics of his audiences back to themselves, in the service of an ongoing political project whose aim was nothing less than the full-scale debunking of the fantasy of the United States of America. *Bicentennial Nigger* (fig 1.2) was in many ways the literalization of this effort, explicitly focused as it was on the Bicentennial's insistent celebration of progress in the face of the nation's foundation on slavery and ensuing history of racial violence and inequality—also the subject of Richard and Willie's *Red, White & Blue*, as the bulk of this chapter attests.

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[60] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 72.
[61] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 507, 534.
[62] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 15.
[63] Ibid., 75.
[64] John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 103.

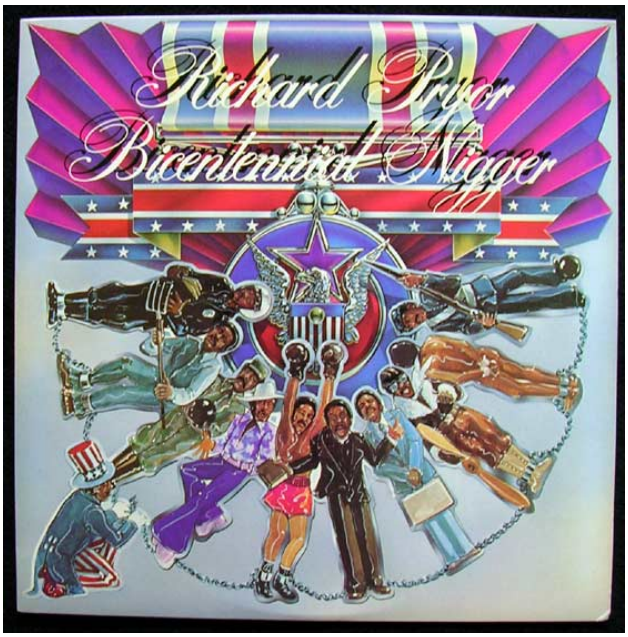


Fig. 1.2 *Bicentennial Nigger* album cover

The importance of sonic creation to Pryor's comedic practice and political project cannot be underestimated, for the primary medium of circulation for his performances, as for those of Richard and Willie, was the Long Play vinyl record. This format, which hid Pryor's expressive body—a body that didn't simply stand, but that made full use of the stage, roving around, contorting itself, falling down, and picking itself up again—foregrounded the comedian's vocal impressions, pauses, sound effects, and loud ejaculations, all of which were undergirded, and sometimes overwhelmed, by room tone, ambient sound, audience laughter, and the irrepressible crackle of the very vinyl that transmitted these many sounds. *Bicentennial Nigger* places the listener amidst shouts and swells of laughter, in a packed club, alongside the likes of writer Cecil Brown and singer Natalie Cole, yet simultaneously transports her to Tupelo, Mississippi; Peoria, Illinois (Pryor's birthplace); and Hollywood, as sounded through the voice of a Southern black man named Mudbone, whose body Pryor produces alongside, say, a version of his own body warped by the influence of LSD (in the famous number, "Acid"). Hilton Als writes of this period in Pryor's career:

> Pryor began to reconstruct himself first through the use of sound—imagining the sound of Frankenstein taking LSD, for example, or a baby "being birthed." His routines from this time regularly involved gurgles, air blown through pursed lips, beeps. He also began playing with individual words. He would stand in front of an audience and say "Goddamn" in every way he could think to say it. Or he'd say, "I feel," in a variety of ways that indicated the many different ways he could feel. And as he began to understand how he felt he began to see himself, to create his body before his audience. He talked about the way his breath and his farts smelled, what he wanted from love, where he had been, and what America thought he was.[65]

Crucially, Pryor not only voiced other bodies into being but also had the "ability to give voice to inanimate objects,"[66] as well as to human body parts whose functions are, as our daily experiences tell us, often not accessible to human control. In one of his most famous routines, performed years after the release of *Bicentennial Nigger*, he dramatizes a past heart attack by *voicing* the heart as it attacks him: "You thinking about dying, ain't you?... You didn't think about it when you was eating all that pork!"[67] This sequence unsurprisingly produces uproarious laughter—a "laughter fit to kill," in Carpio's language.[68] For as Richard and Willie have already taught us, *things* sometimes say the funniest things, and make the most noise.

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[65] Hilton Als, *White Girls* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2013), 239. Als gets beautifully at the way in which Pryor's sonic experiments produced their own phantasmatic bodies and spaces— "vocalic spaces" and "vocalic bodies," according to Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 12, 35. The recorded voice of the comic not only incites the building of an "imaginary architecture" within which to map the coordinates of his voice (a fantasy nightclub, if you will), but also generates what Connor describes as "a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice." Ibid. In Pryor's case, as in Sandfield's, the comic's voice was not one but many; his polyvocal emanations conjured overlapping geographies and a multiplicity of bodies.

[66] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 93.

[67] "Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip - Heart Attack Scene," *YouTube*, accessed May 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc3GmvRJxcY. The recording comes from a live, high profile performance of Pryor's in 1982.

[68] Carpio speaks of "laughter fit to kill" as produced by both a tragicomic form of humor that takes slavery as its direct subject, eliciting a form of laughter that is in actuality mournful, as well as by "an eviscerating humor, one that is bawdy, brutal, horrific, and insurgent and that…pillories the ideologies and practices that supported slavery and that, in different incarnations, continue to support racist practices." Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 7. Interestingly, Limon refers to the laughter produced by a Pryor audience as part of its "noise": "the noise produced by a Pryor audience is unifying: shrieks of laughter, mixed with clapping, hooting, and screaming, its volume intact for two to ten seconds duration. You can lose your identity in the high pitch: the embodiedness of the response to Pryor (whole body laughing) is exactly equal to its disembodiedness (whole audience laughing). Your body is not the point of distinction of ego and other; it is the point of convulsion." Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, 103.

CHAPTER TWO
Milli Vanilli and the Cultural Politics of Synchronization

> All the duo did was lip-sync, a technique that when perfectly executed merely requires an image to match it.
>
> EDUARDO ESPINA, *The Milli Vanilli Condition: Essays on Culture in the New Millennium*

> Are the inescapable pluralities involved in the movements of black peoples, in Africa and in exile, ever to be synchronised?
>
> PAUL GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*

I. INTRODUCTION

Few cultural events have demonstrated ventriloquism's moralizing power like the Milli Vanilli lip-synch scandal of 1989-90. A Munich-based pop group formed in 1988 by the globally recognized songwriter and music producer Frank Farian, Milli Vanilli has been labeled "the world's most sophisticated ventriloquist act" and a "ventriloquist act par excellence," among other similarly hyperbolic analogies.[1] While functionally incorrect, these comparisons highlight the crucial role of the voice in the group's storied rise to fame and precipitous fall from the lucrative pop cultural prominence they had so quickly (and, it turned out, briefly) achieved. For, like many other pop performers of the day and of the present day, Milli Vanilli's two iconic Afro-European frontmen, the Munich-born Robert "Rob" Pilatus (1965-1998) and the Paris-born Fabrice "Fab" Morvan (b. 1966), lip-synched in the group's music videos and live performances,

[1] Nearly a decade after the scandal, *Entertainment Weekly* described Milli Vanilli as "the world's most sophisticated ventriloquist act," and thus as one of the "100 Greatest Moments in Rock Music" of the 1990s. "The 100 Greatest Moments in Rock Music: The 90s," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 28, 1999, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.ew.com/article/1999/05/28/100-greatest-moments-rock-music-90s. Jeremy Simmonds subsequently described Milli Vanilli as a "ventriloquist act par excellence" in his 2006 book, *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rock Stars: Heroin, Handguns, and Ham Sandwiches* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006), 392. These are just two of a great many examples of ventriloquism's metaphorization in the wake of the Milli Vanilli scandal.

but unlike most of these other pop performers, they did so without ever having recorded vocals for any of Milli Vanilli's songs. The voices publicly linked to the bodies of Rob and Fab were, unbeknownst to Milli Vanilli's fans and the music industry at large, recorded in the studio by a cadre of African-American vocalists and musicians Farian had selected. The suturing-together of the group's globally popular image and sound thus constituted a particularly transatlantic, and even more precisely, black Atlantic, feat of audiovisual synchronization.[2]

That this feat was produced (in the industrial sense) by Farian—a German-born white man who had already made a name for himself in the 1970s by assembling the disco-pop group Boney M., which was fronted by three Caribbean-born singers who, with one partial exception, recorded their own vocals as well as sang live—gave the act its metaphorical ventriloquist, one whose material voice was absent from Milli Vanilli's recordings, music videos, and live performances. Yet when the act was unmasked and the scandal broke, it was Rob and Fab, the analogy's lip-synching "dummies," who reaped the worst of the deception. Among other suspicions, "tech issues" presaged the group's demise. During a 1989 live performance for MTV, the recording to which Rob and Fab were lip-synching began to skip, and the duo, knowing the cost of approximating Milli Vanilli's R&B-style raps and sung lyrics in their incongruous, thickly accented English, ran offstage.[3] Doubts began to accumulate, alongside other pressures,

[2] The geographical and cultural designation "black Atlantic" comes from Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

[3] After the breaking of the scandal, Fab told the Associated Press, "Every time we gave an interview, the reporters would hear my French accent or Rob's German accent and they'd say, 'No way. How could these guys have sung the songs?'" Concurred Rob, "The more we talked, the worse things got." John Antczak, "Milli Vanilli: Thick Foreign Accents Raised Suspicion," *Associated Press*, November 21, 1990, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1990/Milli-Vanilli-Thick-Foreign-Accents-Raised-Suspicions/id-116ab3f8b41bd4a96c92d9c54e814812. The moment of the infamous skip is revisited and processed by Pilatus in the first-ever episode of VH1's *Behind the Music*. *Behind the Music*, Television, VH1, Aug. 17, 1997. A glimpse of the episode and the skip can be viewed on YouTube at "MILLI VANILLI - SONG SKIPS LIVE!," *YouTube*, accessed September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udS5qBrBFqE.

and in late 1990 Farian publicly confessed to the group's ventriloquial formation.[4] As Milli Vanilli's frontmen, and thus as the faces of the group's scandal as well as its success, Rob and Fab were shamed by the media and prompted to return the Grammy Award they had won for Best New Artist of 1989.[5] They did so publicly at a heavily attended press conference, their European accents (which had, of course, been there all along) prompting renewed incredulity at the idea that theirs could ever have been perceived as the voices behind the music.[6]

In a 2014 live storytelling segment for The Moth, Fab, the duo's only surviving member after Pilatus's 1998 suicide, described the devastation he felt upon realizing that he and Rob were being treated "as if we were the mastermind behind it"—the ventriloquist behind Milli Vanilli's synchronization scheme.[7] However in the decades following the scandal, Farian has profited from having spearheaded the disgraced group,[8] while the act's "dummies" have either died or never quite recovered.[9] Far from being treated as "masterminds," Rob and Fab have been dually cast as fraudulent victims, deceptive objects. Writes Eduardo Espina, espousing a common view, "This pair of imposters had so completely accepted their…condition…that when they were discovered they denied the accusations…because they were possessed by the fiction they were

[4] Bob Mack, "Down with Milli Vanilli: The real scoop on pop's most synthetic flavors-of-the-month," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 30, 1990, http://www.ew.com/article/1990/11/30/down-milli-vanilli.

[5] Chuck Philips, "Milli Vanilli's Grammy Rescinded by Academy: Music: Organization revokes an award for the first time after revelation that the duo never sang on album," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Nov. 20, 1990.

[6] "Milli Vanilli - Press Conference / Interview (1990 HD)," *YouTube*, accessed September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ7y-7cjdCs&noredirect=1.

[7] Fab Morvan, "Finding My Own Voice," *The Moth*, accessed September 29, 2016, https://themoth.org/storytellers/fab-morvan.

[8] For one, Farian's musical, *Daddy Cool*, based on the music of Boney M. and Milli Vanilli, has been running since 2006. "DADDY COOL - Das Musical," *daddycoolshow.com*, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.daddycool-show.com/de/show/.

[9] "Milli Vanilli's Pilatus Dead," *MTV News*, April 6, 1998, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.mtv.com/news/1432182/milli-vanillis-pilatus-dead/. Fab Morvan has spent years diligently developing his voice into a marketable instrument, and now sings for his supper on the talk show circuit, demonstrating his hard-earned vocal prowess on such programs as *The View* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Meanwhile, his attempt at a scandal-free musical career has met with little success.

portraying. Even they were seduced by their own deceit…."[10] The case of Milli Vanilli is thus not a simple instance of the dummy being mistaken for the ventriloquist. Rather, the scandal's persistent ventriloquial metaphorization begs us to consider the warped cultural processes through which Milli Vanilli's supposed puppets, Rob and Fab, were each cast in the bifurcated role of "deceit[ful" actor and "possessed" dummy, each framed as a kind of cross between ventriloquist and dummy that allowed for the simultaneous assignment of culpability and evacuation of agency. *Why Milli Vanilli*? Why did this particular lip-synch scandal incite such widespread judgment, and why, if Rob and Fab were merely Farian's dummies, did the dancing duo bear the brunt of that judgment? Why were Rob and Fab so brutally eviscerated for being the faces and bodies of Milli Vanilli's multi-actor synchronization scheme?

While lip-synch scandals contemporaneous with Milli Vanilli, as well as those that have occurred more recently, have provoked ample moral judgment, none has elicited enduring ire (and irony) quite like this chapter's subject. The Whitney Houston lip-synch scandal of 1991, wherein the pop singer sang the U.S. national anthem over her own prerecorded vocals at the Super Bowl; the Beijing Olympics lip-synch scandal of 2008, wherein the nine-year-old Lin Miaoke mouthed the Chinese national anthem over vocals prerecorded by the seven-year-old Yang Peiyi, the latter having been deemed too unattractive for the global stage; the Beyoncé Inauguration lip-synch scandal of 2013, wherein the pop singer may or may not have been singing over her own prerecorded vocals at President Barack Obama's second swearing-in—these events are remembered, but their subjects have not become "synonymous with fraud."[11]

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[10] Eduardo Espina, *The Milli Vanilli Condition: Essays on Culture in the New Millennium* (Houston: Arte Público, 2015), 5.

[11] For details on the Houston scandal, see Steve Wurtzler, "'She Sang Live, But The Microphone Was Turned Off:' The Live, the Recorded, and the *Subject* of Representation," in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992). On the Beijing Olympics, see Tania Branigan, "Olympics: child singer revealed as fake," *Guardian*, Aug. 12, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2008/aug/12/olympics2008.china1. On the Beyoncé inauguration scandal, see Matilda Battersby, "Beyonce belts out national anthem live before

Though Houston and Beyoncé's short-lived shamings certainly exposed cultural anxieties surrounding "the collapse of the discursively produced categories of live and recorded" similar to those dredged up by Milli Vanilli, and though the Beijing scandal begged the question of how a human body could be gendered as visually out of synch with its "own" voice, these scandals were each discretely bound by the figure of the sovereign nation-state.[12] Houston and Beyoncé's voices were their "own," albeit recorded, (African-)American voices, and Yang Peiyi's voice was channeled through the body of another girl who was also, very necessarily, a Chinese citizen. Thus at the end of the day, these voices and the bodies that accompanied them were able to be re-synchronized, in the popular imaginary, into unified national subjects singing national anthems—if seemingly unconventionally. (As the music designer of the Beijing ceremony put it, using Lin Miaoke's body as the visual focus of the anthem was "in the national interest."[13])

These more-or-less resolved lip-synch scandals, however, give us a crucial point of entry into the still-resonant case of Milli Vanilli, foregrounding as they do the bodies and voices of racialized and gendered performers. For if we consider, in the U.S. cases, the obvious fact that the normative U.S. citizen continues to be constructed as racially white and male-gendered, we might differently understand the condemnation of Houston and Beyoncé's ventriloquial U.S. national anthems. As black American women, Houston and Beyoncé are not only expected to serve as embodied bearers of vocal authenticity; they are also national subjects whose citizenship is perpetually in question. Thus when these prominent women are "caught" lip-synching—and the national anthem to boot!—they are punished less for the inauthenticity of their performances

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admitting lip synching on US inauguration day," *Independent*, February 1, 2013, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/beyonce-belts-out-national-anthem-live-before-admitting-lip-synching-on-us-inauguration-day-8476782.html. Milli Vanilli is described as "synonymous with fraud" in Rob Tannenbaum and Craig Marks, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

[12] Wurtzler, "'She Sang Live,'" 88.

[13] Qtd in Branigan, "Olympics: child singer revealed as fake."

than for the abiding racialized and gendered asynchronies these performances represent. In these cases, the predetermined failure of black femininity to synch up with normative cultural ideals of U.S. citizenship is projected onto the lip-synching body of the black female performer, whose recorded voice is "spatially co-present" with but "temporally anterior" to her body.[14] Only a "live" performance at the Super Bowl can redeem her (always already denied) Americanness.[15]

In the case of Milli Vanilli—a group fronted by an Afro-German and an Afro-Frenchman whose European-accented speech, hybrid style of dress, identical braided hair extensions, and sexualized twinning in the form of synchronized dancing and other chest-bumping antics—a coherent racial, sexual, or national identity could not be redeemed, especially not within the U.S. context. Taking the Milli Vanilli scandal as the limit-case that gives us a window into what I call the *cultural politics of synchronization*, this chapter argues that Milli Vanilli's uniquely punishing framing as a ventriloquist act was, and to an extent still is, retribution for Rob and Fab's anti-"chrononormativity" as queerly racialized audiovisual subjects.[16] While Elizabeth Freeman uses "chrononormativity" to describe the process through which human bodies are oriented "toward maximum productivity" through the deployment of time, I see Freeman's own redefinition of the term as the "enforce[ment of] synchronicity" as a way to grasp Rob and Fab's negative positioning as individuals whose voices and bodies, as well as sounds and images, literally failed to synch up.[17] As Freeman crucially points out, queer and racialized subjects are

[14] Wurtzler, "'She Sang Live,'" 90.

[15] "Beyonce admits Inauguration Day lip sync, says she'll 'absolutely be singing live' at Super Bowl," *CBS News*, January 31, 2013, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/beyonce-admits-inauguration-day-lip-sync-says-shell-absolutely-be-singing-live-at-super-bowl/.

[16] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), ix-xxiv.

[17] Ibid., 39. See also Lucas Hilderbrand, "Sex Out of Sync: *Christmas on Earth*'s and *Couch*'s Queer Soundtracks," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 2 (2013): 45-75. In this article, Hilderbrand explores what he calls "queer sound tracks: image-sound relations unfixed in ways that not only are dynamic aesthetically but that also evoke an affective, diachronic bond to the past," 46. If we read Milli Vanilli's various asynchronies reparatively, as I believe we must, one could say that the asynchronous "image-sound relations" for which Rob and Fab were castigated by

frequently cast as out of synch or anachronistic; the "normativity" in "chrononormativity" thus refers not merely to a generic process of normalization through time, but one coextensive with processes of racialization, gendering, and sexualization. However chrononormativity is also thwarted, resisted, or refused by certain (per Freeman, queer) cultural formations. To wit, Paul Gilroy has extensively written on the non-synchronousness, and indeed double consciousness, of black transatlantic cultural production owing, in part, to the nonlinear "movements of black peoples" across the Atlantic and back again.[18] Thus as the chapter progresses, I will read Milli Vanilli's variegated audio and visual components as a particularly complex instantiation of black (and, at least nominally, queer) transatlantic asynchronousness. Moreover, the occurrence of Rob and Fab's condemnation within the historical context of the German "reunification" of 1989—Milli Vanilli's own national cultural context, but also an event that unfolded on the global stage—will not be considered a strange coincidence. For it is no accident that the public display and metaphorical flogging of Fab and Rob's asynchronous Afro-Franco and Afro-German bodies occurred in a moment of profound global anxiety about the spatiotemporal synchronization of Europe's long-divided halves.

While previous analyses have explored the Milli Vanilli scandal in relation to changing U.S. cultural paradigms of authenticity and the shifting norms of the U.S. music-industrial-complex, the role of Rob and Fab's positionality as Afro-European subjects, and the modes of gendering and racialization that attended to this positionality, has remained all but absent from such studies. To understand the Milli Vanilli situation in all of its complexity, as well as the lip-synch controversies that continue to follow in its wake, we must do more than think synchronization as a music industrial practice or a desired property of audiovisual media. We

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the mainstream media constituted one of Hilderbrand's "queer sound tracks." I suspect that Hilderbrand would agree with me.

[18] Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 30.

must consider the *cultural politics of synchronization* that coincide with the implicit and explicit labeling of certain voices and bodies as "out of synch," while other voices and bodies are permitted to roam freely.[19] We must attend to the specificities of situations like Milli Vanilli's, marked "ventriloquism," to begin to grasp the power dynamics that structure audiovisual media, as well as those at play in the management of the relations between "actual" voices and bodies. Additionally, thinking Milli Vanilli through the lens of nonmetaphorical ventriloquism—where ventriloquism is understood not as a blunt metaphor for hidden sovereign power but a performance of splitting that, like the act described in the previous chapter, puts the fantasies of originary voice and unified subject into crisis—allows us to move away from the moralizing discourses that have historically enveloped the Milli Vanilli narrative and into more productive critical territory. For instance, this chapter interrogates why, in examinations of the ventriloquial triangle of Rob, Fab, and Farian, the vocal and sonic materiality of Milli Vanilli's music is persistently effaced from consideration. What, I ask, is the status of the group's music, written largely by African-American composers and musicians; what, alternately, is the status of the voices and sounds technologically and physiologically produced in the studio by Farian and "The Real Milli Vanilli" (as they were later called), which were then attached to the moving lips and gyrating bodies of Rob and Fab? In posing these questions, we must continue to confront the degree to which ventriloquism is metaphorized not only to a moralizing end but also to a racializing end, which invokes the embodied practices of racial ventriloquism discussed in the previous chapter, as well as in the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation.

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[19] See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1999) and Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), for linked discussions of the cinematic embodiment and disembodiment of male and female voices. The conversation illuminates some of the ways in which female voices are often constrained to embodiment, and thus to synchronization, while male voices are permitted to remain acousmatic, asynchronous, and thus all-powerful (at least in Chion's analysis). Neither text much discusses the racialization of the voice, nor how race might intersect with the voice's gendering vis-à-vis questions of audiovisual synchronization.

Accordingly, this chapter takes a sustained look at several crucial yet under-examined dimensions of the Milli Vanilli scandal. After a section situating prior readings of Milli Vanilli's "inauthenticity" and perceived queerness in relation to the more capacious critical frame of black Atlantic asynchronousness (Section II), I examine the group's complex transatlantic genesis through a close reading of the many cultural strands that were woven together to create what erroneously became known as Milli Vanilli's hit song, "Girl You Know It's True," as well as through a glimpse at the singers and musicians who provided the "real voices" of Milli Vanilli (Section III). I then examine this song's synchronization—and, most crucially, queer resistance to synchronization—with Rob and Fab's visual images via the music video for "Girl You Know It's True" (Section IV). Following this analysis, I briefly discuss several contemporary artistic and pop cultural responses to the now retro scandal that, with some exceptions, continue to frame the Milli Vanilli situation as a crisis of "authenticity"—rather than as an exemplar of the "enforcement of synchronicity" through chrononormativity and audiovisual racialization.

II. SIMULATION, SYNCHRONIZATION, REUNIFICATION

In popular cultural contexts, the Milli Vanilli scandal often reads as a kind of paradoxical warning: acknowledge your artifice or suffer its exposure, admit that your voice is not "your own" or be branded an impostor. Philip Auslander has already (in 1999, ten years following "*l'affaire Milli Vanilli*," as he calls it) outlined the crisis of the real exemplified by this contradictory framing, which attempts to reestablish a grounds for authenticity within an already established culture of simulation.[20] The Milli Vanilli affair, writes Auslander, quoting Baudrillard, "was not a *real* scandal at all but rather a *scandal effect* used by agencies of power

[20] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 108. For the original quotation, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 27.

and capital to 'regenerate a reality principle in distress.'"[21] In other words, like many parallel pop culture dramas of the contemporary moment—the aforementioned Beyoncé Inauguration lip-synch scandal being a relatively fresh example—the Milli Vanilli event was produced as scandal, shame, dishonor, disgrace, and indeed as event, rather than embodying a revelation that scandalized the group's mostly indifferent audience.[22]

Looking at the scandal, then, as an unfolding juridical and representational response to the threat simulation poses to "the structures on which power and capital depend by implying that moral, political, and other distinctions are no longer meaningful," Auslander observes some of the ways in which the authenticity associated with "live" musical performance was reclaimed and reasserted in the years directly following Milli Vanilli's public punishment.[23] *MTV Unplugged*, which initially invited mostly rock artists to perform acoustic sets before live (TV) audiences, gained traction in the early 1990s, authenticating individual creators by showcasing their respective abilities to perform sans technological bells and whistles—in a thoroughly mediated televisual context. During the same period, between 1990 and 1993, English rock singer and guitarist Eric Clapton was showered with Grammys, several of which he was awarded for an *MTV Unplugged* recording.[24] These Grammatical shifts underscore Auslander's crucial point that it was, somewhat incongruously, *rock* tenets of authenticity according to which Milli Vanilli's performance practices were judged and proclaimed unacceptably fake. In the pop realm, where simulation has long been a given, a celebrated mode allowing for maximal entertainment, the group's activities were not entirely unremarkable but bore far less scandal-

[21] Ibid., 109.

[22] As Auslander points out, "Most the commentary was adamantly opposed to the practice [of lip-synching], though virtually all of it admitted that the main audiences for the performers in question, mostly young teenagers, did not seem to care whether their idols sang or not." Ibid., 73.

[23] Ibid., 109.

[24] Ibid., 107-127.

making potential.[25] In Auslander's analysis, the Milli Vanilli scandal effect marks a cultural moment, roughly spanning the calendar years of 1989-1993, in which rock ideology went imperial, not only enforcing its hegemony over those objects already located within in its own domain, but expanding its power outwards, into the previously unconquered land of pop. "[T]he scapegoating of Milli Vanilli," writes Auslander, "not only successfully…shored up rock's ideology of authenticity but helped to extend the reach of that ideology to musical genres and artists with whom it would not previously have been associated."[26]

Yet why was Milli Vanilli the chosen territory for rock ideology's imperialism? Why was the group, personified by the figures of Rob and Fab, selected by the "agencies of power and capital" to exemplify the follies and dangers of the simulacral enterprise? Why were Rob and Fab—though notably not Farian, their alleged ventriloquist—guillotined, "martyr[ed]" and "sacrifice[d]" (in Ted Friedman's words) so that the "recording industry…[could] prove the integrity of the rest of their product"?[27] If, per Auslander, the problematic of authenticity versus simulation lies at the heart of the Milli Vanilli inquiry, what of the variant levels of authenticity or simulation ascribed not simply to certain musical forms, but to the bodies and voices associated with these forms?

Auslander's consideration of the roles of race and gender in shaping the Milli Vanilli scandal is consigned to a footnote, wherein he observes that, "their status as Europeans is probably more significant than their African heritage. The fact of their being German [and French] places them outside the American music establishment in a way that their being Black

[25] Writes Simon Frith, by way of example, "Elton John is a pop not a rock star because his authenticity—the authenticity of his expressed emotions—is not an issue. 'Candle in the Wind' is not a song of self-exposure; it was not written to mark off John's difference, his unique artistic sensibility. It was, rather, a pop song, designated for public use." *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 168.

[26] Auslander, *Liveness*, 125.

[27] Ted Friedman, "Milli Vanilli and the Scapegoating of the Inauthentic," *Bad Subjects*, November 1993, accessed September 29, 2016, http://bad.eserver.org/issues/1993/09/friedman.html.

does not."[28] On the contrary, I argue that Milli Vanilli's stigmatization did not derive from *either* their blackness *or* their European citizenship, but from Rob and Fab's projections of dual, hyphenated Afro-European identities. Further, the duo's German- and French-accented projections of blackness, perceived as asynchronous by many in the U.S. context, were relatedly interpreted as markers of queerness.[29] Indeed, without mentioning race, Friedman celebrates the group's "goofy" appeal, citing Rob and Fab's thick accents as a case in point, along with their "huge pectoral muscles," "power-shoulder jackets," and "weird dynamic" that was "so interestingly, almost incestuously, queer."[30] In an anticipatory nod to Freeman's concept of "chrononormativity," Friedman compellingly argues that this queerness is what ultimately made Rob and Fab's "fail[ure] to play a 'productive' role in the making of their music" so consequential.[31] Already aesthetically feminized, Friedman suggests, the duo's subsequent exposure as allegedly passive, voiceless marionettes, reconfirmed their queer nonreproductivity, inviting an even stronger degree of homophobic retribution. Christopher Martin, too, invokes Rob and Fab's queerness in his concurrent analysis of Milli Vanilli's demise, arguing that the group was subject to the "anti-disco discourse" of rock criticism, which historically tended towards "racism and homophobia," well before the lip-synch scandal's eruption.[32] Also without making reference to Rob and Fab's Afro-Europeanness, Martin writes that the group was marked for debasement from the get-go, owing to the queer confluence of their "pop/dance music, the young female 'teenybopper' audience, and the rumored homosexuality of Pilatus and Morvan."[33]

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[28] Auslander, *Liveness*, 73.

[29] Citing the 1993 analyses of Friedman and Christopher Martin, Auslander does acknowledge in passing that, "homophobia may have played a role in [Milli Vanilli's] stigmatization." Ibid.

[30] Friedman, "Milli Vanilli."

[31] Ibid.

[32] Christopher Martin, "Traditional Criticism of Popular Music and the Making of a Lip-synching Scandal," *Popular Music and Society* 17, no. 4 (1993): 71. See also Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco," *Gay Left* 8 (1979), 20-23.

[33] Ibid.

But from whence came these rumors? And if these rumors owed, in part, to perceptions like Friedman's—rooted, I will later demonstrate, in Rob and Fab's sartorial gender-fluidity and consistently homosocial dynamic in Milli Vanilli's music videos and popular appearances—might they also be connected to the foreignness, or queerness, of Rob and Fab's specifically European blackness in the U.S. context—their dual resistance to interpellation as African-American *and* as masculine in the American sense?

As I have already been suggesting, to grasp the multidimensionality (as well as intersectionality) of the Milli Vanilli scandal, we have to look beyond the isolated frameworks of authenticity/simulation and adjectival "queerness" to the cultural context for the group's formation. This context includes not only a divided and "reunified" Germany—increasingly diversified by the bicultural children of African, Caribbean, and other immigrants from colonized territories—and an advanced capitalist, Cold War United States with a deep legacy of black slavery and an ongoing "struggle" with immigration; it also crucially involves what Gilroy has termed the "black Atlantic." Examining transatlantic black culture not as a static and linear spatiotemporal entity, but rather as a fluctuating assemblage marked by "motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean," Gilroy posits the black Atlantic as a "modern political and cultural formation" that challenges both the "structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."[34] In charting the complexities and pluralities of black culture in, say, Germany, at a given historical moment, we cannot think solely in terms of Afro-Germanness as an essential, though hyphenated, identity. Conjuring the forced migration embodied by the Middle Passage, Gilroy implores us to imagine black Atlantic culture as a culture of passages, circuits, and returns, created not by stalwart ethnic and national singularities but by the Du Boisian (at least) double consciousness engendered by the

[34] Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 4; 19.

overlapping histories of colonialism, slavery, and migration. Thus Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* focuses on the "*stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal* cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering…heuristically called the black Atlantic world."[35]

Emphasizing that the black Atlantic is a heuristic, or speculative, formulation—a way of thinking black cultural space that is informed by, but not confined to, the logic of place so often stringently applied to precise geographical locations—Gilroy ascribes to black Atlantic cultural forms a split, bifurcated quality: a stereophony, which suggests two (or more) disparate, yet proximate, audio channels; a bilingualism, which suggests comparable fluency in two languages; or a bifocality, which suggests the ability to (usually visually) focus on two objects simultaneously. The bifurcations that mark black Atlantic cultural production are thus auditory, visual, and linguistic, and reflect, per Gilroy, the ways in which black lives in motion—in circuits of migration, exile, and exchange—have been and continue to be shaped by sensorial multiplicity and spatiotemporal discontinuity. In the epigraph that begins this chapter, Gilroy rhetorically asks if these "inescapable pluralities" will ever be "synchronised." After having posed this question, he explains that "non-synchrony" was in fact a fundamental aspect of black life in the space of the slave plantation. "In many respects," he writes, the plantation's inhabitants live non-synchronously. Their mode of communication is divided by the radically opposed political and economic interests that distinguish the master and mistress from their respective human chattels."[36] Because, among other things, they did not share a unified political and economic agenda with their slaveholders, plantation slaves lived, according to Gilroy, *out of*

[35] Ibid., 3, emphasis mine.
[36] Ibid., 57.

synch—a multifaceted orientation to say the least. On the one hand, the cultural productions of the enslaved "reiterate[d]," writes Gilroy, "the continuity of art and life," while on the other hand, the operation of "relations of cultural production and reception…that [were] wholly different from those which define[d] the public sphere of the slaveholders" was a crucial part of the quotidian, non-synchronous fabric of slave life.[37] Placed side-by-side, and yet inhabiting divergent temporalities, master and slave lived parallel lives, with the former staunchly adhering to the Enlightenment distinction between art and life upon which the commodification of both art, and life, had already come to rest. Simply put, the synchronicity between art and life practiced in the culture of the enslaved was at odds, or out of synch, with the division between the two practiced in the culture of the slaveholder.

Considered, then, in relation to "modernity," a historicizing term that marks a lengthy and ambiguously bounded temporal expanse that witnessed the formation of the notion of "race" as both motivation and justification for the horrors of slavery and colonialism, the cultural practices of the enslaved must, Gilroy argues, be understood as taking place "both inside and outside the dubious protection modernity offers."[38] Encoded with memories of the pre-slavery past, these practices can be viewed as exercising a vital resistance to modernity, which for the enslaved was not simply the historical condition of being—in the sense that subjects can be said to "live in modernity"—but the condition of their racialization and enslavement. At the same time these practices must be considered autonomous cultural formations that move to the beat of a different drummer, so to speak, a beat Gilroy describes as the "syncopated pulse of non-European philosophical and aesthetic outlooks" that bespeaks an alternate spatiotemporality.[39] The

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 58.
[39] Ibid. Alexander Weheliye would call this alternate spatiotemporality "sonic Afro-modernity." See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

enslaved condition of having one foot in, and one foot out, of modernity—a fissured, split positionality that is out of synch, or non-synchronous, with the dominant order of the slaveholder—accords with the "striking doubleness" explored in Du Bois and chronicled in the work of other itinerant black American intellectuals, as well as in that of Afro-Caribbean-European artists and intellectuals like Frantz Fanon, whose work unfolded along the diasporic circuit between colonial and colonized "homelands."[40] In a context distinct from, and yet intimately connected to, the turn-of-the-century U.S. environment that gave rise to Du Boisian double consciousness, the Martinique-born Fanon wrote, in 1952, that, "[t]he black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man…. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question….".[41] While the respective Du Boisian and Fanonian theoretical constructs of double consciousness and what Fanon calls "disalienation" are far from identical, both formulations take up the non-synchronousness of racialized subjectivity within the porous yet culturally distinct space of the black Atlantic.[42]

As I explore the audiovisual dimensions of Milli Vanilli's fragmented origin story, I will think alongside Gilroy's idea of the non-synchronous quality of the non- or extra-linear movements that inspire the bifurcations of black Atlantic cultural production. This approach is appropriate given that popular narratives of Milli Vanilli's formation tend already to begin with the beginning of the end: the scandal wrought by Rob and Fab's public asynchrony, their lip synch act gone out of synch. In fact, no matter how, where, or when we talk about Milli Vanilli, we will find it impossible not to do so without reference to asynchrony, making the revelation of asynchrony that caps the story not an unforeseen climax, but a given. As in stage ventriloquism,

[40] Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 58. Notably, Gilroy rarely directly engages with Fanon in this book.

[41] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 17.

[42] Ibid., 38.

where the knowledge of the disjunct between voice and source, image and sound, is part and parcel of the performance, the "ventriloquism" enacted by Milli Vanilli was an established pop practice in an era that was no stranger to the separation and recombination of recorded voices and bodies, sounds and images. Always already out of synch, and yet uniquely derogated for its asynchrony, Milli Vanilli points us towards a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of racialization vis-à-vis the cultural politics of synchronization. For while Milli Vanilli was fetishized, by some, for marrying a Caribbean-inspired, creolized look with a seemingly African-American, "urban" sound, this very same hybrid black Atlantic aesthetic was lampooned and discredited by others, who were stymied by Rob and Fab's European accents and wide range of Afro-Caribbean and, most perplexingly, German influences.

A word, then, on Afro-Germanness in the space of German reunification—the national as well as global cultural context for Milli Vanilli's formation and subsequent denigration. Though Fab was born in France to Guadeloupian parents, and now celebrates his Afro-Caribbean "musical roots," the now deceased Rob, the duo's German half, was always Milli Vanilli's self-appointed spokesperson.[43] As the most vocal of the group's two frontmen before and after the scandal, Rob and his widely ridiculed German accent (along with Farian's Germanness and Milli Vanilli's nascence in that particular European nation) may have been the reason so many U.S. fans and commentators continue to believe that Milli Vanilli was in fact an Afro-German duo. Born in mid-1960s Munich to a white German mother and an African-American soldier father, Rob was raised by a white German family from the age of four, a biographical detail that Fab has since cited as the cause of Rob's professional and personal malaise, comparing Rob's childhood

[43] According to his website, Fab is "the son of a [Guadeloupian] architect/builder and pharmacist [whose] musical roots got a boost from his grandfather, a fisherman/baker who played the accordion and took a young Fab on his musical travels throughout the Caribbean." "About," *Fab Morvan*, accessed September 29, 2016, http://fabmorvan.com/about.

experience of schoolyard racism and "fear" to his own experience of "love" growing up in Paris with his Guadeloupian mother.[44] While this posthumous assessment is at least partly intended to bolster Fab's own positive self-representation, it also references the renewed racism directed toward Afro-Germans in the Cold War period, during which many Afro-German children were, like Rob, born to black American soldiers and "West German Women."[45] As Weheliye observes in his work on Afro-German hip hop, Afro-German children of Rob's generation were persistently framed as "dilemmas for German society and culture," and were treated as "large-scale social problems by the media and state apparatuses."[46] Explicit articulations of Afro-German identity began to take root in the mid-1980s, when the hyphenated term was coined by the Initiative of Black Germans.[47] However from the moment that Rob and Fab first encountered each other, and then Farian, in the Munich nightclubs of the late 1980s, the Wall was crumbling. "The dramatic political turn of 1989," which was also the calendar year of Milli Vanilli's greatest popularity, saw an East German shift from "call[s] for popular sovereignty" to "assertion[s] of national integrity against the division of the Cold War," with these nationalist exhortations ushering in a "wave of anti-foreigner sentiment" leading to outbreaks of racist and xenophobic violence.[48] Though Afro-Germans were not "foreigners," they had, Weheliye points out, long been viewed as such owing to the "implicit whiteness of German cultural citizenship."[49] Thus at the very moment of "reunification," Afro-Germans found themselves violently repudiated from within their own national borders, though their repudiation was by no means a new phenomenon.

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[44] Morvan, "Finding My Own Voice."

[45] Russell A. Berman, "Foreword: Thomas Mann, W. E. B. DuBois [sic.], and Afro-German Studies," in *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890-2000*, eds. Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver (Rochester: U of Rochester P, 2005), 4.

[46] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 171.

[47] Berman, "Foreword," xiii-xiv; Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 171-2.

[48] Berman, "Foreword," xiv.

[49] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 177.

Milli Vanilli did not self-identify as Afro-German, and they were not a hip hop act in the manner of other contemporaneous black German groups who found in "[h]ip-hop, with its global appeal and roots in African American culture…a particularly appropriate medium by which to communicate" a uniquely Afro-German identity.[50] This owes in part to the obvious fact that Fab is not German, as well as to Farian's ventriloquial constitution of the group as a dance-pop act—one whose English vocals were characterized by an array of accents associated with African-American rap and song. Yet publicly helmed by the talkative Rob, Milli Vanilli often did appear both black and German in the U.S. context, a context especially influenced by the political situation unfolding in Germany, in which Afro-German identity was necessarily beginning to articulate itself as an identity "situated at that dangerous line where the national bleeds into the transnational and vice versa" even in the face of increased threat.[51] In the U.S. context, Rob's black Germanness was differently incongruous, for it failed to echo "the dominant first world conception of blackness" represented by African-American culture.[52] The same must be said of Fab's black Frenchness, which was at once more and less legible, and certainly less remarked on. In a 1990 sketch for the then-popular television comedy showcase *In Living Color*, Damon and Keenen Ivory Wayans lampoon the cultural incongruities of both performers, doing so months before the breaking of the lip-synch scandal.[53] Garbed in oversized blazers and crowned with dreadlocked wigs, the duo argues, in thickly accented, broken English, about who gets to be "Milli" and who gets to be "Vanilli" in the fictional advertisement the pair is shooting. "You can't be Vanilli two days straight…because you are Germany and I'm from Fransch," says Fab

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[50] Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver, "Introduction," *Not So Plain as Black and White* (Rochester: U of Rochester P, 2005), 8.

[51] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 182.

[52] Ibid., 169.

[53] Damon Wayans and Keenen Ivory Wayans, "The Do-It-Yourself Milli Vanilli Kit," *In Living Color*, Fox, Apr. 21, 1990. The skit can be viewed at "In Living Color (♥‿♥) 'Do-It-Yourself Milli Vanilli Kit,'" *YouTube*, accessed September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIeG6YfbcDo.

(Damon) to Rob (Keenen), before gaily flipping his hair over his shoulder to guffaws from the studio audience. After a clapperboard signifies the beginning of the duo's infomercial, Rob muses, "You know a lot of people don't understand the enormous success of Milli Vanilli." Replies Fab, "And neither do we. But we are here today to tell you that you too can be Milli Vanilli." The two then reveal a Do-It-Yourself Milli Vanilli Kit that contains wigs made of mop heads, fake eyes, and VHS tapes of classic cartoons so that viewers can memorize Rob and Fab's "terrible accents" by listening to the voices of "Pepé Le Pew, Boris and Natasha, Elmer Fudd." This skit represents the interchangeability of Rob and Fab's "terrible" European accents in the ears of U.S. audiences, which hear "Germany" and "Fransch" without caring to tell the difference. It also represents the transposability of Rob and Fab's material bodies, casting them as Ken dolls comprised of exchangeable parts, animated by cartoon voices. Finally, "The Do-It-Yourself Milli Vanilli Kit" stages American blackness as the base from which differently accented blacknesses diverge. In the end, we come away with asynchrony: bodies and voices that fail to match up, such that their owners appear messily cobbled-together, out of synch.

III. MILLI VANILLI'S "BLACK" (ATLANTIC) SOUND

Milli Vanilli's apparently perplexing cultural hybridization was established well before Farian met Rob and Fab and Milli Vanilli became Milli Vanilli. One has only to look to the genesis of the group's most iconic track, ironically titled, "Girl You Know It's True," to begin to apprehend the black cultural complexity that undergirds Milli Vanilli's formation. The song's storyline picks up on the Wayans side of the Atlantic, on the Eastern seaboard of the United States, along the East Coast thoroughfares that connect the cities of Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland, where an African-American gas station attendant named Bill Pettaway, also a

songwriter and session guitarist, germinated the idea for the hit single in the mid-1980s. Following high school in Annapolis, Pettaway had graduated from the Southwestern Guitar Institute in Texas, and after trying and failing to make it in New York City, he returned to his hometown "broke and wiser to the ways of the [music] industry."[54] Working out of his parents' basement in between shifts at the local Amoco, Pettaway would go on to write for, play for, and produce the work of, renowned U.S. pop artists from Toni Braxton to Timbaland.[55] Pettaway is in fact "credited with discovering" Braxton, whose recent memoir, *Unbreak My Heart*—named for the 1996 single penned by the Grammy Award-winning songwriter and musical author of Milli Vanilli's 1989 hit "Blame It On The Rain," Diane Warren—includes a short chapter about Braxton's transformative first encounter with Pettaway entitled "Miracle at Amoco."[56]

Before his career began its belated takeoff, however, Pettaway sometimes wrote music with and for a Baltimore-based DJ crew by the name of Numarx, which formed in the early 1980s and peaked in 1987 with the side-by-side releases of "Girl You Know It's True" and another single co-written by Pettaway called "Rhymes So Def." Founded by DJ Spen (Sean Spencer), Numarx featured a rotating cast of characters, with the constitution of the group's core members remaining unfixed, or at the least open to popular interpretation.[57] Some sources list Pettaway as a member of the crew, alongside co-writers Rodney Holloman and Kevin Liles (of Def Jam fame), while others give group credit solely to the DJs and MCs legibly involved in the project: Spen, DJ Junie Jam, DJ Wanye, Kool Rod (Holloman's DJ/MC name), and KG (Liles),

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[54] Mary Corey, "Sunday Snapshots: Bill Pettaway," *The Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 16, 1990, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1990-12-16/features/1990350162_1_bill-pettaway-larson-walking-tours.

[55] "Bill Pettaway," *You Rock Guitar*, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.yourockguitar.com/artists/bill-pettaway/.

[56] Ibid.; Toni Braxton, *Unbreak My Heart: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 72.

[57] Kevin Beacham, "Artist Profile: Numarx (Classic Radio Mixes + Music)!!," *Fifth Element*, January 24, 2012, accessed September 29, 2016, http://fifthelementonline.com/blogs/fifth-element/5884187-artist-profile-numarx-classic-radio-mixes-music. "Girl You Know It's True by Milli Vanilli," *Songfacts*, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=1879.

who, though he would later rise to the rank of record company exec, "was doing his thing on the mic with Numarx" in the early 80s.[58] The crew got its start mixing for radio, released a 12" single, "Buss It," in 1984, then put out both "Rhymes So Def" and "Girl You Know It's True" as 12" singles in 1987 before releasing their one and only full-length album, *Our Time Has Come*, in the same year.[59] While "Rhymes So Def" exemplifies the sound the group was known for, rocking old school breakbeats, samples, and lyrical gymnastics whose smooth delivery evokes the less obscure oeuvre of Grandmaster Flash, "Girl You Know It's True" is a poppier track, a love song whose chorus is sung. In its "Dub," "Extended," and "Regular" versions, all of which were featured on the 12" release, "Rhymes" foregrounds Numarx's production prowess: the pleasure is in the curation, combination, and (re-)arrangement of preexisting and original materials (which include James Brown's "Funky Drummer"), aided and abetted by an undeniably silky lyrical flow. By contrast, "Girl," in the words of hip hop specialist Kevin Beacham, "goes in a completely different direction than the hardcore foundation of 'Rhymes So Def.' It is more pretty musically and there is a singing chorus...."[60] According to Beacham, whose musical proclivities clearly lie elsewhere, the "different direction" Numarx took with "Girl" was in essence the wrong one, as it failed to bring the group the commercial success it had sought in taking the pop turn in the first place. As it turned out, Numarx's loss was Frank Farian's gain. When "Girl" was released back-to-back with "Rhymes" as a 7" on the UK-based label Bluebird in 1988, it attained some level of club popularity across the Atlantic, where Farian first "discovered" the future hit before putting it to his own use.[61]

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[58] Beacham, "Numarx."

[59] Numarx (Musical Group). "Buss It." LP. KMA, KMA-5237. 1984. Numarx (Musical Group). "Rhymes So Def." LP. Studio Records, STU-1212. 1987. Numarx (Musical Group). "Girl You Know It's True." LP. Studio Records, STU-1811. 1987. Numarx (Musical Group). *Our Time Has Come*. LP. Studio Records, STU-AL1900. 1987.

[60] Beacham, "Numarx."

[61] Numarx (Musical Group). "Girl You Know It's True." 7" vinyl recording. Bluebird, BRX-50A. 1988.

Both Numarx's 1987 and 1988 releases and Milli Vanilli's 1988 and 1989 releases of all the many different versions of "Girl You Know It's True" available for listening consumption (including the "N.Y. Subway Extended Mix" featured on the Milli Vanilli album named for the single) feature the same songwriting credits, albeit occasionally in remixed order: B. Pettaway, Jr., S. Spencer, K. Liles (misspelled "Lyles" on the Milli Vanilli releases), R. Holloman (misspelled "Hollaman" on the Milli Vanilli releases), and K. Adeyemo.[62] While no one on the Milli Vanilli end of the song's extended life could be bothered to get the writers' names right, the list of songwriters nevertheless produces a kind of authorial palimpsest in the context of Farian's productions. The song's credits, which remain more or less the same from release to release and album to album, recall the origins of "Girl You Know It's True" within the basements, on the radio stations, in the tape decks, and on the vinyl records of the African-American old school hip hop community. The faint presence of this creative community in the form of parenthetically noted, abbreviated names, in turn invokes the circuitous history of black America, a history of middle passages and enslavements, trans- and intercontinental migrations, and the formation of overlapping diasporas that produced, among so many other cultural formations, a hip hop culture of sampling, cutting, and mixing—a culture of syncopation, rather than of synchronization,[63] a culture famously built on the deconstruction and reconstruction of origins and originality.

The biography of Kayode Adeyemo, one of the co-writers of "Girl You Know It's True" who is sometimes said to have been Numarx's producer at the time of the song's initial release, further illustrates the collaborative genesis of "Girl" as the brainchild of overlapping African diasporic subjects. Adeyemo, then a member of an Annapolis and New York based R&B group

[62] See, for example, Milli Vanilli (Musical Group). "Girl You Know It's True (N.Y.C. Subway Mix)." 7" vinyl recording. Hansa. 611-589. 1988, which features the credit, "Bill Pettaway, Jr./Sean Spencer/Kevin Lyles (sic.)/Rodney Hollaman/Ky Adeyemo."

[63] Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 58.

called Starpoint, is represented on the group's website as "a U.S. citizen but, his parents are from Nigeria and Barbados. His father studied medicine and became a doctor soon after. Kayode's father came to Crownsville State Hospital near Annapolis, Maryland to work…."[64] While emphasizing Adeyemo's citizenship (he was in fact U.S.-born), the profile pays homage to his Afro-Caribbean background and his parents' black Atlantic migrations, albeit in the interest of stressing their status as respectable, white collar immigrants. This contrasts with the U.S. mainstream media representation of Pettaway, which completely takes for granted his position as a partial member of society whose mere association with the success wrought by "Girl You Know It's True" is nothing short of a miracle, a rags-to-riches fantasy that confirms the feasibility, yet also the apparent randomness, of the American Dream. In an *Inside Edition* segment on Pettaway broadcast before the breaking of the Milli Vanilli scandal, a sleazy white anchor with a prominent comb-over takes pains to emphasize, multiple times, that "some thought [Pettaway] was retarded" prior to his music industrial success. "[T]here's quite a story behind one of [Milli Vanilli's] big hits," he tells viewers with a smug smile, of the kind that would later introduce newsbytes on the group's lip-synch debacle.[65] Here, however, the "funny story" is that the European pop group's global imprint was in fact jumpstarted by a disabled American black man living in purportedly abject conditions—a man whose success is so unfathomable to the newsman that he (Pettaway) must be nothing other than a savant. Intercutting footage of Pettaway taking customers' orders at the Amoco station where he works with clips from the music video for "Girl You Know It's True," the newsreel enacts and amplifies an audiovisual and spatiotemporal disjunct between Pettaway's voice, body, and daily movements through the

[64] "Kayode Adeyemo," *Starpoint Music*, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.starpointmusic.com/pages/KyAdeyemo.htm.

[65] "Bill Pettaway interveiw [sic.]," *YouTube*, accessed September 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeyIxn6acm4.

world, and the seamless pop production he has scored, to which Rob and Fab's sinewy forms move in time. The story centers on an alleged asynchrony: this man *does not match up* with the effects of his music on the world. This diminutive man has done something big in spite of himself—this "slowed-down" individual whom society has deemed "behind" normative time has done something "ahead of the times," something culturally prescient. The notion of Pettaway's personal incongruity with his own market-confirmed pop genius coincides with his racialization and disablement. Whether his blackness is read as a disability, or whether his self-reported dyslexia is intensified, ratcheted up to "retardation" in the space of his racialization, the segment aims to highlight the *misfit* between Pettaway and his creation. If he is to be given credit as an artist, he will be deemed a kind of "outsider artist." The segment is especially telling to behold in light of the retrospective knowledge that shortly after it was aired, Rob and Fab would be publicly humiliated for their own related asynchrony. Yet while Pettaway was construed as the unlikely "man behind the music" whose identity, when revealed, would elicit oohs and ahs of televisual delight, Rob and Fab were branded imposters upon the unveiling of their roles as frontmen for someone else's music. The latter revelation elicited comparably more oohs and ahs, while also guaranteeing the duo the ambivalent fame produced by scandal.

Both the discursive framing of Pettaway as the improbable musical originator of "Girl," and the subsequent positioning of Rob and Fab as deceptive figures masking the origins of Milli Vanilli's music, draw our attention to the contradictory ways in which black Atlantic subjects are castigated by white supremacist forces on either side of the pond for refusing to perform certain mandated bodily, vocal, and musical synchronies. The *Inside Edition* segment inextricably links Pettaway's success in the musical arena with his supposed failure to function as a self-determining individual in U.S. society, playing on the disjunct between his quotidian, humble

visual and vocal presentation and the smooth pop spectacle underwritten by his music. (Let's note, here, that Pettaway is now widely recognized—by Braxton, Timbaland, and others—as an exemplary songwriter and producer whose already decades-long career continues to expand.) The caricatures of Rob and Fab prior to and in the wake of Milli Vanilli's exposure likewise (and yet in an interesting reversal) play up the schism between the smooth pop spectacle of their bodies and the queerness of their European-accented English-speaking voices. The implicit question posed by the latter is something like: how could these black bodies be linked to these black voices? These black bodies were charged with the enactment of a creolized Caribbean fantasy sung in the designated voice of African-American hip hop and R&B. Thus Rob and Fab's black Europeanness was queer, but remained acceptable when it could still be subsumed into the spectacle. When that became impossible, it became clear that they were, and always had been, hopelessly out of synch.

Before I offer a brief discussion of Rob and Fab's assigned voices on the Farian-produced, Milli Vanilli rendition of "Girl You Know It's True," I want to reassert the fact that the music upon which Milli Vanilli's success was partially built was not the product of a single, ventriloquial individual—say, the songwriter Pettaway, or the producer Farian—but was, as should be evident, germinated within the fertile nexus Gilroy has called the black Atlantic. We have observed that "Girl," the musical and sonic text at this section's center, was the product of collaboration between Pettaway, Adeyemo, and some of Numarx's DJs/MCs. A closer look at the infectious beat, lyrics, and stylistic flourishes of the music itself, some of which change from version to version, drives this point home, making it impossible to understand this exemplary song as the spawn of a single voice or origin. For among other things, as in many hip hop and

R&B tracks, the beat comes from elsewhere.[66] Comprised of two bass beats, a quick snare on the uptake, three more rapid bass beats, and another snare, accompanied by consistent, jangly cymbal-work that decays on the second snare—boom…boom-bah…boom…boom-boom-bah undercut with what sounds like coins rhythmically rattling against each other in a Salvation Army collection bucket—the beat to which Rob and Fab danced in synchrony dates back to a 1974 song called "Ashley's Roachclip."[67] The latter was written by Lloyd Pinchback, an original member of the funk band The Soul Searchers, the famous first musical home of legendary singer, guitarist, songwriter, and producer Chuck Brown, who is often called the "Godfather of Go-go." The instrumental song layers a deep, funky bass track with a chorus of jazzy horns and flute interludes, and about three minutes and thirty-five seconds in begins the drum solo, which has since been sampled by musicians across the spectrum—from Eric B. and Rakim to Duran Duran, DMX to Roxette, Panda Bear to 2Pac, Brian Eno to LL Cool J, and the list goes on (and even includes the Japanese pop group Pizzicato Five, a U.S. indie fan favorite). The most recognizable uses of the beat are probably those of the U.S. hip hop group P.M. Dawn, who sampled it in their singles "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" (1991) and "Paper Doll" (1992).

Listening to the full twenty seconds of the drum break is an ear-opening experience. It's like finding the beat to every pop song you've ever heard, stripped down, distilled into its purest form. This beat has been in the back of your head all these years, but you didn't know it—you sensed it, felt it auditorily, physiologically. If, like me, you were a human being cognizant of popular music in the 1980s and beyond (or if, unlike me, you ever listened to the radio in the mid-late 1970s), this beat made its way through your ears and was, however imperceptibly,

[66] On sampling, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994), 62-98.

[67] "Ashley's Roachclip" is the third track on Soul Searchers (Musical Group). *Salt of the Earth*. LP. Sussex Records, SRA-8030. 1974.

encoded within your brain. If the *Wikipedia* entry for the song is correct (and I believe that it is probably an underestimation), the famous drum break has been sampled more than one hundred and thirty times. Milli Vanilli songs account for a whopping *three* of these instances. "Girl You Know It's True," of course, uses the beat, as do "All Or Nothing" (the title track from Milli Vanilli's first European album release in 1988) and "Baby Don't Forget My Number" (which also appeared on *All Or Nothing*).[68] Presumably, the beat was a gift from Pettaway et al. to Farian et al., albeit one not acknowledged as such. For it seems that Farian found in "Girl You Know It's True" a pop formula that he could extend ad infinitum, a musical mold into which he could repeatedly pour the bodies of Rob and Fab and the voices of "The Real Milli Vanilli" to extract premium pop success. YouTube fan videos for the three Milli Vanilli songs that use "Ashley's Roachclip" ably demonstrate the interchangeability of the musical tracks and the videos created to accompany them: if one layers the audio track for "Girl" with the video for "Baby," for example, it's hard to see an audiovisual disjunct or even a lip synch inconsistency. Yes, there are sartorial variations, and the stories told by the lyrics slightly differ, but the differences, for all intents and purposes, stop there. Both songs were immensely popular—not in spite, but because, of their similarities—with "Girl" hitting position 2 on the Billboard Hot 100 on April 1, 1989, and "Baby" hitting no. 1 on July 1 of the same year.[69]

The voices that were heard singing over these songs' shared infectious beat had also come to Farian (b. 1941, Kirn) from across the Atlantic, as had his interest in "black American music," germinated in the producer's postwar youth growing up "near Saarbruecken on the German-French border, near the U.S. military bases that would change his life." As the *Washington Post* reported in a biographical piece published in the scandal's aftermath, it was

[68] Milli Vanilli, *All Or Nothing*, Hansa, 1988.

[69] "All Or Nothing," would hit position 4 the following February. See http://www.billboard.com/artist/311298/milli-vanilli/chart for the historical record.

there that Farian developed a love of soul music and began to perform his own blue-eyed covers of "the latest soul hits" in clubs frequented by American soldiers. When this didn't pan out as a career path because, per Farian, "A white singer singing black music wouldn't work," the aspiring singer and musician briefly tried making German pop before "push[ing] his way into black music" from the production end via Boney M., on whose albums Farian himself sometimes sang, but in connection with which he never visibly appeared. Describing the "color" of Boney M.'s music, Farian sounds wistfully eugenicist and unabashedly racist: "Boney M was the most perfect mix of black and white music, but in America, music still had to be black or white."[70]

Presumably, Milli Vanilli was the producer's attempt to "black up" in order to break into the U.S. market. To accomplish this task, he relied particularly heavily on vocals provided by the African-American singers and musicians Brad Howell, Charles Shaw, and John Davis. Though the biographies of these three men remain unwritten, the small scraps available suggest that Shaw and Davis came to Germany in or around the 1970s as American G.I.s and remained there after their service,[71] while Howell "came to Germany in 1966 as a drummer with Wilson Pickett's band, decided to stay and [chose to reside] in Offenbach."[72] Shaw's is the voice that performs the smooth, measured rap on "Girl You Know It's True"[73]; Davis rapped, sang, and

[70] All citations in the paragraph, including quotations from Farian, are from Marc Fisher, "The Man Who Mixed Milli Vanilli," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1990, accessed October 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/12/22/the-man-who-mixed-milli-vanilli/0dbb91e8-c5c1-4fb8-a26c-2f1e878df4c4/.

[71] See "Shaw (Charles)," *KDJ Eurodance Ltd*., February 13, 2004, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.eurokdj.com/search/eurodb.php?name=Shaw_Charles; "Girl You Know It's True by Milli Vanilli," *Songfacts*, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=1879; and Steve Dougherty, "Honestly (We Think), the Real Milli Vanilli Turns Up with a New LP And, This Time, No Video Stand-Ins," *People*, January 14, 1991, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20114226,00.html.

[72] Ibid.

[73] See "Shaw (Charles)," and "Das Supertalent 2012: Charles Shaw ist die Stimme von Milli Vanilli," *Das Supertalent*, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.rtl.de/cms/das-supertalent-2012-charles-shaw-ist-die-stimme-von-milli-vanilli-1290623.html.

possibly played music; and Howell sang and likely played music as well.[74] Howell is not credited for his labor on either *All or Nothing* or its U.S. counterpart *Girl You Know It's True*, while Shaw is listed on both albums as one of a squadron of "backing vocalists." Davis, too, is listed as a "backing vocalist" on the U.S. release, and was purportedly added to the operation after Farian began to worry that Shaw was disclosing the extent of the act to outside parties and fired the latter rapper.[75] Notably, while Rob and Fab's visual images graced the cover of the European release, their names appeared nowhere on the album (fig. 2.1). *All or Nothing* thus strongly implied a relation between the duo's bodies and the album's voices, but left the precise nature of that relation up to the imagination, eschewing any mention of the "lead vocals" that would logically complement the "backup vocals" listed. Because the U.S. release would entail enhanced publicity, not to mention the making of music videos, a different strategy had to be undertaken. On *Girl You Know It's True*, the album's primary "vocals" are oddly credited to "Brothers of Soul, Rob & Fab." The album also follows its production credits with the assurance that, "MILLI VANILLI is: Rob Pilatus [and] Fabrice Morvan." This hyperbolic addition is purportedly what provoked Shaw, in late 1989, to confess the group's deception, marking another starting point to the rhizomatic scandal.[76] When the word finally did get out, Farian convinced Howell and Davis to try their hand at recording and performing as The Real Milli Vanilli, a feat that failed, among other reasons, because the reformed group included yet new

[74] "25 Years Ago: Milli Vanilli – Girl You Know It's True (A Look Back and 'Where Are They Now?')," *Rob's Wall of Music*, March 6, 2014, accessed October 6, 2016, https://rcgoodmanblog.wordpress.com/2014/03/06/25-years-ago-milli-vanilli-girl-you-know-its-true-a-look-back-and-where-are-they-now/.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Bob Mack, "Down with Milli Vanilli," *Entertainment Weekly*, Nov. 30, 1990, accessed Oct. 6, 2016, http://www.ew.com/article/1990/11/30/down-milli-vanilli.

members that had never been part of Milli Vanilli to begin with.[77] Shaw, Howell, and Davis, all appear to have continued to work musically, as well as reside, in Germany.[78]



Fig. 2.1 *All or Nothing* album cover feat. Fab (left) and Rob (right)

As this brief excursus demonstrates, the voices of Milli Vanilli were not sought or found in the United States but primarily arrived on the group's albums by way of U.S. military movements across the Atlantic, tours of duty that resulted in the enduring presence of black American singers and musicians in Germany. Farian profited from these black Atlantic migrations—echoes of those that had brought Rob's own African-American father to the European nation—by employing these singers and musicians to perform what he saw as "black music" that would sell on both sides of the Atlantic. His production attempted to synchronize Rob and Fab's Afro-European bodies with the voices of these African-American émigrés, hoping that Milli Vanilli would both appear and sound "black" enough to make it in the U.S. context, where, he lamented, "music still had to be black or white." Farian's own personal history attests

[77] The Real Milli Vanilli's website can be viewed at http://www.therealmillivanilli.com. See also "The Real Voices behind Milli Vanilli Share Their Side Of The Lip-Synching Scandal (VIDEO)," *Huffington Post*, Feb. 27, 2014, accessed Oct. 6, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/27/milli-vanilli_n_4860222.html.

[78] "Das Supertalent."

to his racialization of the voices of African-American singers, in particular those of soul singers and rappers, as paradigmatic "black voices."[79] Thus the voices of Rob and Fab, who did in fact want to sing on Milli Vanilli's albums, but who could only do so in German- and French-accented English, would never be "black" enough for the producer. In other words, though they were produced by an Afro-German individual and an Afro-French individual, these voices each failed to conform to Farian's racializing conception of fundamental vocal blackness. Farian's description of Rob's voice drives the point home: "I've never heard such a bad singer in a black," he told the *Washington Post*, "never in my career."[80] In incredulously describing Rob as "a black" who is "such a bad singer," Farian casts the Afro-German performer as an asynchronous aberration, one whose incongruity he must correct through the insertion of a genuine "black voice"—the voice of Howell, Davis, or Shaw. On the U.S. side of the Atlantic, Farian's racist attempt to construct the ultimate audiovisual embodiment of blackness briefly took—undoing itself all the while, of course. For in this same moment, the U.S. rock critical establishment attacked Rob and Fab's persistent asynchrony from other angles.

In an August 1989 piece for *Spin*, penned after "Girl You Know It's True" and "Baby Don't Forget My Number" had reached the top of the pops, the music writer John Leland smirkingly underscored the "temporariness" of Milli Vanilli's *Girl You Know It's True*, citing the album's sampling of the "Ashley's Roachclip" drum break and the fact that the record seemed to have been "[c]onstructed on the fly" as evidence of its essential transience.[81] Projecting this alleged ephemerality onto the bodies of Rob and Fab, he opines, "The group's two members, complete in the moment (even their hair conveys the immediacy of a digital bite,

[79] See Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013).

[80] Fisher, "The Man Who Mixed Milli Vanilli."

[81] *Girl You Know It's True* (Arista, 1989) was the duo's first U.S. record release, and was a repackaging (with some differences) of the European album *All or Nothing* (Hansa, 1988).

rather than the analog process of growth over time), are the human equivalent of samples.[82] Indeed, sweepingly framing both Milli Vanilli's circuitous engagement with other musics and very "human" embodiment as a grand, decontextualized instance of Jamesonian pastiche, Leland patronizingly chastises Rob and Fab for not knowing the authorial history of "Ashley's Roachclip" when grilled about their songs in an interview.[83] He goes on, however, to (pompously) allow that the duo may be ahead of the curve in their "ability to recognize that beat as a piece of information, without author or history, accessible at the push of a button and gone with a second push," concluding that Rob and Fab, "do more than embrace their own mortality; they embrace their own nonexistence."[84] Acting the part of the consummate racist rockist, Leland equates Rob and Fab, notably via their long braided hair, with "temporary" or (worse) "nonexistent samples" of information rather than with "mortal humans," framing their black Europeanness as the sign of a terrifyingly futuristic non-human and ahistorical digitality. At once refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Milli Vanilli's musical practice of sampling and condemning the group for lacking a sense of their central sample's history—a history that Leland locates solely in black America and 'splains in a chronological fashion (see footnote no. 78)—Leland exemplifies the U.S. rock critical (and ironically U.S. popular media) tendency to position Rob and Fab as out of step with normative temporality well before the breaking of the lip-synch scandal. He not only does this by metaphorizing the duo's bodies as "digital b[y]tes," but by taking Rob and Fab to task for their unfamiliarity with African-American musical history.

[82] John Leland, "Temporary Music," *Spin*, August 1989, 87.

[83] Ibid. He writes, "The thing that strikes me about 'Girl You Know It's True' is Milli Vanilli's sense of history. To make their record, they sampled the beat from the 1987 Coldcut remix of Eric B. and Rakim's 'Paid in Full.' Eric B., in turn, had already sampled it from the Soul Searchers' 'Ashley's Roachclip,' a 1974 obscurity that Bronx hip hop DJs like Jazzy Jay or Afrika Bambaataa used to cut up back in the days. Milli Vanilli couldn't trace the beat past 1987. I asked them about this; they said that the way they heard it, the Soul Searchers sampled the beat from Coldcut. I was appalled, or at least amused."

[84] Ibid.

As this section demonstrates, however, the transatlantic confluence of black cultural affiliations, affinities, ambitions, musical traditions, and vocal stylings that culminated in Milli Vanilli's particular iteration of "Girl You Know It's True" as well as other songs suggests that the group is best understood as a black Atlantic cultural formation—one whose "pluralities," in Gilroy's words, formulated its resistance to any dominant politics of synchronization prior to, and indeed in spite of, Farian's assembly of the group and the ensuing lip-synch debacle. When we consider even the basic histories of "Girl You Know It's True" as a song and Milli Vanilli as a sonic and vocal phenomenon, the multidirectionality of our findings exposes the fallacy of framing the group as a unilaterally disposable act of ventriloquism. Milli Vanilli may have been out of synch, but they were never "temporary."

IV. MILLI VANILLI / MUSIC VIDEO

"Throughout the 1980s," writes Andrew Goodwin, "pop, rock, and rap audiences became habituated to the idea that some of the music being heard 'live' might be on tape, or might emanate from a machine, and/or might consist of a sample of music recorded elsewhere."[85] These audiences' habituation to the potential elsewhere-ness of the sounds and voices accompanying the performance unfolding before them, the music video theorist continues, both affirmed the existent reality that "pop performance is a *visual* experience" and "sanctioned and legitimated the practice of lip-synching as a valid part of pop culture."[86] Goodwin then invokes and dispels an entrenched claim: the popular assertion that Milli Vanilli—and other such lip-synch acts, though there were, to my knowledge, none quite like them—came into being as a

[85] Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992), 32.

[86] Ibid., 33.

direct result of the audiovisual practices of "MTV and music television."[87] On the contrary, he argues, both the cultural forms of the music video (distributed via music television) and Milli Vanilli (the lip-synch act) were "effects" of the same thing—the unholy synchronization of the live and the recorded afforded by the aforementioned automation of popular music, a synchronization that crucially reemphasized pop performance's profound visuality.[88]

It is the visual aspect of Milli Vanilli's act, apprehended through the form of the music video, upon which this section focuses, though not, as the previous section's focus on Milli Vanilli's music and voices should already suggest, at the expense of a consideration of the audio. In the analysis that follows, I examine some of the ways in which Milli Vanilli's music videos, particularly the music video for "Girl You Know It's True," synchronize Rob and Fab's images with the sounds and voices discussed earlier, while also representing and performing various acts of asynchrony at the levels of both narrative and form. These asynchronies include, but also greatly exceed, what Goodwin refers to as the structural "disjuncture[s]" common to music videos, by which he means disconnections between song lyrics (which are often the basis for music videos' visual narratives) and video images.[89] Since the Milli Vanilli scandal revolved, on its surface, around the revelation of the lack of embodied connection between Rob and Fab and their singing/sung voices—on the admission, in other words, that Rob and Fab's bodies had never, in fact, matched up with the voices on their records—this section looks at the audiovisual fantasies of Rob and Fab that were allegedly destroyed when the scandal broke. Below I demonstrate, in keeping with the chapter's larger argument, that Milli Vanilli's audiovisual performance was not only always legible as a lip-synch act-cum-music video, but was characterized by overlapping queer asynchronies from its inception. Within the context of the

[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 88.

U.S. cultural politics of synchronization I have thus far been discussing, lip-synching was but a small part of the group's purported infraction.

Milli Vanilli's music videos typically adhere to a distinct narrative and stylistic formula. In the music videos for "Baby Don't Forget My Number" (1988), "Girl You Know It's True" (1989), "Girl I'm Gonna Miss You" (1989), and "Blame it on the Rain" (1989), a love triangle is always firmly in place, though it's sometimes unclear whether what is pictured is a three-way affair featuring Rob, Fab, and the woman in question, or a two-way relationship in which Rob and Fab serve as avatars for each other as they court the same woman. This ritual triangulation is as much a matter of convenience as it is an audiovisual narrative reproduction of the kind of homosocial—and in Rob and Fab's case often homoerotic—structure queer theorist Eve Sedgwick traces through 19th century English literature in her book *Between Men* (a book published only several years before Milli Vanilli's pop cultural emergence).[90] For though in Milli Vanilli's music videos Rob and Fab take turns singing, and thus driving the musical narrative to its logical conclusion, there must be room in each video for the visible presence of both members of the duo, later revealed never to have sung at all. The conundrum of how to create a convincingly heterosexual romantic storyline featuring two equally weighted male leads crops up here, and the tried and true solution, as Sedgwick's work demonstrates, is to incorporate a transactional female figure.[91] The conundrum exists as a conundrum precisely because the alternative of depicting a narrative involving only the two men would induce palpable homosexual panic—a panic to which Rob and Fab, as Martin showed us earlier, were already subject. Accordingly, viewers of Milli Vanilli's music videos are invited to indulge in the spectacle of Rob and Fab's spandex-clad, muscular bodies gyrating side by side, and often in

[90] Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

[91] Ibid.,

suggestive relation to one another, as the representational evidence needed to confirm the situation's heterosexuality (read: the requisite woman) is almost cheekily furnished. Indeed, there is a camp dimension to these videos, whose appeal hinges on the joint infectiousness of their respective musical tracks—thanks, in more than one case, to "Ashley's Roachclip"—and always slightly out of synch, mirroring dance routines choreographed for Rob and Fab.

Like many music videos of the period, but also like many music videos, period, Milli Vanilli's music videos usually alternate between shots of Rob and Fab performing onstage, yet not "live" (i.e. in front of an audience, simulated or otherwise), and scenes set out in the world—Milli Vanilli's world being a manifestly, yet ambiguously, European urban environment marked by narrow streets, bicycles, densely populated outdoor markets, sparsely furnished indoor spaces, taxi cabs, and public transit. This structure of scenic alternation owes to the pop music lyrical convention of "double address,"[92] which, as Goodwin explains, means that, "[w]hen a pop singer tells a first-person narrative in a song, he or she is simultaneously both the character in the song and the storyteller." Since these "two positions [often] become confused for audiences," the additional "positions" created by Rob and Fab's status as a duo with its own internal dynamic of doubling and alternation creates, as I intimated earlier, at least several added degrees of perplexity.[93] However, even given the complicated quality of each discrete video's multiple modes of address and characterization, the music videos for "Girl You Know It's True" and "Baby Don't Forget My Number" are so structurally similar that one can, as the chapter's previous section notes, switch their soundtracks and still retain admirable levels of audiovisual synchronicity. A brief comparative glance reveals that while the stage set for the "Girl" video is abstractly framed by gauzy cloth over neon blue backlighting, the "Baby" video's mise-en-scène

[92] Goodwin, *Dancing*, 76.
[93] Ibid., 75.

features a painted backdrop in the Futurist style, depicting a landscape of angular factories belching smoke from tall cylindrical towers. The Cold War is palpably present in the latter video's invocation of bleak industrialism, as well as in both videos' fashion styling, which channels a decidedly queerer (or perhaps simply more European?) iteration of 1980s military chic than that present in the factory-set music video for the title track of Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation* (also 1989). While Jackson and her crowd of impressively synchronized backup dancers sport matching dark fitted jumpsuits belted at the waist, military caps, and combat boots, Rob and Fab's equally beloved and lambasted getups combine body-hugging gym-wear and oversized power-suits with a variety of abstrusely European and Caribbean accents—a beret here, a skull-and-crossbones bandana there. In the "Baby" video, Fab's beret, perched atop his tinted braids, seems to function as an overdetermined signifier for his Frenchness—one that may have appeared asynchronous with his blackness in the eyes of some U.S. viewers.

The duo's long, braided hair extensions are crucial features of every performance. Rob and Fab's abundant and abundantly parodied tresses are themselves choreographed into Milli Vanilli's music videos, sometimes anchoring the beat of the music in a partial nod to music video's heavy metal origins,[94] other times moving in slow-motion, in step with the parallel temporality of the elsewhere within which the narrative told by the song's lyrics unfolds. Suggestive of both the "naturalness" associated with dreadlocks, and yet braided, colored, and curled (see Fab's usually crimped tips), Milli Vanilli's tresses illustrate the styling of black hair as, in Kobena Mercer's words, a "popular *art form* articulating a variety of aesthetic 'solutions' to a range of 'problems' created by ideologies of race and racism."[95] In the case of Milli Vanilli, the "problem," as we have already seen, may have been how to visibly appear "black" enough to

[94] Ibid., 135-36.
[95] Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," *new formations* 3 (1987): 34.

synchronize with the "black" voices on their records in the U.S. context. The "solution," as articulated by Rob, Fab, and possibly other parties as well, culminated, it would seem, in the duo's simultaneous adoption of what Mercer describes as "two logics of black stylization – one emphasizing 'natural' looks, the other involving straightening to emphasize 'artifice.'"[96] As Fab tells it, however, Milli Vanilli's hair was conceived before the duo had even met Farian, when he and Rob concurred that they needed "good hair" based on the observation, made while watching TV together late one night, that European pop icons all had one thing in common: "they had good hair."[97] "After thinking about it a little bit," he recounts, "we decided, 'this is it: braids.'"[98] Writes Mercer, "'Good hair,' used to describe hair on a black person's head, means hair that looks 'European,' straight, not too curly, not that kinky."[99] Yet Rob and Fab's hair was both "European" and non-; their braids eschewed the dreads worn by some members of P.M. Dawn and the English group Soul II Soul as well as the respective perms sported by the Jacksons.

The music video for "Girl" introduces the viewer to Rob and Fab by way of the duo's hair. After opening on a stage upon which a trio comprised of black male "musicians" exaggeratedly mimes playing the dance-pop song's synth, bass, and drum machine tracks, the video first presents Fab from behind, framed from the chest up. His hair is visualized before we see his face, and as he whips around, in slow-motion, to make eye contact with the viewer (and thus to visually initiate the song's direct address), his long braids fan out around him in transient umbrella formation (fig. 2.2). When Rob materializes a shot later, he, too, appears in motion, framed by his braids (fig. 2.3). Before the video's offstage scenes commence sketching the fragmented narrative arc inspired by the song's lyrics—lyrics that perform desperation,

[96] Ibid., 37.
[97] Morvan, "Finding My Own Voice."
[98] Ibid.
[99] Mercer, "Black Hair," 35.

reassurance, and aggressive insistence rather than furnishing a linear storyline ("So try to understand / I'm in love girl"…"Girl you know it's true / My love is for you")—Rob and Fab perform one of their signature, frequently mocked, stage moves: an airborne chest-bump, also filmed in slow-motion. Identically styled in three-quarter-length spandex pants and shoulder-padded, block-colored blazers of different bright hues, Rob and Fab leap towards one another, their long hair bouncing off their backs after the moment of contact, in a masculine gesture that resembles a post-football-game victory bump. The U.S. cultural connotations of this act are tellingly ambivalent: such displays of masculine contact can be interpreted as platonically homosocial, "gay," or both, depending on the context. In Rob and Fab's case, the duo's tight pants and physical bondedness often led to the second assessment, despite all of Milli Vanilli's lyrics about "girls."[100] Per Sedgwick, this is precisely why a woman—in this case a "girl"—becomes the necessary means of balancing out the over-sameness of Rob and Fab's twinning, the queer doubleness that paradoxically places them out of time. A female love object must be added to the dynamic, one toward whom Rob and Fab can safely avert their gazes away from each other while continuing to indulge in the scenario's all-too-enjoyable homoerotics of replication.


Fig. 2.2 Fab's hair, video still


Fig. 2.3 Rob's hair, video still

[100] In the music video for "Baby," Rob and Fab perform a synchronized hump-dance, thrusting their pelvises to the beat in unison, so close they are nearly touching. While this dance is indeed overtly sexual, I believe it was their general tendency toward twinning that rendered them queer.

This is precisely what happens as Fab, lip-synching to the recorded voice of Charles Shaw, proceeds to rap the song's lyrics onstage. As the studio scene becomes intercut with an illustrative, amplificatory, and disjunctive narrative visualization of these lyrics, we see that Fab's ostensible girlfriend, a young woman of color, is trying to leave him and he is trying to convince her not to.[101] As the song's lyrics—whose desperation indirectly mirrors Fab's refusal let the "girl" go—continue, Rob is nowhere to be seen, either onstage in a storytelling capacity or in the parallel world as a character. When the lyrics transition to the song's first chorus, however, Rob reappears onstage, singing and dancing in synchrony with his partner. He is subsequently incorporated into the fantasy narrative as a friend of Fab, who, along with the "girl," randomly encounters him in a red telephone kiosk, lending the scene a British colonial air. The three proceed to walk down the street together, a scantily clad woman flanked by equally scantily clad twins. As Fab/Shaw raps the next set of verses—"This is some sort of thing, girl, I can't explain / My emotion starts up when I hear your name"—the "girl" disappears and the scene gives way to a congested outdoor clothing market where Rob and Fab shop together. Modeling a pink headband, Rob appears to delight in his own/the duo's collective self-fashioning, recalling the origin story of Milli Vanilli's "good hair." Promenading side-by-side, identically dressed in tight white shirts and black leather jackets, with Rob's muscled midriff on prominent view, the two men uncannily mirror one another, but just as the queerness of the image begins to register, Fab sights the "girl" with another guy and chases her down, after which the threesome lip-synchs to "Girl You Know It's True" on the upper level of a double-decker bus (fig. 2.4). Then, again, the "girl" evaporates. She returns only at the video's end, when she and Fab are pictured reuniting, before an image of Rob and Fab reunited, clad in their identical market-wear, closes out the track

[101] According to Goodwin there are "three kinds of relations between songs and videos: illustration, amplification, and disjuncture," *Dancing*, 86-90.

(fig. 2.5). The "Girl" music video's structure, then, is relatively conventional, with the fantasy narrative unfolding more or less in keeping with the song's lyrics. What queers the video, however—among the other attributes already mentioned—is its need to incorporate Rob into the romance plot due to the duo's general status as an equally weighted performative pairing ("MILLI VANILLI is: Rob Pilatus [and] Fabrice Morvan"). When Rob is incorporated into the action, however, the "girl" of the song's title reveals herself to be a transactional object, present only to offset the queerness of the duo's homosociality.


Fig. 2.4 The triangle, video still


Fig. 2.5 The couple, video still

As Sedgwick has demonstrated, depictions of triangulation like the one in the "Girl" music video afford both veiled and overt expressions of same-sex desire. One such expression takes up extended time in Milli Vanilli's video. In this sequence, Rob and Fab are temporarily permitted to eschew the normative time established by the synchrony of the song with the events taking place in the video's interlocking visual spaces. This moment of escape coincides with a musical interlude that directly follows the song's second chorus, in which the "Ashley's Roachclip" drum break is sonically layered with samples of some of Charles Shaw's vocals from the opening verse of "Girl" ("I'm in love with you, girl / Cause you're on my mind"), skipping the first half of the verse so that Shaw's audibly technologized voice repeats, "I'm in love with you, girl / I'm in love with you, girl-girl-girl-girl-girl / I'm in love with you…." The repetition of

this declaration of love as though scratched by an unseen DJ eerily presages the alleged beginning of Milli Vanilli's end, the concert at which the very same song skipped—this time unintentionally—at the moment of its chorus: "Girl you know it's / Girl you know it's / Girl you know it's…." But in the single version of "Girl You Know It's True" used for the music video, the calculated effect is queerly accompanied by the visualization of an as-yet-unseen space within which Rob and Fab are momentarily emancipated from both the necessity of lip-synchronization and the need for a third, feminine party to normalize their homosocial bond. As the second chorus' instrumental bars play out over slow-motion footage of Fab's swinging braids, the music video's image-track cuts from the stage to a large green meadow through which Rob and Fab are pictured running towards the camera, racing each other and grinning, braids flowing in the breeze (fig. 2.6). Their gleeful facial expressions recall Rob's earlier happiness while shopping with Fab, the "girl" nowhere in sight. Marked by several abrasive synth blasts followed by a sharp, low, synth note that fades out over the course of a few drumbeats, the beginning of the interlude takes us back to the stage, where Rob and Fab dance wordlessly, as though guided by the sound alone. The video's audio and visual tracks isolate body parts and beats, their synchronies and asynchronies. Rob twirls and jumps into the air, Fab jumps and kicks his leg over his head on a drumbeat, the still airborne Rob returns to the floor in a gymnastic split, bouncing back from the landing as though made of rubber. A tight shot captures Fab's feet, encased in shiny dress shoes, running in time to the beat. Rob and Fab face one another, running in place, fists clenched, punching the air. When Shaw's remixed vocals are woven into the song, a rapid alternation ensues between shots of staged, synchronized dance moves and outdoor, freeform jumps, hurtles, and airborne splits performed by both halves of the duo, whose athletic

torsos blur against the sunny backdrop (fig. 2.7). Rob and Fab are still garbed in their clothes from the market, though the pastoral location has materialized from nowhere.


Fig. 2.6 Rob and Fab elsewhere, video still


Fig. 2.7 Rob jumps, video still

In this musical and visual interlude—centered as it is on the "Ashley's Roachclip" drum break gifted to Farian by Pettaway et al. (who encountered it via the Soul Searchers, but possibly elsewhere); incorporating as it does Pettaway's lyrics rapped in Shaw's voice, sampled, remixed, and skipped; foregrounding as it does the gymnastic bodies and flowing locks of Rob and Fab, momentarily freed from mouthing the lyrics of a song whose travels, transits, and plural iterations defy notions of ownership and origin; allowing as it does for the expression of the duo's queer doubleness without the forced mediation of the transactional feminine presence pictured earlier—the "enforced synchronicity" to which Rob and Fab were so often subject is given a literal and figurative break, and the marked audiovisual asynchrony that results opens up an alternative spatio-temporality. The latter is then abandoned as the interlude ends and the music video reintroduces the triangle's third point, the "girl," to seal up (or straighten out) the narrative. But the image of Rob and Fab standing side-by-side appears as the music fades out (fig. 2.5), recalling Milli Vanilli's first German album cover, on which the duo appeared unnamed and uncredited, their relation to the music rendered ambiguous. By the point of the video's production, however, "MILLI VANILLI [*was*]" Rob and Fab, a state of being they only

briefly achieved before the cultural politics of synchronization cemented their deposition from this coveted role. In the cultural imagination, however, Rob and Fab do continue to "be" Milli Vanilli, lip-synching, out of synch, or no.



Fig. 2.8 Rob and Fab dance in synchrony onstage in the music video for *Girl*, video still

V. CODA: NOSTALGIC ASYNCHRONIES

A quarter of a century after the group's initial imprint on popular consciousness, Milli Vanilli has made something of a comeback. Like the contemporary "return" of ventriloquism, to which the group's lip-synch act was, and still is, so often compared, Milli Vanilli's recent revivals in the realms of both "high art" and popular culture confirm that Rob, Fab, and Farian's scandalous endeavor has long been lodged in the popular imaginary. Accordingly, *l'affaire Milli Vanilli* continues to invite both metaphorization and instrumentalization to serve a variety of comedic, artistic, moral, and critical ends. When "Milli Vanilli" is not being deployed to mean

"simulation" in the same manner that "ventriloquism" is often facilely used to connote deception, the story of the group's demise continues to raise questions about sound, vision, and the racialized and gendered power relations that structure contemporary audiovisuality. Recent U.S. artistic repurposings of the Milli Vanilli story are notable for their particular approaches to these questions as well as for their palpable nostalgia for the period of Milli Vanilli's popularity. Like *Ostalgie*, or the longing for aspects of life in the Eastern (*Ost*) portion of divided Germany before the "reunification" marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the nostalgia that animates current cultural responses to Milli Vanilli marks a desire to revisit the perils and pleasures of a 1980s pop culture in which today's seemingly more sophisticated technologies of synchronization were just beginning to take hold. At the same time, such nostalgia sometimes sanctions the reanimation of the racialized and gendered discourses that led to the enforcement of Milli Vanilli's synchronization in the first place—discourses that never, in fact, disappeared.

Artist Benjamin Pearson's "docu-narrative" video *Former Models* (2011-12) is something of an exception to this tendency, comprising a working-through of the artist's queer Milli Vanilli fandom as well as a theoretical excursus on the gendering and racialization of the work of art in the age of digital reproduction. In the video, Pearson ventriloquizes a fictionalized version of Rob, who, via a heavily processed, German-accented voiceover, tells the story of Milli Vanilli from the first-person perspective. This central narrative is interspersed with didactic segments narrated by the "voice of technology," another voice that self-identifies as "white, female, urban, northeastern American, or southern British." Prompted by an invisible interviewer, Rob's narration provides a wholly new account of the scandal illustrated by a collage of images from Milli Vanilli's music videos that Pearson has brilliantly manipulated to evidence this alternative plot. The "voice of technology," meanwhile, furnishes a "techno-

narrative" that unpacks the implications of Auto-Tune's now widespread voice manipulation software. Neither of the film's two dominant voices is visibly synchronized to a body at any point, though Rob's robo-voice is associated with the images of his body visualized in the recontextualized music video footage. There is thus an ethereal quality to both the voices of Rob and technology, and while we might instinctively expect a certain omnipotence from the latter, the indirectness of Rob's accountability to a singular, or static, bodily form enables Rob to expound on the ambivalent feelings engendered by his technologization. For his is also a voice of technology, and its conscious juxtaposition with *the* (white, female, British) voice of technology both exposes the fallacy of technology's whiteness and invokes the presence of the black Atlantic technological history on which Gilroy, Weheliye, and others have lately written.[102]

Other Milli Vanilli-related experiments, such as *WOW* (2014), an "experimental opera" produced by the New York-based trio of director David Levine, composer Joe Diebes, and poet Christian Hawkey, seem to re-sensationalize the Milli Vanilli story in their attempts to make it signify as a kind of "parable for the virtual."[103] With the artist duo Merckx&Gwynne in the roles of Rob and Fab, *WOW* staged a roving performance through multiple "architectural spaces" rooted in a "libretto using remixed, pirated, and appropriated language, including transcriptions of various Milli Vanilli press conferences and interviews." This libretto was scored by an "information-processing system…recombining fragments from Wagner's *Der Meistersinger von Nürenberg* into a sound stream that jumps, skips, and loops."[104] Mused Levine in early 2014:

> Rob and Fab made their own style…. European pop and German pop, especially in the 1980s, is deeply perplexing. You think of how much of it is homegrown

[102] All references in the paragraph are from Pearson, *Former Models*, 2011-12. See also Weheliye, *Phonographies*, as well as my discussions of this text in the dissertation's introduction and first chapter.

[103] "WOW: An Opera," *BRIC*, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.bricartsmedia.org/events-performances/wow-opera. See also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

[104] "WOW: An Opera."

> from there, how much of it is imported from America…. The logic that holds these braids, these jackets, these biker shorts, these shoes—the notion of doubling, which seems totally unnecessary—this youthfulness, this effeminacy, this machismo. The only thing that holds it together are these two guys wearing it all, but you're trying to figure out under what logic all these things make sense together, and you have no access to it.
>
> I just don't know who Milli Vanilli were legible to. You watch their live performances and they are studs. You can get away with not seeing it because they were also so girlish, but in concert they're crotch grabbing in biker shorts. But they're also wearing halter tops. All of which is to say, it's such an exquisitely unlocated look that can take you in so many different directions. Legibility looks so monotonous beside it.[105]

Levine's perplexity at Milli Vanilli's "legibility," his insistence that "you have no access" to the "logic" of their performance, and his dismissal of their "doubling" as "totally unnecessary," quite perfectly reflect the cultural politics of synchronization this chapter attempts to elucidate. Though the materials for his production do mention that *WOW* considers the ways in which "exploited labor and racism are often at the heart of manufactured fame," a serious engagement with the Milli Vanilli scandal (as *WOW* purports to be) necessitates more than a simple acknowledgment of the racism and exploitation at the heart of Rob and Fab's (as well as Milli Vanilli's singers and musicians') involvement with Farian. It involves not merely understanding racialization and gendering as aspects of the lip-synch scandal, but rather rethinking and reframing our understanding of audiovisual synchronization as a mechanism for the enforcement of chrononormativity.

As this chapter has demonstrated, if we expand our thinking about the synchronization of sounds and images beyond the question or scandal of successful or inaccurate audiovisual synching in film or video, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of how the cultural politics of synchronization enforces relations between queer and racialized voices and bodies (as well as

[105] Quoted in Mike Thomsen, "Together We Are None," *The New Inquiry*, January 30, 2014, accessed October 6, 2016, http://thenewinquiry.com/features/together-we-are-none/.

their technological extensions and avatars) in the contemporary moment of image and sound saturation. Theorizing such a cultural politics includes charting the ways in which different audio, visual, and audiovisual entities are summoned to work together to constitute "sellable products" far beyond the dualistic formula of putting sound and accompanying image-tracks together in a "synchronized" and thus marketable way. Viewed through this lens, the Milli Vanilli scandal was as much about shifting paradigms of authenticity within the music industry as it was a kind of public, and publicly consumed, commentary on precisely which bodies and voices are allowed to "succeed" or "fail" within the regimes of synchronization necessary for any musical act to "make it" in the U.S. pop context—as well as within the regimes of synchronization that undergird the culture more generally speaking.

CHAPTER THREE
Puppet Love
Documenting Ventriloquism in Nina Conti's Her Master's Voice

> Pull them little strings and I'll sing you a song
> I'm your puppet
> Make me do right or make me do wrong
> I'm your puppet
> Treat me good and I'll do anything
> I'm just a puppet and you hold my string
> I'm your puppet
> I'm your walking, talking, living, loving puppet….
>
> JAMES & BOBBY PURIFY, "I'm Your Puppet"[1]

I. INTRODUCTION

Even puppets are capable of love. And perhaps, as James and Bobby Purify suggest in their 1966 song, puppets are the best lovers of all. This is not, they intimate, because puppets don't speak, but rather because they vocalize their love on command, over and over again, like broken records. In the Purify cosmology, puppets walk, talk, live, love, and profess their love. Puppets, in other words, are consummate lovers, and lovers merely puppets.

This reversal, whereby the lover is recast as a "walking, talking, living, loving puppet" forms the heart of the British ventriloquist Nina Conti's 2012 documentary, *Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice and the legacy of six bereaved puppets*.[2] Produced by Conti herself, and executive-produced by prominent mockumentarian Christopher Guest (whom many would unhesitatingly label the "father" of the mockumentary genre), *Her Master's Voice* excavates the anachronistic art of ventriloquism, taught to Conti by another such paternal figure: her ex- and now deceased mentor-cum-lover Ken Campbell, an irreverent veteran of the British Theatre

[1] James & Bobby Purify, *100% Purified Soul*, Arista, US, 1988.
[2] *Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice and the legacy of six bereaved puppets*, dir. Nina Conti, BBC, UK, 2012.

known for his penchant for "snort[ing] out forgotten art forms."[3] Conti's film follows the filmmaker as she transports six of Campbell's former puppets and one of her own from London to Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, where ventriloquist dummies go to retire. Her aim is to donate one of Campbell's ventriloquial figures to the Vent Haven Museum, a mausoleum for the dolls of departed ventriloquists, along the way visiting the Vent Haven ConVENTion, where devoted practitioners of the art meet each July to consort with each other and their puppets. These unglamorous destinations provide eerily resonant backdrops against which to stage Conti's mourning and melancholia in Campbell's wake, as well as her resulting ambivalence towards her own ventriloquial practice, which she reckons may die a final death with Campbell. Interweaving meditative autobiographical sequences (taking place across a range of space-times) with an observational and interview-based portrait of ventriloquism as both personal pastime and professional field, *Her Master's Voice* is, as its title suggests, also metaphorically and sonically punctuated by the voice of Campbell himself—the "master" to whom Conti remains personally and professionally tethered.

Arcane though it may seem, ventriloquism—as both performance practice and metaphor—has enjoyed something of a re-popularization in recent years in Anglo-American popular and academic cultural contexts. For scholars and cultural commentators alike, the term "ventriloquism" frequently signifies a deceptive operation: one in which an image, surface, or body (the figure of George W. Bush, say) conceals and/or serves as the mouthpiece for the "actual" agency behind it (the corresponding figure of Dick Cheney, say). Ventriloquism, in other words, is said to dramatize a scene of mediation. The passing of a voice, so often equated with agency, from one body through another becomes a metaphor for a power hidden in plain

[3] Conti, *Her Master's Voice*. We receive this description of Campbell's practice via Conti's voiceover.

sight. This somewhat paranoid reading of ventriloquism—to ventriloquize Eve Sedgwick[4]—is both extended and complicated by the fashionable suggestion that we are all dummies, speaking in voices not our own,[5] and that voice, that most textured and "grainy" attribute of an individual,[6] is in fact just as much mediated as everything else. Alongside such theoretico-metaphorical usages of ventriloquism, the vaudevillian form of the art flourishes, with stateside ventriloquists such as Terry Fator and Jeff Dunham among the country's most popular and highly paid entertainers,[7] and with Conti across the pond, spreading her "deconstructive" practice around multiple media platforms.[8] Ventriloquism's play on the peculiarities of vocalization, its comedic staging of the voice's questionable provenance, may explain the art's enduring popularity. But what might this supposed cultural anachronism have to teach us that we haven't yet learned from it?

Perhaps surprisingly, Conti's film is not the first documentary to take ventriloquism as its subject.[9] *Her Master's Voice* is, however, unusual, in that a puppet lover (read: ventriloquist) is both its director and its central protagonist. That this puppet lover happens to be a girlish and giggly, highly personable cis-gendered woman only compounds the film's (and Conti's) exceptionality; the stereotypical ventriloquist has historically been a soft-spoken, socially and sexually stunted white male whose adolescent male dummy overcompensates for his queer lack

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[4] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51 for a theorization of "paranoid reading."

[5] See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 70. "Ventriloquists," Dolar writes, "usually display their art by holding a puppet, a doll, a dummy, which is supposed to be the origin of the voice…. They offer a dummy location for the voice which cannot be located, a hold for disacousmatization. But suppose that we are ourselves the dummy…while the voice is the dwarf, the hunchback hidden in our entrails?"

[6] See Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-89 for Barthes' famous theorization of vocal "grain."

[7] Texas-born Terry Fator won the reality talent show *America's Got Talent* in 2007 and now has a multi-million dollar contract with the Mirage hotel and casino in Las Vegas. Jeff Dunham, who also hails from Texas, is one of the top-grossing comedians in the United States, and can often be viewed performing on Comedy Central.

[8] "Deconstructive" is Monk's word.

[9] See *Dumbstruck*, dir. Mark Goffman, Truly Indie, US, 2011. See also the fantastic ventriloquist television documentary *A Gottle of Geer*, writ. and dir. Ray Alan, Channel 4, 1986. The full version can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPUcg30D8NM>.

of ego.[10] Thus, unlike Mark Goffman's 2010 documentary on ventriloquism, *Dumbstruck*, which—operating at a critical remove from its subject—patronizingly frames the art and its (mostly male) practitioners as a field of Middle American curiosities ripe for Guestian parody,[11] Conti's film both takes ventriloquism seriously and mocks itself for doing so—with more than a little of the self-effacement characteristic of mainstream femininity. As a woman ventriloquist-documentarian, Conti pictures the weirdnesses of the US vent community—its peculiar cast of characters, its queer blend of pathos, shame, pride, and expository matter-of-factness—through the lens of her own gendered, yet dual, ventriloquial persona. For Conti is never one, but always two, and literally so. She is a ventriloquist, and therefore she has a dummy. Aptly named Monk, he is a male-gendered, diminutive stuffed monkey with a voice (it has been remarked), like Sean Connery's.[12] While not utterly lacking in sensitivity, he is a curmudgeon, and usually treats his giggling mistress with a mixture of crudeness and cruelty.

With this duo at the film's helm, *Her Master's Voice* compellingly alters a handful of tried-and-true documentary devices, notably those of voiceover and the interview. For example, when Conti's asynchronous voiceover is employed to explain or simply to accompany a set of images, we usually hear Monk's voice as well—augmenting, contradicting, and challenging her

[10] See Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 403-10 for allusions to this tendency, though Connor's interpretation differs from my own. Using Edgar Bergen's Charlie McCarthy as an example, he notes that many ventriloquist dummies have historically been "saucy boy[s]" who provoke disciplinary action from their ventriloquists. He then explains that the male body has been the primary vessel for the reception and containment of violence since the 1800s, which accounts for this trend in ventriloquial performance. "Since the nineteenth century," he writes, "the cost of patriarchal ideology for boys has been that they are expected to internalize much higher levels of violence than girls" (409). I read the adolescent male dummy very differently—in part as the nurturing of "boys will be boys"-style patriarchy alongside the refinement sometimes demanded of grown men, and also as a figure whose performative masculinity may bolster the ventriloquist's perceived lack thereof.

[11] Goffman, *Dumbstruck*.

[12] Freddy Gray, "'A totally irresponsible art,'" *Spectator*, 31 Jul 2010, www.spectator.co.uk/arts/arts-feature/6172613/a-totally-irresponsible-art.html.

account. And when Conti, in classic interactive documentary mode,[13] interviews fellow ventriloquists about their craft, there are often four parties visibly involved: Conti and Monk (who ask the questions) and two interviewees (who supply the answers). Conti, for her part, is also frequently cross-examined by Monk, who poses some of the film's most provocative questions, about love and about ventriloquism.

Taking Conti's work as its inspiration, this chapter considers what happens when a ventriloquist makes a documentary film about ventriloquism. However, rather than diligently peeling away the layers of what is clearly a scene of meta-mediation, I argue for a reading of Conti's *Her Master's Voice* as a project of *bifurcation*. "Bifurcation" typically refers to the splitting of something into two parts or branches—the forking of, say, a railroad track into two adjacent tracks. For my purposes here, bifurcation has several additional valences. First, as Conti's documentary demonstrates, bifurcation is a ventriloquial practice—a performance technique whereby a ventriloquist "bifurcates" her own vocalization into two independent procedures, such that her lip movements appear out of synch with her voice. When performed, this asynchrony of visible lips with audible voice recalls the second audiovisual bifurcation explored in this chapter: the split between film image and film sound, which are traditionally recorded separately before being synched and printed alongside one another on the same strip of celluloid. Lastly, bifurcation addresses the division between subjectivity (often equated with the voice of the documentary subject) and objectivity (often conflated with the voice of the documentary filmmaker) historically upheld in documentary film as a genre. Rooted in the materiality of ventriloquism as performance and film as medium, yet theoretically portable, bifurcation suggests that unconventional relationships ensue when bodies and voices, sounds and

[13] See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 44-56 for a thorough explanation of the term "interactive documentary."

images, subjects and objects, are (sometimes literally) placed next to each other rather than in the usual hierarchical fashion. As an analytic that emphasizes adjacency, bifurcation strongly resonates with queer and feminist theories that propose besideness and nearness as alternative models for relationality.[14]

Far from revealing the workings behind its object—as so many documentaries purport to do—Conti's unique exercise in bifurcation invites us to contemplate a space in which ventriloquists and dummies cohabitate in uneasy, shifting relation. At the same time, *Her Master's Voice* places documentary film (as genre and medium) beside itself, as filmed ventriloquism visibly and audibly reduplicates both documentary form and cinematic operation, often to startling effect. Fitting, then, that Conti's professed impetus for making the film was her own bereavement: metaphorically beside herself with grief—bifurcated by grief, we might say—she elected to capture the quite literal state of being beside oneself constituted in ventriloquism. More appropriately still, she chose documentary as the vehicle for her expression. For given its historical claims to objectivity, documentary perhaps most directly poses the questions pertinent to any ventriloquial operation: "Who is speaking?" and "For whom?"

II. TALKING PICTURES, TALKING PUPPETS

Documentary film and the cinematic apparatus more generally have sometimes been metaphorized as gendered ventriloquial operations. Scholarly discussions of film sound in the 1980s, as well as academic work on voice, the subject, and documentary film stretching from the 80s into the 1990s, respectively reveal ventriloquism's efficacy as a recurrent metaphor for 1) a

[14] See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8-9 for an invaluable reflection on the queer relationality illuminated by the preposition *beside*. Sedgwick's discussion of besideness is explored in depth in the final section of this chapter. See Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Nancy N. Chen, "'Speaking Nearby:' A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82-91 for Trinh's theorization of "speaking nearby" in the context of documentary film, which is unpacked in the following section of this chapter.

deceptive sound cinema whose voices and noises come from sources other than the images that appear to produce them, and 2) an illusory documentary cinema whose generic devices and claims to objectivity obfuscate its distortion of the voices it purports to allow to speak "on their own terms."[15] More recently, since the early 2000s, ventriloquism has materialized into an object of inquiry—for both culture and cultural studies—even as its metaphoric usefulness has dramatically increased. For in certain quarters, ventriloquism now indicates not merely the offbeat practice of sitting a dummy on one's knee and "speaking through" its moving lips, nor the process by which one metaphorically "speaks for" another, but the very act of vocalization itself.[16]

In this section, I examine several key film theoretical interventions that explicitly and implicitly use ventriloquism as a model for understanding the roles of voice and sound in the sound film in general, and in the particular genre of documentary film. I then offer bifurcation as an alternative framing of ventriloquism that accordingly allows us to reassess the ventriloquial dynamics of the (documentary) sound film. As I will argue, reframing ventriloquism as bifurcation has implications for both film spectators and documentary subjects, neither of which need be construed as duped, powerless, or "puppet-like," as the traditional ventriloquial analogy suggests.

In the case of the sound film, ventriloquism (in its crass, Vaudevillian incarnation—the basis for Conti's own practice) has offered up a concrete model for the power dynamics at play

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[15] See Rick Altman, "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 67-79 and Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) for the equations of sound film with ventriloquism (to be discussed later in this section). See Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin with Lee Amazonas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 246-67, as well as Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), for variant framings of documentary film as a potentially ventriloquial genre (also to be discussed later in the section).

[16] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70. "Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*," he writes. Dolar is inspired by Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 58. "Even when we see a living person talking," states Žižek, "there is always a minimum of ventriloquism at work."

between film sound and image, a literal figure for the means by which the "audio" and the "visual" ultimately collude to fool an audience. In the early 1980s, ventriloquism as metaphor was evidently in vogue in Euro-American cinema studies discourse: both Rick Altman (c. 1980) and Michel Chion (c. 1982) used the term to illuminate the effects of sound-image synchronization and dubbing—that is, to call attention to these common cinematic practices *as* special effects, rather than as indices of an extra-cinematic real. Wrote Altman, "the sound track is a ventriloquist who, by moving his dummy (the image) in time with the words he secretly speaks, creates the illusion that the words are produced by the dummy/image whereas in fact the dummy/image is actually created in order to disguise the source of the sound."[17] This overstatement was shortly revised into the now established claim that film sound (ventriloquist) and image (dummy) are trapped in a master-slave dialectic, a power struggle that upholds cinema's unified appearance while concealing the fundamental technicity of a sound cinema rooted not in unification, but in separation (79).[18] One cannot help but note that Altman's ventriloquist (i.e. film sound) occupies a default masculine position, while his dummy (i.e. image) remains—not unthreateningly—androgynous.

Concerned less with exposing the means of filmic production than with the fiction film's capacity to both mine and mask the deceptive character of *all* synchronization—including that of live voice and fleshly, animate body—Chion used "ventriloquism" as one of several names for the process by which voices are artificially tethered to bodies (both) on (and off) screen.[19] The figure that guides Chion's navigation of the problematics of cinematic ventriloquism is what he

[17] Altman, "Moving Lips," 67.

[18] In gesturing towards a fundamental separation, Altman refers to the fact that sound and image are recorded separately and printed "many frames apart" on the celluloid strip—that, in other words, their togetherness and synchronicity are essentially artificial.

[19] Along with "ventriloquism," Chion uses "jerry-rigging, nailing-down, dubbing, synch sound, [and] playback" to describe the cinematic process of "restoring voices to bodies." Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 131.

terms the *acousmêtre*, a vocal presence without a body that wanders the screen in search of its corporeal form (21). Once this bodiless voice—be it a voiceover (diegetic or non-) or an ostensibly diegetic voice whose source is not visualized onscreen—finds its human host, it *de-acousmatizes*, a process that culminates in synchronized speech (23). This restoration of voice to body represents, we might extrapolate, a dramatization of the birth of the imperceptible ventriloquism that drives sound film's normative operation. But before the acousmêtre de-acousmatizes, he—for as Chion notes, "*most acousmêtres are masculine*" (55)—is possessed of "magical powers" (23): he is invisible, and is therefore everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He is the epitome of omnipotence—the ventriloquist whose dummy is nothing short of the image in its entirety.

Like Altman's, Chion's formulation of cinema as ventriloquism hinges on the primacy of a "master's voice" that directs all other cinematic operations from a hidden location. Thus even as Altman maintains the dialectical nature of the relation between masculine film sound and genderless puppet film image, we are left, by these film theorists, with the sense that both sound film and ventriloquism (by virtue of the direct comparison) are unidirectional forms. To put it bluntly, neither theorization posits either form as something much more than a concealing operation undergirded or overlaid by a singular source of masculine vocal power. In making these observations, I intend not only to echo Kaja Silverman's brilliant feminist critique of Chion's now canonical work,[20] but also to argue that *thinking ventriloquism differently* forces us to reexamine those relations it has reflexively been used to analogize. As Conti's cheekily titled

[20] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Silverman observed that Chion's all-powerful masculine acousmêtre functions in gendered contrast to his fantasy of the feminine acousmêtre, which, evoking the "maternal voice," is calming, nurturing, and conjures the prediscursive environs of the womb (76-77, 100). Outside of this maternal usage, the female voice in cinema is, Silverman asserts, repeatedly punished into synchronization, while the male voice is permitted to acousmatize and de-acousmatize at will (39). See Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 61-2 for Chion's "maternal" framing of the feminine acousmêtre.

film demonstrates, ventriloquism may indeed invoke the "master's voice" detailed by Altman and Chion, but the practice also depends on destabilizing this voice's primacy, and even on thrusting it into queer relationality. For example, in line with Silverman's submission that a non-maternal, yet decidedly feminine acousmêtre is needed to liberate the female voice from the shackles of a sexist synch sound cinema,[21] *Her Master's Voice* has Conti's "own," female-gendered voice wander the screen at will, speak independently of her body, and speak over (voiceover) other visible bodies. Additionally, Conti visualizes and sounds her voice's transition into a male-gendered voice, thus bifurcating the "organic" unity of voice and body that, for Chion, comprises film's ultimate ruse—and ultimate undoing.

Her Master's Voice's frequent use of Conti's disembodied voice is in fact par for the course given the film's status as documentary, a genre that neither Altman, nor Chion, nor Silverman address in their mostly fiction-film-centric discussions of voice and sound. Indeed, it may be that Conti chose to work within the genre because documentary film's assertions of its own objectivity have long raised the same kinds of questions prompted by ventriloquism: "Who (or what) is the source of this voice?" and "Whom (or what) does this voice represent?" For documentary film is both a cinematic operation marked by the same processes of synchronization that mark the fiction film and a genre that regularly depends on authenticating voices to convey the truth of its message. Whether in the form of the interview; the first-person testimonial; or "that most-disparaged documentary device," voiceover commentary,[22] documentary frequently deploys both acousmatic and embodied voices to legitimate its perspective and even its very factuality. Alternatively, in the cases of many subjective or experimental documentaries, the genre's play with voices functions to question film's ability to

[21] Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 186.
[22] Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxi.

"represent reality,"[23] as well as to challenge the notion, already much eroded, that there is an unmediated reality readily available for documentation (by a medium!). Thus the documentary sound film, we might venture, performs a double ventriloquism: alongside the ceaseless performance of the film's soundtrack (ventriloquist) and image-track (dummy) is the ventriloquism required by the documentary genre, whose formal devices include talking heads, speaking witnesses, and disembodied voiceovers with unverifiable sources.

Foundational documentary theory on voice has acknowledged, and even cautioned against, the genre's potential for ventriloquism. Writing in 1983, Bill Nichols warned that if the voices of a given documentary's interviewees, witnesses, or participants, cannot be distinguished from what he called the "voice of the text" as a system,[24] the film runs the risk of transforming these participants into "puppets" (261)—mere containers for the text's own, indirect message. Further, in purporting to "give voice" to ignored or repressed events or constituencies, or to allow persons and things excised from history to "speak for themselves," documentary films often reproduce the very raced and gendered power relations they seek to make transparent. As experimental documentary filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha remarked in a 1990 interview, "The notion of giving voice is so charged because you have to be in such a position that you can 'give voice' to other people. And also the illusion that you 'give voice,' whereas the film is very much the voice of the filmmaker…. The notion of giving voice [thus] remains extremely paternalistic."[25] In calling attention to the gendered structure of a documentary cinema that patronizingly purports to tender voices to those who lack them, Trinh also makes a ventriloquial analogy. A documentary film, she implies, always speaks in the filmmaker's voice, even as it might seem to privilege the voices of those the filmmaker has given the platform to

[23] Nichols, *Representing Reality*.
[24] Nichols, "Voice of Documentary," 256.
[25] Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 169.

speak. For to be "given" a voice—or, for that matter, to be permitted (again by the paternal filmmaker) to speak for oneself—is to first be rendered a dummy void of the voice that transforms object into subject. What makes "giving voice" possible is, in other words, the objectification, or evacuation, of the subject to whom the filmmaker (the analogical ventriloquist) wishes to give a voice.

But while this vicious circle is indeed one of documentary cinema's (not to mention ventriloquism's) dominant modalities, Trinh's artistic and theoretical work presents other, more expansive, possibilities for the genre. One of these is the notion, developed in and through a number of her films, of "speaking nearby."[26] This strategy, developed by Trinh in the context of what might traditionally be called ethnographic filmmaking, attempts to actualize "a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition" (87). Crucially, Trinh makes the point that "speaking nearby" is not simply a verbal gesture, but an orientation, a way of inhabiting the world, a positionality that must suffuse a film both sonically and visually for its effects to be registered. It is a speaking that, while operating in intimate proximity to an object/subject (for Trinh uses the words interchangeably in her description), does not *possess* this object/subject. Forged in the fire of a feminist critique of the voice's paternal operation in documentary film (sometimes despite the filmmaker's own marginalized position), Trinh's notion of "speaking nearby" resonates far more with my (and Conti's) sense of ventriloquism as a practice of bifurcation than with Altman or Chion's masculine metaphorizations of the art. In

[26] Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Nancy N. Chen, "'Speaking Nearby:' A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82-91.

the performance practices of actual ventriloquism, the lips go one way and the tongue another to produce two voices and indeed two unevenly balanced thought-patterns that act alongside each other:

> When you get into dialogue…you run smack into the first big mental problem confronting the ventriloquist. You are no longer one person. You are now two separate and distinct individuals and personalities. And you now have to think and act for two different people. This double-barrelled thinking [sic] is only difficult in the beginning. The more you practice, the easier and faster it becomes. And one future day it will be as natural for you to think, speak and act for two people as it was for you to do it for only yourself.[27]

Ventriloquial thought, speech, and action are, as ventriloquist Paul Winchell explains, "double-barrelled," contrived of a series of splittings. Thought must fork to accommodate recollection and anticipation in tandem; the voice must fork to preserve itself as past (the voice that just spoke) even as it rockets into the future (the voice that must now speak, with scant premeditation). To take Winchell's description a step further, the ventriloquist must not only "think, speak and act for two," like a pregnant mother is said to do; she must perform beside herself, transitioning (as Trinh says) between voices with little opportunity to lapse into the singularities of puppet-possession or, for that matter, self-possession. The split subjective voice of ventriloquism not only supports existing arguments that subjectivity is not static or synchronous, but divided, active, and relational—as the back-and-forth of a ventriloquist's banter with her dummy/herself aptly demonstrates. Ventriloquism's bifurcated voice also allows openings for the ventriloquial genre of documentary to be read, in Alisa Lebow's recent words, as "a dialogue between subjects, rather than [according to] the subject/object relations of the traditional documentary."[28]

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[27] Paul Winchell, *The Key to Ventriloquism for Fun and Profit* (Owings Mills, MD: Ottenheimer Publishers, 1954), 122-3.

[28] Alisa Lebow, "Introduction," in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow (New York: Wallflower, 2012), 3.

There is no better place to encounter the vicissitudes of such a dialogue than *Her Master's Voice*. Due to its unusual position as a ventriloquist's documentary film about ventriloquism, Conti's work cannot help but examine the splits that define the practice of ventriloquism—whose practitioners sometimes employ the term "bifurcation" to describe the opposing movements of the mouth in producing ventriloquial speech—alongside those that characterize the operation of (documentary) cinema. For this reason, the film warrants a particularly close examination. As Winchell indicates above, and as *Her Master's Voice* makes clear, bifurcation cannot be reduced to a physiological gag or a technical display. It has also to be understood as occurring at the level of thought. And for the ventriloquist, this "mental problem" is far from pathological; it is, rather, something to be unthought as a problem, practiced, and rendered "natural." Like Trinh's "speaking nearby," bifurcation is a positionality, a way of being in the world whose actualization presents "a great challenge."[29] In ventriloquism, the presence of a puppet conjures up forkings of thought, speech, and action and, rather than rejecting these splits, the ventriloquist practices thinking otherwise. In bifurcation as a desirable state of besideness, as a sought-after nearness immune to full possession, we find love's—and, appropriately, grief's—performative analogue. "What is it," Judith Butler asks of grief, "that claims us…such that we are not the masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?"[30] As documentary film, as love story, as mourning process, and as ventriloquism, *Her Master's Voice* both illustrates and bodies forth bifurcation's pleasures, pains, and problematics.

[29] Trinh, "Speaking Nearby," 87.
[30] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

III. DEAD VOICES TALKING

Rather than the postmortem silence one might expect, *Her Master's Voice* documents the voices that multiply in the echo chamber left by Ken Campbell's death, as Conti uses ventriloquism to express grief over her lost love. While the film offers catharsis in the form of a more or less linear journey, over whose course this grief might be transformed into acceptance, it also leaves us with the discomfiting sense that even time itself is bifurcated, and that voices can at once die out and continue talking. In this section, I investigate what *Her Master's Voice*'s representations of the relationship between ventriloquist and dummy tell us about bifurcation as both practice and theory, focusing special attention on Conti's admittedly ventriloquial relation to Campbell, her dynamic with her own puppet partner Monk, and her reanimation of Campbell's dummies and voice in the act of mourning. This sets the stage for thinking not only subjectivity, but also cinema and documentary form, as nested processes of splitting.

Her Master's Voice frames Ken Campbell as the older man for whom Conti was never ready: He was the craggy, esteemed pedagogue to Conti's unformed, naïve protégé; he died, tragically, before she could learn all that he had to teach. Theirs was a trademark untimely heterosexual romance, and while Monk cheekily reminds Conti that she and Campbell had "a relationship…with sex and everything," Conti does not directly confirm a consummation. The great love Campbell and Conti truly shared was ventriloquism, the dormant cultural form into which Campbell breathed new life, fully resurrected by Conti as the feminine vessel that would obey "her master's voice," following in her mentor's hallowed footsteps to chart new performative ground. In an explicitly ventriloquial reprisal of the gendered power relation chronicled in George Du Maurier's iconic *Trilby*,[31] Campbell provided the inspiration and Conti

[31] George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

furnished the body—a young, nubile body for a voice from the past. And Conti's body carried with it yet a new voice, attached to a monkey's body (fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1 Conti and Monk, video still

Conti's Monk has a tan simian face, ears, hands, and feet, all framed by matted brown fur. His dark eyes do not blink. His soft, mass-produced form (for ventriloquists other than Conti work with this same "model") at once eerily echoes a child's plaything and evokes ventriloquism's historical connections and overlaps with minstrelsy, which, along with a host of other cultural forms, frequently used simian representation to racialize and dehumanize black subjects.[32] Monk's voice, however, as it is used within the context of Conti's practice (more on this later) carries with it a set of associations to a presumptively elderly, white, masculine, Anglo-European authority figure: variously described as "a cynical primate who sounds like Sean Connery"[33] and as having Conti's "grandfather's voice, and his dry Glasgow wit,"[34] Monk's voice might also be linked to that of Conti's very own Svengali, Ken Campbell. Accordingly, grumbling, grainy, and world-weary, Monk's voice walks Conti through her live act, all the

[32] For an extensive theorization of minstrelsy see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[33] Gray, "'A totally irresponsible art.'"

[34] Jessica Salter, "The world of Nina Conti, ventriloquist," *Spectator*, 20 Jul 2012, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9416031/The-world-of-Nina-Conti-ventriloquist.html.

while deriding her "tartish" appearance and "whorish" performance style.[35] Despite Monk's command over Conti, he can never break free from her, a fact he greatly resents. His resentment, in turn, fuels their gigs: infantilized and dehumanized, tethered to his mistress, his voice—which unfortunately also belongs to Conti—is the only means he has to exact revenge.

Perhaps the most striking sketch in Conti and Monk's regular repertoire is one I have come to call the "striptease," in which Monk literally strips Conti's hand of her dummy (i.e. Monk himself) before a live audience (fig. 3.2). Equal parts crass and witty, this deconstruction of ventriloquism as form is reprised in *Her Master's Voice*, where we see Conti performing part of the sketch before the other ventriloquists attending the Vent Haven ConVENTion. The routine usually begins with Monk telling Conti he wants his "own show," after which he declares that if he can't perform independently from Conti, she'll have to do comedy "on her own"—without his assistance. He orders Conti to put him back into the bag from which he emerged at the beginning of their act, and to remove her naked hand from the bag, at which point the hand continues to speak to her in Monk's voice. Conti is then instructed to retire her hand to her side as Monk's voice disembodies, becoming acousmatic, a purely sonic counterpart to the "proper" voice emanating from her own moving lips. Finally, in a denouement as dirty as it is uncanny, Monk's voice insists on "coming" on Conti's face, emerging directly from her mouth. "Oh, at last I'm in the stupid cow!" he victoriously crows. "Quite a sweet voice on a little monkey," he cries, "but within a dress it's bloody sinister!"[36] In its undoing of the structure of traditional ventriloquism, this gendered act fantasizes and dramatizes the vindication of an instrumentalized figure through

[35] Monk uses these words liberally, across a range of the duo's performances.

[36] As I've already emphasized, this sketch is one of Conti and Monk's repeat performances. Because the reproduction of this particular act in *Her Master's Voice* is only partial, I've described a "fuller" version of the performance, visible at www.youtube.com/watch?v=E25ebRjx8w0&feature=kp.html.

a powerful vocal agency—one that leaves its proper body to possess the body of the one who would subjugate it.



Fig. 3.2 Conti performs the "striptease," video still

Through their performances, which began in the early 2000s, and backed by Campbell's guiding presence—*Her Master's Voice* relates—Conti and Monk re-popularized ventriloquism. But when Campbell died in 2008, Conti was not left voiceless: her already split voice bifurcated further, proliferating additional voices to fill the void of her master's absence. Thus, in addition to Conti and Monk's voices, *Her Master's Voice* records the nascent voices of Campbell's former puppets, inherited and animated by Conti in the year following his death (2008-9)—though as Conti relates, "it took me a while to get a word into any of them." These dummies include Dog, a gargoyle-faced bulldog with an underbite and a studded collar; Crow, a knit, orange-beaked bird with a purple bowtie whom Monk hilariously describes as "a kind of daft glove"; Owl, a wispy, bug-eyed owl; a wrinkle-faced "grannie" with a shock of white hair otherwise known as "Gertrude Stein"; and Jack, who embodies, again in Monk's withering

words, "the archetypal cliché of a horror movie ventriloquist mannequin." Capping the list is an eerie puppet likeness of Campbell himself, an accurate caricature with bushy eyebrows and moveable eyelids and jaw (fig. 3.3), whose hard head sometimes appears attached to a life-sized, stuffed body. While they are visually introduced within the first five minutes of the film, accompanied by voiceover commentary from Nina and Monk, most of these characters aren't fully synchronized with their "own" voices until Conti's arrival at the 2009 Vent Haven ConVENTion, where they start to speak in earnest, signaling the commencement of Conti's mourning period. At this point we also begin to see and hear from the other ventriloquist-dummy pairs (and even trios) present at the convention, some of which are privately interviewed by Conti and Monk about their particular ventriloquial practices. Sprinkled amidst and occasionally layered over the musings of this motley crew is Campbell's distinctively nasal voice, sometimes synched with candid video footage shot before he passed, other times in the guise of a bodiless voiceover. Notably, Campbell's is the only voice other than Conti's and Monk's given acousmatic abilities. Thus, while multiple vocal and cinematic bifurcations mark the complicated structure of Conti's ventriloquial documentary, a gendered hierarchy obtains in its privileging of "her master's voice" (as the film's title, which goes verbally unremarked upon in the filmic text, suggests).



Fig. 3.3 Conti shares a bed with "Campbell," video still

As both doll and immaterial (father) figure, video image and disembodied voice, Campbell's ghostly presence presides over the various dialogues presented in *Her Master's Voice*, supporting Conti's assertion at the film's start that Campbell was, and clearly still is, "astounding at…playing God for other people." Conti thus inhabits the space of suspension Kleist describes in his philosophical vignette "On the Marionette Theatre," wherein only the poles of God (the puppet master) and the puppet (which performs without thought) can release the human from the shackles of intentionality.[37] One cannot, observes Kleist, *intentionally* perform gracefully; consciousness causes "affectation" (24), and affectation is the marker of a bad performance. To perform well—or in Conti's case, to find proper voices for Campbell's puppets—she must possess either "no consciousness at all" or "infinite consciousness"; she must herself embody either "the mechanical puppet" or "the God" (26). Conti cannot occupy Campbell's Godlike shoes, nor is she able to jettison his voice and speak unfettered, and Campbell's puppets recognize this shortcoming. Conti is herself a "living, loving puppet," relegated to the partiality of speaking beside, or nearby, the dummies with whom she communes (including that of Campbell, the stand-in for her belated lover). While these bifurcations are often painful, they necessarily supplement Kleist's either/or formulation, which Kleist well knew that no mere mortal could possibly realize. Further consolation may lie in the fact that, as Silverman would have it, Conti's feminine voice technically gets more airtime than Campbell's masculine one, wandering the screen to find its human and puppet hosts only to leave them again.

When the puppets of other ventriloquists are pictured speaking in Conti's documentary, they almost always appear directly alongside their masters, though in the film's staged interview

[37] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3 (1972): 22-26.

segments they are permitted to break away and achieve some autonomy. Unlike standup ventriloquism, film easily allows for the occasional Muppetization of the ventriloquist's dummy, permitting the cropping out of the ventriloquist and/or the dubbing of his or her voice over the image of the newly independent puppet. This option is infrequently used in Conti's film, perhaps to avoid viewers' confusion about the voice's origins (which are, ironically, already in question); perhaps also because the artistry and integrity of theatrical ventriloquism would be too much compromised by cinematic ventriloquism's consistent incursion (though film's bifurcation is a fact, and not an option, as its own self-dramatization might have us believe). Despite this, Conti's privileged counterpart Monk has a rather long leash, and often appears without his mistress, though usually in conversation with her. In an interview sequence (one to which the film returns several times), the two are captured in shot reverse shot, with Monk posing the questions and Conti providing the answers. While Monk's function here is largely to act as a sounding board for Conti's recollections of Campbell, it is also—as in their shared voiceovers and live performances—to goad Conti into disclosing information about which she would rather not speak (such as the details of her intimate contact with Campbell). Like the "signifying monkey" described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his landmark literary study, Monk is both trickster and mediator[38]: ever beside Conti, or "speaking nearby" to her, he is also the thorn in her side, equal parts enabling and frustrating.

In contrast, Campbell's puppets are tightly physically, and thus visually, tethered to Conti. It is almost as if she is afraid to allow them to speak without her visibly mediating presence. Several of them appear irritated with Conti for dragging them into this mess to begin with. It isn't that they miss Campbell, for like Monk, they berate Conti for her melancholia.

[38] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

What they seem, in fact, to resent is her insistence on giving them voices—her compulsion to reanimate Campbell's discarded bodies with new life (fig. 3.4). Though perhaps it's their own easy iterability that plagues them: the facility with which Conti's vocal provisions keep them alive even in death. When they are unpacked in Conti's slipshod Vent Haven hotel room, after an uncomfortable trip across the Atlantic crammed into a giant blue suitcase, Dog asks, in a voice like Monk's but with less vocal fry, "Is Vent Haven as shitty as this?" Conti then pulls Jack from the suitcase, holding his face close to hers. "Okay Jack," she says nervously, "this is the room." "Hellhole," he intones flatly, twisting his neck to survey the drab environs. "You're not American…. You're not a dog," Conti responds, visibly frustrated with her own inability to get his voice right. "You're not getting the hang of this, are you?" Jack spits back, his voice newly reedy and British. In a later hotel room sequence, Jack taunts Conti once again. "You haven't got my voice," he threatens in a low, gravelly tone. "You haven't got it." Though Conti raises her eyebrows in mock horror, she appears genuinely frightened by the dummy's sinister assertion of her lack of command over him. For whose voice is Jack's, really? Is it the master's voice—Campbell's voice—critiquing Conti's performance from beyond the grave? Is it the voice of Conti's own self-judgment? Or is it a voice unto itself, unique to Jack's particular interaction with Conti as ventriloquist? The uncannily shifting quality of the dummy's voice, even as this voice verbally acknowledges its own mutations, makes audible the ongoing process of ventriloquial bifurcation. Conti's struggle for control over Jack's vocalizations results in an uncomfortable, unresolved exchange between Conti and Campbell, Conti and ventriloquist dummy, and Conti and Conti herself. Within the documentary context, these dialogues take on the character of informal interviews, but ones in which the poles of subject and object are thoroughly compromised.



Fig. 3.4 Conti contemplates "getting a word into" Campbell's puppets, video still

Conti's failed attempts to harness a proper voice for Jack might seem to support her opening assertion, delivered in a voiceover, that ventriloquial puppets are "uniquely bereaved objects" that "lose their voices." This statement is echoed by a sequence midway through the film in which Conti and Monk visit the Vent Haven Museum for the first time. The camera follows Monk's silent face as he passes a row of mute dummies, his gentle movement accentuating their stillness. The image then cuts out to follow the duo as they walk slowly past a wall of figures, each with a nametag, mummy-like, some open-mouthed, some with lips pursed. A funeral march plays, but this is worse than a funeral. For Vent Haven's mission is to preserve the dummies of deceased ventriloquists in a state of eternal voicelessness. Once a dummy has been sent there, it will remain bereft of a voice unless its rightful owner unexpectedly rises from the grave. The connection between ventriloquist and dummy is sacrosanct and inviolable, thus Campbell's death should theoretically mean that his dummies fall voiceless. Yet as we have seen, this is not the outcome of Campbell's passing. Conti's ventriloquial reproduction of their

voices, as well as *Her Master's Voice*'s filmic documentation of these voices past and present, ensures that Campbell and his puppets continue to speak, albeit imperfectly and incompletely. As ventriloquist and documentary filmmaker, Conti has the power to keep dead voices talking, even when they may not desire to speak on. Yet as Conti bifurcates into both ventriloquist and dummy, and simultaneously into both subject and object of her own documentary, *Her Master's Voice* offers us a fleeting glimpse of the queerness of dialogue in the absence of the voice's "proper" ownership or mastery.

Indeed, Conti's film reverses the question answered by the Vent Haven Museum, asking not what puppets will do when they "lose their voices," but rather, what voices will do when puppets no longer wish to vocalize. In other words, if a puppet doesn't want to speak, and I continue to speak to and through her, what kind of exchange will result? In Monk's goading and in Conti's ambivalent polyvocality, we find something of an answer: a conversation will take place, but not without some resistance from the uncontrollable object. For ventriloquial bifurcation produces a dialogue wherein conflicting desires coexist forked, side-by-side—that which would continue to speak and that which would just as soon fall silent.

IV. BIFURCATIONS

The sequences that appear intended to explicate ventriloquism, and thus to reveal how practitioners actually perform the art, serve a rather extraordinary function in *Her Master's Voice*, which otherwise uses the figure of the puppet to both contain and represent the bifurcations of voice and thought. As I have already mentioned, Conti includes in the documentary brief interviews with other ventriloquists at the Vent Haven ConVENTion, which provide "behind the scenes" insights into various tricks of the trade. These sequences, which

sometimes cast ventriloquism as pathology, but which do so affectionately, operate neither inside nor outside ventriloquism as a form. In Trinh's parlance, they speak nearby to ventriloquism, unwilling to occupy explicitly subjective or objective positions in relation to the art. For while Conti, the main interviewer, is indeed a sympathetic fellow practitioner who wishes to share ventriloquism's artistry with a broader audience, she is also—as a documentarian—anthropologically invested in getting to the bottom of the ventriloquial conundrum (a feat that would in turn augment her own self-understanding). Additionally, a ventriloquial pair interviewing another ventriloquial pair circumvents typical dialogue, as, among other things, ventriloquist and dummy are apt to provide variant answers to the same question. The ventriloquist's interviews in *Her Master's Voice* thus refuse to furnish a master reading of the art. Returning to Nichols's terminology, these sequences elide a clear distinction between the already bifurcated "voice of the text" and the voices of the ventriloquists and dummies interviewed within the text's documentary format. Ironically, Nichols's warning that such a lack of vocal definition will result in the transformation of a documentary film's interviewees into hapless "puppets" is lost on Conti's film, as many of *Her Master's Voice*'s interviewees are non-metaphorical puppets, i.e. puppets in the Sesame Street sense. The following section hones in on a particular interview sequence in Conti's puppet-affirmative documentary that crystallizes some of the aforementioned linkages between ventriloquial bifurcation, the medium of film, and documentary form.

While *Her Master's Voice*'s documentation of the Vent Haven ConVENTion includes handheld footage of ventriloquists and dummies chaotically communing in a large courtyard, with Conti often present among them, as well as footage of the ventriloquist acts performed in the convention's theater shot from an audience perspective, the ventriloquist's interviews are

filmed in isolated contexts—hotel rooms and the like—free from sonic incursions. Interviewees are closely miked and shot against neutral or minimal backgrounds. They are framed either in "talking head" style or from the midriff up to allow for the presence of their dummies. Shot reverse shot sequences give interviewed ventriloquists the whole of the screen, with Conti and Monk only visible on the other end of a conversation after the image cuts away. The structure of the film's interviews is thus interactive and dialogical, but still cedes the most air- and screen-time to Conti's ventriloquist interviewees, who speak about their respective crafts with minimal prompting. The aura of transparency this structure creates—the sense that interviewees are "speaking for themselves" in these sequences—is, however, belied not only by the film's continuity editing, but also by the visible and audible fact that the subjects of Conti's interviews are bifurcated. Whether they appear *alongside* their puppet/s, in viscerally doubled form, or whether they speak in two or more voices despite the visibility of only one body, the interviewees in *Her Master's Voice* are always already split subjects. Layered with the ventriloquism of film as medium (Altman) and documentary as form (Nichols), the actual ventriloquism performed and explicated in Conti's interviews allows us to look the phenomenon of bifurcation squarely in the face, which in turn prompts a recognition of the bifurcated qualities of both film and documentary form. Rather than constituting simple dualities or complications, the bifurcations made manifest in *Her Master's Voice* open us to feminist and queer ways of understanding the relations between sound and image, subject and object, and ventriloquist and dummy. Thinking through bifurcation allows us to imagine these entities not as irrevocably locked into punishing Hegelian dialectics, but as operating beside, or nearby one another—as holding contradictions in tension, and, not least, as demonstrating bonds outside the bounds of

the heteronormative relation between "her master" (Campbell) and "her" (Conti) implied and also undone by *Her Master's Voice*.

The viewer's formal education in bifurcation occurs in an interview sequence about one third of the way through *Her Master's Voice*. In this brief, but crucial segment of the film, a goofy, mildly rotund ventriloquist named Kevin Johnson introduces Conti to *bifurcation* as a term that, for him, signals a ventriloquial epistemology. Over footage of Johnson performing at the ventriloquist's convention in the guise of a bird trainer, with a large, frazzled, bug-eyed bird puppet on either arm (one of whom insists on yodeling at a high pitch, to his master's great annoyance), Johnson's smooth voice filters in asynchronously over the audience's laughter and applause (fig. 3.5). "There's a new word that I learned this week at the ventriloquist's convention called 'bifurcating'," he relates, before the image cuts to Johnson's talking head, synchronizing his voice and body (fig. 3.6). "Your lips do one thing;" he continues, "[and] your tongue does the other." He goes on to model this technique mid-monologue, fusing description and demonstration into a single act. "So…I keep the ventriloquism the same," he explains, freezing his lips into stillness mid-sentence, "as though we were talking and keep it the same way," he goes on, lips unmoving, "however," he continues, synchronizing once again, "then I can take the liberty and have the lips do something different, but I can't really look at you while I'm doing it, cause I have to think so hard about what my lips are doing, so that I can have them go one way, and have the tongue go the other way, and still articulate it, and make it work simultaneously, which is a *little* scary!" As Johnson explains that he "can't really look" at Conti while bifurcating, the image cuts to a reaction shot of Conti and Monk sitting in rapt silence, Monk slowly nodding his head. The image then cuts back to Johnson, still speaking synchronously, before his lips fall entirely out of synch with his speech, moving in directions that appear at odds

with the words we hear. He synchs up again on "which is a *little* scary!" at which point the image returns us to Conti and Monk, who laugh, along with Johnson, as he asks, "How do you wrap your brain around it?" As the image cuts back to Johnson, a small, high-pitched voice—one of Johnson's birds, perhaps?—answers his question. "Don't worry about it," the acousmatic voice says softly, to which Johnson, heaving a mock sigh of relief, replies, "Okay." This invisible voice suddenly seems have been beside Johnson all along, to have witnessed his demonstration of bifurcation, and to wish to offer him a kind of queer companionship in the wake of his labor. Itself a product of bifurcation, the birdlike acousmêtre yet further expands the web of audiovisual relations already suggested by the scene.

The mind-boggling sequence described above mirrors documentary cinema back to itself, as Johnson's dummy-free ventriloquial act reproduces film's own ventriloquism. Among other things, Johnson's ventriloquial bifurcation of the look and sound of speech—his ability to make the movement of his lips appear at odds with the sound of his speech—necessitates an acknowledgement of film's own bifurcation, if only in the form of the question, "Did he really do that, or was it the film?" Because Johnson's bifurcation willfully effects what mainstream films usually try hard not to show: the asynchrony of lips and voice, of image and sound, upon which film, per Altman, actually depends. When Johnson's lips fall out of synch with his speech, the result resembles what one sometimes sees at the movies when the projected film's audio and visual tracks become misaligned, not to mention the spectacle of a poorly dubbed film. This kind of asynchrony is culturally coded as a failure of the cinematic operation: When the synch is "off," one asks the theater manager for one's money back. In the context of *Her Master's Voice*, however, Johnson's feat is just that—a feat. His bifurcation is a kind of artistry that extends ventriloquism's regular operation ("I keep the ventriloquism the same") into something even

more difficult, something so challenging that it requires tremendous concentration. Ironically, this something is the very bane of synch sound film's existence. Of course, as Chion tells us, comedy often mobilizes asynchrony as a special effect. And Kevin Johnson's practice, like most ventriloquism, can indeed be placed under the aegis of "comedy" as a performance genre. However, while *Her Master's Voice* focuses its attention on an historically comedic genre, Conti's documentary is not itself a comedy. And Conti's interview with Johnson is intended, as I have already made clear, to expose some of ventriloquism's workings: it is as much instructional as it is amusing.

Transmitted as it is in the form of a documentary film interview, Johnson's bifurcation produces some confusion, or at the very least a double take. I have repeatedly watched and listened to this sequence and I still can't get it. True to interactive documentary convention, Johnson's bifurcation produces a reaction shot of Conti and Monk's laughter—the intended index that what we are seeing did in fact happen, and that this particular asynchrony is not attributable to the workings of sound film. But this reaction shot is the product of editing; who knows where it came from, or what Conti was responding to when it was filmed? I find myself puzzling over Johnson's actions. "Was that for real, or was it dubbed?" I wonder, asking myself the question one would not ask in the movie theater with the badly synched film. For in the latter scenario, the schism between film sound and image is rendered all too real, and what it shows is that asynchrony is not the exception but rather the rule, which makes disavowal more difficult (though not impossible). Contrastingly, in the brief moment in which Johnson's lips appear to move asynchronously with his speech *onscreen*, we (or at least I) do not know whether this bifurcation is the product of ventriloquism or of documentary cinema, as Johnson's feat could be carried out by either form. What results is neither an unveiling of the fundamental workings of

ventriloquism nor of the cinematic apparatus, but a few seconds of blatant indistinction. When ventriloquial bifurcation occurs alongside cinematic bifurcation, there simply is no telling what is voice and what effect—or what is ventriloquism and what is cinema's own splitting. Thus in this informational and instructional segment, *Her Master's Voice*'s visualization of the apparatus behind its puppetry proves both revelatory and indiscernible. A remarkable possibility has been discovered, but its underlying mechanism remains opaque. Conti's interview, that contested staple of documentary form, gives us neither an objective explanation of bifurcation, nor a subjective, univocal "opinion" of the phenomenon. Rather, the interview itself bifurcates, as Kevin Johnson responds to his own question with yet another ventriloquial voice.


Fig. 3.5 Johnson performs, video still


Fig. 3.6 Johnson bifurcates, video still

V. BESIDENESS

Before concluding this chapter's discussion of bifurcation read in and through Conti's *Her Master's Voice*, I wish to suggest some key connections between the former and besideness as a queer theoretical proposition. "Beside" is precisely the subject of a short section of the introduction to Eve Sedgwick's 2003 volume *Touching Feeling*; sandwiched between more substantial sections on her quarrels with Butlerian performativity and Foucault's reading of the repressive hypothesis, Sedgwick's writing on "beside" feels at once crucial and crucially under-

theorized.[39] Like the remainder that defies incorporation into the whole, thus defining the whole through its defiance (and let us not forget that for Chion and his fellow Lacanians it is the voice that constitutes the body's unassimilable remainder), Sedgwick's brief account of besideness doesn't quite fit with what's around it—a misfit that paradoxically heightens its resonances throughout the rest of her text. For *Touching Feeling* as a volume is comprised of disparate essays, strung together under the aegis of what Sedgwick calls "a project to explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy" (1). As it were, the volume places Sedgwick's work—"a decade's work," she tells us (1)—alongside itself, to see what might result from this spatiotemporal experiment. Sedgwick thus frames *Touching Feeling* as a non-prescriptive instruction manual: one that doesn't simply *tell* its readers to abandon dualism, but that opens them to nondualistic "habits and practices" like the besideness activated by the form of the book itself.

I want to make clear that I am aware that the connection I am drawing between bifurcation as I have outlined it above and besideness as a nondualistic "habit and practice" may still appear contradictory. After all, isn't bifurcation by its very essence dualistic? What is Winchell's "double-barrelled thinking" if not a dualistic mode of thought? Aren't Nina and Monk the consummate duo? Isn't ventriloquism—like the audiovisual medium of film, in which sound and image are recorded separately before being printed alongside one another—the very embodiment of splitting a singular, synchronized entity *into two*? In the preceding pages, I've tried to argue for a reading of ventriloquial bifurcation, placed alongside the formal conventions of documentary film, as a practice that, while ostensibly rooted in splitting, demonstrates just how messy, how indiscernible, how actually nondualistic, that splitting may be. In its visceral

[39] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8-9.

dramatization of what many are often tempted to call schizophrenia,[40] ventriloquism effectively shows us that ventriloquist and dummy are in fact not so easily separated out into two sides of the same coin. Conti's "striptease" performance, for instance, highlights rather than obscures the violence incurred by her fission into the duo of Nina and Monk, only to reincorporate the two poles of the ventriloquist-dummy pair back into a single, Frankensteinian body. The implication is that this body, with its voice, was never cleanly "one" or "two," but rather, a kind of incongruous assemblage of parts and agencies. And Kevin Johnson's feat of bifurcation foregrounds the difficulty and partiality of this iteration of ventriloquial performance, while its documentary filmic reproduction further emphasizes the impossibility of discerning between voice and effect that undergirds ventriloquism as a practice. In these and other ways, ventriloquial bifurcation performs fission, or dualizes, only for the resultant parts to fall back into indiscernibility, or to appear alongside one another in fluctuating and unstable relation.

In philosophy of mind, dualism often connotes Cartesianism, the basis for which is the notion that mind and matter are essentially different substances. Descartes held that mind does not extend into space, and that matter is mere, unthinking, spatial extension. This well-known formulation bears repeating precisely because in ventriloquism, the concept of matter as devoid of thought is explicitly challenged. For when a dummy talks back, surprising his or her alleged master, what agency produces the voice that speaks? And is this voice material or immaterial? (Many dualists are still attempting to answer this question.) Whether it snarkily "deconstructs" the binary oppositions it appears to produce, or simply, in its very practice, casts doubt on the "true" agency of the walking, talking, living, loving puppet, ventriloquism theatricalizes dualism

[40] One has only to read any popular account of ventriloquism to find it unproblematically aligned with schizophrenia. See, for instance, the actor, screenwriter, and director Tim Robbins's comments on ventriloquism as arising from a "personality disorder" in an interview regarding his 1999 film *Cradle Will Rock*: Melanie Rehak, "The Lives They Lived: Questions for Tim Robbins; Body Double," *New York Times*, 2 Jan 2000, www.nytimes.com/2000/01/02/magazine/the-lives-they-lived-questions-for-tim-robbins-body-double.html.

in order to chip away at its foundations. This theatricalization places dualism beside itself—it crassly visualizes, visibilizes it. Ventriloquism, in other words, is not about exposing the dualism at the heart of the allegedly nondualistic, but about comedically, and yes, violently, ensnaring dualism into looking itself in the mirror.

As part of her queer theoretical project of finding ways around dualism, Sedgwick offers up "beside," alongside the reparative, as an antidote to thinking "beyond" and "beneath"—the latter being a classically paranoid formulation:

> Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos.
>
> *Beside* is an interesting preposition also because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.[41]

What happens, Sedgwick asks, when we examine things beside one other, rather than setting our sights on what is beneath or beyond, such that there's always a beginning and a projected end to the story? Thinking in terms of besideness isn't so much a critical program as it is a critical practice—a way of imagining objects and practices next to, or nearby, one another so that relations can be glimpsed in their multiplicity. But *beside* does not always, or even mostly, connote the peaceful coexistence of these objects and practices. Its logic is not necessarily that of tolerance, or of sanguine togetherness. It is capacious enough to include aggression, love,

[41] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

jealousy, obsession, competition, indifference, disidentification[42]—a diverse array of relations, and not in the sense of "diversity" as the status quo acceptance of minor differences. Importantly, *beside* is not simply a linguistic exercise. Looking at things that actually occur alongside one another in space—taking in their besideness—may provide a window onto an expansive net of possibilities. Attending to the besideness of objects and practices allows us to grasp the kind of heterogeneity that the theoretical formulation of "heterogeneity" so often overlooks.

This is, perhaps, why so much queer theoretical work has persistently engaged with the actualities of performance (and not merely with performativity): performances are not frozen objects to be contemplated, but by their very structure engage the space around them. To begin with performance is to begin with an eye towards heterogeneity. My engagement with ventriloquism as a performance practice stems from an interest in the literal dynamics that ensue when a ventriloquist publicly, or before a camera, appears beside a dummy (or beside herself); similarly, my engagement with documentary film stems from an interest in what happens to this media genre, so often taken to be one kind of thing, when it is placed alongside the heterogeneities of ventriloquial performance. The bifurcations that result, which I describe in this chapter, are not meant to be amassed into a strong "theory of bifurcation," though of course a certain amount of this generalization has happened and is bound to happen. I prefer, as I've stated above, to view bifurcation as a critical practice—in the vein of Trinh's "speaking nearby"—with different outcomes, depending on the spaces and situations within which it is employed.

[42] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For Muñoz, "disidentifications" constitute "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere" (4). A disidentification is an identification "with a difference" (15)—a desire for those parts of the whole that don't add up to its idealized form, but that, in their partiality and strung-togetherness, come to constitute something else. In this way, Muñoz's project is reparative: a new whole is constituted that may not at all resemble its former image.

A final note on besideness: reading beside, or alongside, and reading things beside one another, might be understood as a reparative practice. For Sedgwick's work on paranoia not only details the patterns of the paranoid, but also offers up reparation (in the sense developed by Melanie Klein) as an alternative critical positionality.[43] In Kleinian psychoanalysis, reparation is the process by which, after the phantasmatic destruction of the love object, one "use[s] one's own resources" to reassemble what has been destroyed into a new kind of whole.[44] We might think back, once again, to Conti and Monk's "striptease"—to the bifurcation and placement beside one another of ventriloquial bodies that culminates in their reincorporation into a queer, or perhaps queered, whole: a lady's body with a monkey-man's voice. This "striptease" is different each time it is performed and viewed as cinematic performance, because outcomes and contexts shift, gestures are tweaked and falter, what once seemed one way now seems another. The queer body that emerges from this cycle of bifurcation, besideness, and reparation may, to the normative glance, appear monstrous, but as Sedgwick points out, "Among Klein's names for the reparative process is love" (128). And as Campbell suggests to Conti in a flashback sequence towards the end of *Her Master's Voice*, love is constituted in the separation and reunification of lovers—a reunification that often consists of a different kind of whole than the one that appeared to come before. Would it, then, be going too far to suggest that love itself is, perhaps not so secretly, just as monstrous as the puppet love that would be its queer deviation?

VI. CODA: PUPPET LOVE

Like many films that purport to explore, or to redeem, heterosexual romance, *Her Master's Voice* ends up being pretty queer. The film's queerness comes in large part, as I have

[43] Melanie Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," *Love, Guilt and Reparation & Other Works 1921-1945* (Delacorte Press, 1975).

[44] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

already intimated, from its exploration of the kinds of relations forged through puppet love. For while, as the Purify Brothers suggested at the start of this paper, love turns us all into puppets (making puppet love the norm, rather than a perverse exception to the rule), there is also a rather unique genre of puppet love constituted in ventriloquism. After all, the form typically produces an intimate relation between one human agency and one or more non-human agencies, and its public performance comprises the triangulation of this duo (or trio, or quartet) with an audience, whatever form that audience may take.[45]

While ventriloquism's popularity across multiple media platforms legitimizes the art as a mass cultural form, it likewise remains associated with a perverse desire, even a need, to speak through someone else in lieu of being able to speak "for oneself." Edgar Bergen was always said to be shy with women, and to woo them through his brash, confident alter ego Charlie MacCarthy.[46] And in his 2008 autobiography, *Who's the Dummy Now?*, Terry Fator (or his ghostwriter) writes about how his father found his ventriloquism queer, and how he literally closeted his dummy as a result.[47] Ventriloquism is too blatant a form of triangulation to be normal, and is thus coded as deviant, a perversion of heterosexuality's allegedly direct, unmediated operation. Hence Fator's book title, which aggressively restores authority to the formerly emasculated ventriloquist. Hence also the contortions of Conti's untimely love affair with Campbell, routed as it is through puppets, those wood and felt intermediaries who bring them together in separation.

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[45] See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) for in-depth accounts of structures of triangulation. Following Girard, Sedgwick unpacks the queer dimensions of the form.

[46] Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPA7StwntqE.html for an example of Bergen and McCarthy's dynamic.

[47] Terry Fator, *Who's the Dummy Now?* (Sydney, Australia: New Holland, 2008).

Enacting a separation only to bring the divided parts back together is, not coincidentally, exactly what Kevin Johnson does with his bifurcated, ventriloquial voice, separating his speech from his lips before bringing the two component parts back into synchrony. These component parts, however, do not fit together in any permanent way, since synchrony is what we might call a togetherness-effect, rather than the solid truth from which asynchrony and other related aberrations stem.

What, finally, is at stake in the above reading of *Her Master's Voice* as documentary film, as ventriloquism, as mourning process, and even as puppet love story? As I have already remarked, Conti's film is not particularly experimental—though its subject matter, ventriloquism, with its persistent framing as a "fringe" practice, may well be. Indeed, *Her Master's Voice* largely operates in the mode of the cinematic ventriloquism described by Altman and Chion: the film's production apparatus remains hidden from view for the work's duration, fostering the illusions of directness, immediacy, and synchronicity upon which mainstream cinema still depends.[48] And yet it is not *Her Master's Voice*'s, nor is it ventriloquism's, destiny to unveil the machinery lurking "behind" the screen, that fantasy space of projection. It is not the film's, nor is it ventriloquism's, fate to expose the sneaky bifurcations of sound and image, voice and body. Rather, as Winchell's instructional writing on ventriloquism suggests, the film's didactic (yet magical) ventriloquial demonstrations, as well as its ambivalent portrait of the delights and downers of ventriloquism as art and as compulsion, proffer bifurcation as an art to be practiced and (imperfectly) perfected. Put otherwise, *Her Master's Voice* foregrounds bifurcation *as a practice*, rather than as a schism necessarily obscured by the more hegemonic practices of suture and synchronization. And like Trinh's non-totalizing formulation of "speaking

[48] While we can see lapel mics on Conti and her interviewees, we never glimpse a camera or a cameraman, a boom, etc. We are not alerted to how the film was filmed as we watch it.

nearby," *Her Master's Voice*'s bifurcations model a queer critical practice rooted in being, and in speaking, beside—with all the loves and antagonisms besideness entails.

CHAPTER FOUR
Speaking and Singing for the "Silenced Majority":
Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator's "American" Ventriloquism

> [T]he crowd doesn't laugh; it riotously applauds. Dunham describes them as moments of "catharsis," when the dummy says something "everyone wants to laugh about, or that you snicker at with one or two friends, but that you could never say out loud."
>
> JON MOOALLEM, quoting Jeff Dunham[1]

> His African-American characters even receive a warm reception, though audiences don't usually start that way…. "Obviously, it's going to be shocking. People look at me a little nervously," Fator said. "But when I start singing, all objections fade away and they love it."
>
> JOE HADSALL, quoting Terry Fator[2]

> Trump is saying what we all want to say but can't say it.
>
> MARCIA BOUCVALT, 54, Covington, Louisiana[3]

I. INTRODUCTION

Ventriloquism's frequent association with the backwards (and backwoods) entertainment culture of a whitewashed, folksy "American Middle" is deftly satirized in a 2009 episode of the long-running NBC sitcom, *30 Rock*. Titled "Stone Mountain" after the real city of Stone Mountain, Georgia (pop. 5,976), the episode follows Jack Donaghy, an NBC executive, and Liz Lemon, the head writer of the network's fictional live sketch comedy show *TGS with Tracy*

[1] Jon Mooallem, "Comedy for Dummies," *The New York Times Magazine*, last modified October 29, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/magazine/01ventriloquist-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[2] Joe Hadsall, "He's no dummy: 'America's Got Talent' winner to perform in Branson," *The Joplin Globe*, last modified July 10, 2008, http://www.joplinglobe.com/news/lifestyles/he-s-no-dummy-america-s-got-talent-winner-to/article_7abe3484-0cc5-5d4e-841f-25e213a21a1e.html.

[3] Jessica Williams, "Donald Trump 'saying what we all want to say, but can't say': St. Tammany, Jefferson supporters praise frontrunner," *The Advocate*, last modified March 9, 2016, http://theadvocate.com/news/neworleans/neworleansnews/15116677-93/donald-trump-saying-what-we-all-want-to-say-but-cant-say-it-st-tammany-jeff-supporters-praise-gop-f.

Jordan, as the two New Yorkers journey to small-town USA in search of authentically "American" television programming. Jack is a cosmopolitan Republican one-percenter who holds fast to the idyllic fantasy that he and Liz will discover, in Stone Mountain, "an actor from Middle America, a real person"—someone who "makes actual human beings laugh." A consummate white feminist and liberal Democrat, Liz maintains, referencing Obama referencing Palin, that "no part of America is any more American than any other part," and predicts that Jack's misguided romanticism will unearth no programmable talent. But while Liz writhes in digestive agony, brought on by an all-too-American surf-and-turf po' boy sandwich from a regional fast food chain, Jack heads out to the local Laugh Factory (also known as the Chuckle Hut), where he takes in a ventriloquist act, Rick Wayne and Pumpkin. Played by real-life ventriloquist Jeff Dunham and his signature redneck dummy, Bubba J, the duo's twangy accents and PG-rated bathroom puns have Jack in stitches. Delighted by what he willfully perceives as their quaintly amusing routine, Jack resolves to feature Rick Wayne and Pumpkin on *TGS*.

Upon her stomach's recovery, Liz is horrified by Jack's top-down decision to bring a ventriloquist, of all things, on to her show. The Wall-Streeter and the Liberal argue for their competing visions of America, Americans, and Americanness, with Jack accusing Liz of being a "prejudiced, arrogant New Yorker." "In your mind," he spouts, "a southern ventriloquist act can't be funny, but you know who *does* think it's funny—these people. These wonderful, folksy, simple—" until Liz interjects, "Stop calling them 'simple!' …Sure, some of these people are simple. But some of them are smart, like Matlock…. My point is, Americans are the same everywhere, in that we are all different." Determined to stop Jack from embarrassing her and the network, Liz attends one of Rick Wayne's performances, where she heckles him and Pumpkin to expose the fragility of their act. She quickly realizes that she has "underestimated" (her words)

the ventriloquist when he and his dummy hilariously eviscerate her. The audience laughs uproariously as Pumpkin proclaims Liz a "thin-lipped hooker" and a "ferret-faced skank," followed by more explicit commentary on her uneven "knockers" and lack of fuckability. When Jack leaps in to defend her honor (at which the feminist Liz rolls her eyes), he is also verbally dismembered. To Jack's admonition that "a gentleman, whether he's human or somehow more than human, does not speak to a lady like that," Pumpkin replies, "Oh, I get it. You think 'cause we talk like this, we're all simple and quaint. Well, I'm an amateur astronomer and Rick's black wife speaks French" (to which Rick adds, "her name's Jamilla"). When the dummy ridicules Jack's large head, Liz is unable to stop herself from laughing, and transforms from a cynical New Yorker into a rural American audience member, for whom ventriloquism is both an enduringly viable entertainment form and a vehicle for a brash variety of class critique—a way, as it were, to "speak truth to power." Emasculated by a puppet and thus toppled from his pose of condescension, Jack loses his cool and becomes violent. He takes the stage and decapitates Pumpkin before fleeing back to New York.[4]

I begin this chapter with "Stone Mountain," featuring the cameo appearance of ventriloquist Dunham and dummy Bubba J, not only because Dunham's work is one of the chapter's two central case studies but because this popular sitcom episode reflects and lampoons the particular set of U.S. cultural bifurcations on which the final leg of our ventriloquial journey rests. Through its televisual deployment of ventriloquism's persistently anachronistic form, "Stone Mountain" illuminates, and indeed satirizes, some of the wider splits and fissures at the heart of contemporary white America's self-imagination. Indeed, ventriloquism—with its dual valences as a crass, often poorly executed, variety form (think the stereotypical "bad

[4] All citations in the above paragraphs are from *30 Rock*, "Stone Mountain," Season 4, Episode 3, directed by Don Scardino, written by Tina Fey and John Riggi, NBC, Oct. 29, 2009.

ventriloquist") and a black tie performance practice elevated and refined by the likes of Edgar Bergen (the ventriloquist as artist)—here becomes the primary vector for a searing critique of the dualistic relations that so prominently, and problematically, structure the unwieldy heterogeneity of white American identity. Bodying forth and provoking the expression of reigning hyperbolic framings of the geographical and cultural divides between coastal and "Middle" America, the urban and rural United States, the Democratic and Republican political parties, U.S. conservatism and liberalism, "white trash" and white cosmopolitanism, the ventriloquist act encapsulates and explodes what Roland Barthes called "the stereotypes which constitute our 'depth'" as only a puppet show can.[5] As Rick Wayne and Pumpkin, Jeff Dunham and Bubba J affect mirror images of the slack-jawed yokel, a doubling of the character of the regressive, drawling white male hick that serves the dual purpose of lambasting and recuperating this figure in one fell swoop. This double-movement is performed in the service of *30 Rock*'s at once self-deprecating and self-serving commentary on the narrow-minded inability of white, urban, coastal liberals and conservatives alike to imagine how to "play to Peoria" in the contemporary moment. Dunham's appearance on the show enables a reversal: those who think themselves superior (whether they're overtly paternalistic, like Jack, or disingenuously egalitarian, like Liz) are revealed to be nothing more than dummies, whose incessant iterations of half-baked generalizations are quickly and efficiently unmasked by an *actual* dummy, who has nothing to lose because he has no skin in the human game. This dummy, the white country bumpkin that white liberals love to hate and white conservatives love to romanticize, gets the final word, and in so doing reclaims the space of Stone Mountain as a place simultaneously in step with, and outside of, a progressive U.S. cultural temporality. Pumpkin's decapitation is but a temporary setback, as he is not human but rather, in Jack's words, "somehow more than human." In Rick

[5] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 55.

Wayne's hands, Pumpkin is the bionic toy that saves the town from the ignorant New Yorkers, whose own ignorance ironically rests in their presumption of the town's ignorance.

Through its linked case studies of the performance practices of Dunham and his equally famous colleague, the Las Vegas-based ventriloquist Terry Fator, this chapter argues that today's mainstream U.S. ventriloquists achieve mass popularity by channeling the voice/s of an imagined "silenced majority" through the remediated vehicle of ventriloquism's anachronistic form.[6] In a contemporary white America riven by the ideological divisions *30 Rock* so aptly satirizes, and in which Trumpism has taken hold as the purported means by which white Americans who "can't say what they want to say" are given a boomingly audible voice, the reconstructed ventriloquisms of Dunham and Fator also proffer themselves as conduits for this fantasized *vox populi* or "voice of the people"—a people who, the present rhetoric goes, are not merely "silent" but have been actively muted by reigning discourses of "political correctness."[7] Unlike Donald Trump, whose now iconic body serves as a visible loudspeaker for this still implicitly white voice's projection, Dunham and Fator project their own versions of the metaphorically singular *vox populi* the Vaudevillian way: through their dummies. The technological extension of ventriloquism beyond its usual theatrical iteration as a stage practice involving one ventriloquist,

[6] The term "silent majority" was popularized, in the U.S. context, by Richard Nixon's 1969 speech on Vietnamization, in which the then president urged a "silent majority" of Americans, i.e. those not explicitly protesting the war in Vietnam, to support the war effort. This "silent majority" was implicitly white and Middle American. See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Great Silent Majority: Nixon's 1969 Speech on Vietnamization* (Library of Congress, 2014). See also Matthew D. Lassiter, "Who Speaks for the Silent Majority?," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 2011, accessed Oct. 6, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/03/opinion/populism-and-the-silent-majority.html. I use the term "silenced majority" to indicate that current U.S. appeals to a so-called "silent majority" take for granted the notion that said "majority" is not only "silent," but has been actively *silenced* by liberal/progressive/minoritarian forces (on which more later).

[7] See Sam Sanders, "Trump Champions The 'Silent Majority,' But What Does That Mean In 2016?," *NPR*, January 22, 2016, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2016/01/22/463884201/trump-champions-the-silent-majority-but-what-does-that-mean-in-2016. Writes Sanders, "the silent majority today is all about the rise of what [some] call 'PC culture.'" For an excellent analysis of the multivalent meaning of "political correctness" or "PC" in the contemporary cultural context, see Norman Fairclough, "'Political correctness': the politics of culture and language," *Discourse and Society* 14, no. 1 (2003): 17-28. Writes Fairclough, "A primary target of critiques of 'PC' has been attempts by feminists, anti-racists and others to persuade certain organizations such as workplaces or universities to adopt guidelines which ask people to think about how they act and speak," 21.

one dummy, and two microphones, enables each ventriloquist to command a squadron of archetypal dummies, whose gendered and racialized voices furnish a plurality of viewpoints that would appear to negate the dominance of a singular voice or type thereof. As a case in point, Dunham and Fator's dummy-squads each include a white slack-jawed yokel figure in the manner of Rick Wayne's Pumpkin, a benign countrified character who is offset by a "cool," urban, black dummy—a soul singer or a pimp whose animation by the white ventriloquist constitutes an act of present-day blackface minstrelsy. Yet both Dunham and Fator claim, and their audiences concur, that the polyvocality of their acts cancels out the persistence of any discernibly political, much less white supremacist perspective. On the contrary, this chapter argues that the "diverse" voices of Dunham's and Fator's dummies collectively function to position the often muted or silent "proper voice" of the white heterosexual male ventriloquist as a neutral entity. Through the classic use of ventriloquial misdirection, then, Dunham and Fator reconnect the identity of the mythical *vox populi* to whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality, while inciting this "silenced" voice to speak through a melting pot of archetypal bodies.

II. THE MINSTREL, THE YOKEL, AND THE "VOICE OF THE PEOPLE"

Ventriloquism is always, in some sense, about the act of reanimation, but Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator's ventriloquial practices reach particularly deep into the archives of both U.S. blackface minstrelsy and U.S. white redneck imagery to resuscitate familiar, yet anachronistic, figures for contemporary U.S. consumption. In each of their acts, the historically potent tropes of the minstrel and the yokel enact a deceptive polarity, a bifurcation whose seemingly oppositional voices mask the understated, often silent, operation of the implicitly neutral voice of the white, male, heterosexual ventriloquist, whose own errant markers of difference have been heavily

muted. This neutral voice, coded as white and thus unfettered by racialization, captivates its predominantly white, Middle American, audience, I argue, by itself standing in for an imagined *vox populi*, a paradoxically singular "voice of the people" that speaks on behalf of the crowd or the mass, and whose speech emblematizes the drives and desires of that collective body.[8] As I will later demonstrate, while Dunham both consciously and unconsciously orients his ventriloquial practice around giving voice to a broad constituency presumably silenced by contemporary "liberal" discourses of "political correctness," Fator's performative focus on his own voice's ability to transcend the boundaries of race, gender, and genre under ventriloquial constraint (i.e. without moving his lips) more closely emblematizes the latter half of the *vox populi* proverb, whose Latinate usage dates back to at least eighth century England: *Vox populi vox Dei*, or, "the voice of the people is the voice of God."[9] First, however, I will contextualize the grounds for these two ventriloquists' reanimations of the figures of blackface minstrel and white trash yokel in the service of channeling and projecting *vox populi* and *vox Dei*, as well as attend to the bifurcations that both fissure and structure the latter linked totalities.

The connections and overlaps between the practices of blackface minstrelsy, whose heyday cultural theorist Eric Lott locates squarely in the protracted middle of the long nineteenth century (1846-54), and Vaudevillian ventriloquism, whose U.S. zenith spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have gone virtually unexamined.[10] While blackface minstrelsy—the American theatrical tradition in which white actors used burnt cork and other darkening materials to "black up" their faces for the purpose of performing racialized caricatures

[8] See George Boas, *Vox Populi: Essays in the History of an Idea* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), for a history of the term *vox populi*, which today is colloquially defined as the "voice of the people."

[9] According to Boas, the proverb first appeared—at least in textual form—in a letter from Alcuin to Charlemagne in roughly 798. Ibid., 8-9.

[10] Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

of black people before predominantly white working-class audiences—has by now been extensively theorized,[11] ventriloquism's taking up of the mantle of blackface during and after the period of blackface's alleged decline is rarely acknowledged in histories of the form.[12] One has only to research ventriloquism's fairly recent past, however, to find blackface iconography in abundance, alongside a substantial material archive of black puppets formerly wielded by white ventriloquists, which, whether they are visibly "blacked up" or simply "black," are endowed with exaggerated facial features and other racialized characteristics.[13] In the ventriloquial archive, blackface is not a bygone practice whose imagery is all that remains: blackface is materially, three-dimensionally present in the form of the black, or blacked up, dummy, who stands ready for reanimation by a racialized voice. Thus, blackface minstrelsy has not been erased, or disavowed, from the history of ventriloquism; on the contrary, the former practice's centrality to the latter is hidden in plain sight. The blackface minstrel dummy is displayed for all to see, but the assumption seems to be that without the materialization of a white body to speak through that dummy in racialized tones, the dummy is, accordingly, divested of both its minstrelsy and its racism.[14] Ironically, this logic of distance, which claims that the temporal separation between white body and black puppet divests blackface ventriloquism—or simply, "racial ventriloquism,"

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[11] See, among other works, Ibid. and Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). See also Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[12] Neither Stanley Burns' often anecdotal history of ventriloquism, nor Steven Connor's scholarly cultural history of the form, mention blackface minstrelsy in any detail (much less critically explore its historical interpenetration with ventriloquial performance). Stanley Burns, *Other Voices: Ventriloquism from B.C. to T.V.* (Sylvia Burns, 2000). Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[13] I found countless examples of blackface iconography being used within the context of historical and contemporary ventriloquial performance in the archives at both Harvard's Houghton Library (which houses the Harvard Theatre Collection) and the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. I also saw scores of "blacked up" and "black" ventriloquist dummies at Vent Haven, none of which were openly acknowledged as examples of blackface minstrelsy.

[14] I base this observation on my experience at Vent Haven.

where ventriloquism is understood as a bodily as well as a vocal act—of its racist content, is also utilized beyond the space of the museum, to answer for both historical and contemporary practices of racial ventriloquism. For by this same logic, the very bifurcation between white Vaudevillian ventriloquist (with his white face) and black puppet (with his black face) means that the act cannot be "blackface," even if the two entities are directly engaged in a dialogue, with the latter seated on the former's knee. In this way, the contemporary blackface, or racial, ventriloquist—Jeff Dunham, Terry Fator—benefits from the double-distance afforded by both history and ventriloquial bifurcation. At once separated from the racialized ventriloquisms of the past and from the racialized dummies whose voices he "throws" from a safe remove in the present-day, he can perform blackface minstrelsy on national television and in large arenas with comparatively little blowback a full century and a half after the U.S. decline of the form. The above theorization is, perhaps, an overcomplicated way of saying that the racial ventriloquisms of Dunham and Fator are not merely strikingly similar to the racial ventriloquisms of the past. They are virtually the same. What is different, then, about their sameness?

Lott's account of blackface minstrelsy, whose apex directly preceded the great bifurcation known as the American Civil War, argues that the practice manifested a dialectical negotiation between the poles of what he calls "love and theft," a movement that ultimately, though ambivalently, resulted in the consolidation of classed whiteness. "Underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear," he writes, "the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line even as it made possible the formation of a self-consciously white working class."[15] Taking as his jumping-off point the practice's ubiquity in the prewar urban, northeastern United States, Lott situates blackface as a new kind of entertainment industry specifically geared towards the nation's white masses during a profoundly tenuous

[15] Lott, *Love & Theft*, 8.

moment of capitalist formation—what he and many others see as "the most politically explosive moment of the nineteenth century."[16] And just as the moment of its emergence was schismatic, amplifying cultural bifurcations along the lines of race (white/black), class (high/low), and region (North/South), the practice itself hinged on a crucial "doubleness" (Lott's word), a staging of oppositional qualities alongside one another that produced a bifurcated structure of feeling. Minstrelsy traded in the uncanny in the same manner as ventriloquism, simultaneously mobilizing fear and cheer, "terror as well as great affection."[17] Indeed, Lott describes the practice as a "ventriloquized cultural form,"[18] "a case of popular racial ventriloquism" wherein whites with their faces perceptibly blackened (and thus always still visible as whites) dressed in costume, gestured and danced in exaggerated, allegedly black styles, and used "vernacular accents" to speak as blacks supposedly did, or to sing "appropriated black song[s]."[19] Thus alongside minstrelsy's aesthetics of clowning, undergirded as it was by a tug-of-war between curiosity and phobia, blackface performers (who were, in actuality, "voices of the dominant racial culture") attempted to reproduce typically "black" speaking and singing voices—with sometimes "undesirable" results.[20] For just as a ventriloquist's dummy sometimes speaks out of turn to surprise, to challenge, or even to horrify her puppetmaster, the simulated black vernacular of the white minstrel performer had the potential to evade him—to embark on another line of flight. The "subversive dimensions" of this stolen vernacular could not, Lott argues, always be neutralized; the implicit superiority of the white performer beneath the black mask could not always be comfortably maintained.[21]

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[16] Ibid., 37.
[17] Ibid., 25.
[18] Ibid., 56.
[19] Ibid., 102.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

For Lott, minstrelsy's double-tongued potential to resist its own racist expressions (among other contradictions) gives the lie to what he sees as a pernicious "dualism" in reigning analyses of the form, which tend to cast blackface as "people's culture vs. cultural domination."[22] The form begged both of these diagnoses, he tells us, while also exceeding them. Indeed, as Daphne Brooks demonstrates, the performances of bodily transmutation and alienation that defined blackface minstrelsy at once attempted a white supremacist "possession and domination of blackness" and played a vital "role in the making of a spectacularly incongruous body *as* a performance strategy unto itself" (a strategy that, Brooks argues, participated in the formation of a crucially dissident strain of transatlantic theatrical work conceived and enacted by African American, Anglo, and racially ambiguous performers).[23] Like Lott, Brooks emphasizes minstrelsy's ventriloquial dimension, asserting the means by which, "[w]hite minstrel show performers exploited the genre's premise of spectacularly racialized difference in order to reaffirm the superior skill of white performers to invade, occupy, and ventriloquize alien blackness."[24] Here Brooks might be describing the contemporary ventriloquisms of Dunham and Fator, each of which relies heavily on the grounding presumptions of bodily and vocal racialized difference in order to assert the performer's "superior skill"—his supremacy, as it were—at channeling a gamut of characters and types whose outer limit is the "alien blackness" Brooks invokes. Yet as Brooks observes, such performative affirmations of white supremacy do not merely act to secure the whiteness, or the supremacy, they aim to project. For like "the heterogeneous body of the blackface figure," the white minstrel ventriloquist "performs 'blackness' while simultaneously enacting and producing 'whiteness.' Minstrelsy conserves the

[22] Ibid., 37.

[23] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 26, 25. Brooks's formulation of "possession and domination" is her reading of Hartman's work on minstrelsy.

[24] Ibid., 28.

performance of 'whiteness' and 'blackness,' holding them in tension with one another and grotesquely exposing the mutual constitution of the former with the latter."[25] A black dummy in the hands of a white ventriloquist at once shores up "whiteness" and makes the symbiosis of "whiteness" and "blackness" grotesquely audio-visible. More pointedly, a black puppet in the hands of a white puppetmaster makes audio-visible how crucial "blackness" is to "whiteness'" self-understanding and self-constitution. However, where the blackface minstrel performer dons a black mask and speaks in blackvoice through his "own" lips, the racial ventriloquist paints a puppet black and speaks in blackvoice through the lips of his dummy. The former body is visibly "heterogeneous," while the white and black bodies of ventriloquist and dummy make material the fantasy bifurcation between "whiteness" and "blackness."

If the imagined bifurcation between "whiteness" and "blackness" is made visible—indeed, materialized—by the white ventriloquist's appearance alongside his black puppet, and if this split is both widened and undermined by the material heterogeneity of the ventriloquial voice and its ambivalent projection of racialized vernacular, the white ventriloquist's appearance alongside his white yokel (or hillbilly, or redneck) puppet further reinforces and problematizes "whiteness." Holding competing constructions of whiteness in tension with one another, the white ventriloquist's mobilization of the figure of the "white trash" or "country" white yokel frames whiteness as a capacious category, while blackness remains confined to the figure of the black puppet, and thus to singularity. Yet the yokel, in its evocation of a kind of outer limit of whiteness—a whiteness that is, in Matt Wray's words, "not quite white"—also tests "the

[25] Ibid., 29

boundaries of whiteness," highlighting the category's fragility even as this figure may function to secure the neutrally coded, only lightly accented, middle class whiteness of the ventriloquist.[26]

My demonstrated preference, in this chapter, for the term "yokel," and particularly for the construction "slack-jawed yokel," is driven by the expression's potentially ventriloquial connotations rather than by its historical or representational accuracy. On a purely associative, colloquial level, "yokel" derogatorily indicates a feeble-minded person from a small town or a rural place, one whose jaw hangs open in perpetual wonder.[27] The yokel's "slack-jawed" comportment dovetails with her figuration as someone—even some*thing*—whose speech is impeded and imperfect, whose loose jaw works in tandem with her implicitly impoverished linguistic ability to render her, if not speechless, speaking badly. Since the prototypical ventriloquist figure is (also) a dummy defined by its hinged jaw, which slackens and tightens only at her master's behest, and with whose jerky movements contorted speech is synchronized, "slack-jawed yokel" seems the ideal catch-all descriptor for ventriloquist dummies like Dunham's Bubba J and Fator's soon-to-be-described yodeler Walter T. Airedale, each of whom espouses a "country" white sensibility. These representatives of yokelry are, however, quite dichotomous, and their crucial disparity reflects what several scholars have identified as the structuring dualism that undergirds many historical and reigning representations of U.S. rural, or countrified, whiteness. Thus, rather than historicizing the distinctions between the many monikers affixed to the "not quite white" inhabitants of places like Stone Mountain, Georgia—a

[26] Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[27] The OED definition of "yokel" is "an uneducated and unsophisticated person from the countryside; a rustic, a country bumpkin." "yokel, n. and adj.". OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/232060?redirectedFrom=yokel (accessed October 06, 2016).

partial list of which Scott Herring has brilliantly generated[28]—I want to briefly examine the bifurcations that attend to so many of these figurations of "whiteness."

Arguing that one such figure, the hillbilly, best represents the bifurcations endemic to so many representations of U.S. "country" whiteness across a diverse array of audiovisual media, Anthony Harkins attributes this figure's cultural longevity to what he calls its "semantic malleability."[29] According to Harkins, the enduring descriptor "hillbilly" was first coined in 1900, as if to distinguish once and for all the country's backwards, backwoods past from its modern, urban present. The usually pejorative characterization has historically been positioned as a "*primarily*…benignly humorous (if somewhat condescending) term," yet one that also has the potential to "evoke degradation, violence, animalism, and carnality, as well as more positive conceptions of romantic rurality, cultural and ethnic purity, pioneer heritage, and personal and communal interdependence and self-sufficiency."[30] The latter conceptions are of course only construed as "positive" within the overlapping contexts of U.S. white supremacy and imperialism. Harkins draws attention to this fact by acknowledging the reactionary recodification of "hillbilly"—and other terms like it—within some of the white American communities initially unwillingly grouped under its derogatory aegis:

> Many of these…labels were used interchangeably as putdowns of working-class southern whites…. But they were also reappropriated by some as badges of class and racial identity and pride. "Hillbilly," "redneck," "cracker," and recently even "poor white trash" have all been embraced to mark an "oppositional culture"

[28] The epigraph to the introduction of Herring's *Another Country* connects the pejorative monikers typically ascribed to rural whites to the pejorative monikers for the kinds of places said rural whites are presumed to live: "country, country bumpkin, rube, hayseed, Hoosier, hillbilly, clay eater, redneck, yokel, yooper, hick, Hicksville, backwater, boondocks, trailer trash, the middle of nowhere, the midwaste, flyover country, the sticks, the backwoods, the hinterlands, the outskirts, Sticksville, Shitsville, shitkicker, jerkwater, Podunk, Bumfuck, East Bumfuck, East Bumble-fuck, East Butt-Fuck, BFE, Butt-Fuck Egypt." Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 1.

[29] Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

[30] Ibid.

> against a hegemonic middle-class culture and the relative gain in status of African Americans and other minority social groups.[31]

As Harkins makes clear, the hillbilly label provided—and indeed still provides—an axis of differentiation as well as a point of identification for white Americans who, far from constituting a homogeneous mass, formed a heterogeneous demographic striated along class, cultural, and geographical lines. If urban middle-class whites used the term to denigrate rural working-class whites, the latter used the term to "talk back" to the former. And on both ends, there was a certain fascination—a kind of "narcissism of minor [or not-so-minor] differences."[32] That is, those whites not immediately interpellated by the hillbilly image could nevertheless see themselves in it as if in an inverted mirror, which prompted both attraction and repulsion. And those whites for whom the term was meant could see themselves as well, albeit from a similarly angular perspective. The figure of the hillbilly thus was, and continues to be, anamorphotic. A distorted projection, it cannot be viewed head-on. One has to look askance to apprehend it.[33]

In Harkins's language, the hillbilly is naggingly "dualistic," combining into a single term/image "both 'otherness' and self-identification."[34] Working at cross-purposes with itself, the figure both "allow[s] the 'mainstream,' or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society."[35] Giving shape to a forked desire, the hillbilly conjures the best of times and the worst of times, nostalgia and progressivism, simplicity and futurity, pastoralism and modernity.

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[31] Ibid., 5-6.

[32] Freud used this phrase to describe the "phenomenon that it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 72

[33] On anamorphosis and the "distorted grid," see Ackbar Abbas, "Building Hong Kong: From Migrancy to Disappearance," in *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*, ed. Stephen Cairns (New York: Routledge, 2004), 134-36.

[34] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 6.

[35] Ibid., 7.

Alongside the figure's temporal bifurcation, adds Harkins, the hillbilly also provides a "seemingly apolitical site" for negotiations around race, gender, sexuality, and other hot-button issues that may appear more fraught than intra-white American struggles.[36] What becomes abundantly clear in Harkins's text—which characterizes the American "mainstream" as nonrural, middle-class, and white; and which positions the hillbilly's whiteness as a "seemingly apolitical" position from which to operate—is the extent to which whiteness is positioned as a neutral category, yet one whose neutrality must be constantly upkept and maintained, even at the cost of dividing whiteness against itself. As Harkins, Wray, and others have demonstrated, descriptors like "hillbilly" and "white trash" attempt to establish boundaries for whiteness, to consolidate the category even as they make legible its fallibility.[37] If the blackface minstrel show provides a "safe space" for the white *working-class* performer to both identify with and define himself against "alien blackness,"[38] the deployment of the figure of the hillbilly, the yokel, or the country bumpkin provides a "safe space" for the white *middle-class* performer to both flirt with and put further distance between himself and the outer limit/s of whiteness, not to mention the "alien blackness" against which "whiteness" is defined in the U.S. white supremacist context.

As I will soon detail, in the contemporary ventriloquial performances of both Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator we find direct enactments of both blackface minstrelsy and yokel stereotypes. At first glance, the figures of the blackface minstrel and the slack-jawed yokel may appear to undo one another, to set up each ventriloquist's performance as projecting a kind of equal-opportunity racism that renders racism itself moot. But just as the facile formulation of "reverse racism" fails to acknowledge the structuring mechanism of antiblackness, the notion

[36] Ibid., 8.

[37] Writes Wray in *Not Quite White*, "we should reconceptualize whiteness as a flexible set of social and symbolic boundaries that give shape, meaning, and power to the social category *white*," 6.

[38] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 28.

that minstrel and yokel cancel each other out misdirects our attention, averting our gaze from what is hidden in plain sight. For as we well know, the dueling figures of minstrel and yokel are accompanied by a third figure that not only animates their bodies, but invests them with voices—all the while appearing to permit them to speak for themselves. This figure, the ventriloquist, possesses a "seemingly apolitical" body,[39] one that serves as a neutral conduit for the "other voices" he channels into audibility.[40] And like the bodies of the "Founding Fathers"—alongside those of so many other politicians then and now, whose voices have been said to represent the "voice of the people"—the ventriloquist's body is a body coded as white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual.

The deeply classed character of the *vox populi* is evident in the earliest known textual usage of the term. Wrote the eighth century English scholar Alcuin in a letter to Charlemagne, "The people in accordance with divine law are to be led, not followed. And when witnesses are needed, men of position are to be preferred. Nor are those to be listened to who are accustomed to say, 'The voice of the people is the voice of God.' For the clamor of the crowd [*vulgi*] is very close to madness."[41] For Alcuin—as for many in the upper ranks, we might surmise—"men of position" are the "preferred" demographic to bear witness to (indeed, to interpret) "divine law," which, he says, already accords that "the people" are sheep and the Lord (with assistance from said "men of position") their shepherd. Yet, there are "those"—other "men of position," perhaps—who proclaim, *Vox populi vox Dei*. These anonymous individuals (or this anonymous group) should not be lent an ear. For according to Alcuin, what they construe to be a singular voice is in fact "the clamor of the crowd," which verges on "madness." In this, George Boas's

[39] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 8.

[40] See Burns, *Other Voices*, for an example of the overall characterization of the ventriloquial voice as "other."

[41] Quoted in Boas, *Vox Populi*, 9.

1969 translation of the scholar's original letter, Alcuin casts the "voice" of the proverb as a specifically manmade noise, where "clamor" indicates the earsplitting roar produced by a mass of human beings yelling, shouting, screaming, or making other sounds loudly, insistently, and in unison. Though Alcuin's word, *tumultuositas*, is frequently translated as "riotousness" or "turbulence," its connection to the English adjective "tumultuousness" is unmissable.[42] Like "clamor," "tumult" has a sonic valence; the basic dictionary definition includes "disorderly agitation or milling about of a crowd usually with uproar and confusion of voices."[43] If "confusion of voices" sounds a lot like ventriloquism, so does "madness" (translated from Alcuin's *insaniae*): the schizophrenic is said to hear a profusion of voices and the ventriloquist is often said to externalize these voices, to vocalize his own schizophrenia. Indeed, Jeff Dunham regularly incorporates references to *insaniae* into his ventriloquial shtick; as a case in point, he titled his second Comedy Central special *Jeff Dunham: Spark of Insanity* (2007). His first such special, *Arguing with Myself* (2006), also packs a reference to schizophrenia or bipolarity, and the title of his 2010 autobiography, *All By My Selves*, invokes multiple personality disorder.

I draw these connections not to affirm ventriloquism's status as the product of mental illness, but rather to underscore the extent to which often pathologizing discourses of voice/s and voicing continue to play a central role in conversations about U.S. populism and popular entertainment. Looking back at the epigraphs that began this chapter, we can see that in both contemporary U.S. ventriloquism and contemporary U.S. politics, there is a prevailing sense that a certain *vox populi* needs to be heard, but that this clamorous, or tumultuous, voice cannot be

[42] Reproduced in Boas, the original Latin reads, "Populus juxta sanctiones divinas ducendus est, non sequendus; et ad testimonium personae magis eliguntur honeste. Nec audiendi qui solent dicere: Vox populi, vox Dei, cum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit." Ibid., 11.

[43] "Tumult," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed October 5, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tumult. For its part, the OED emphasizes "confused speech": "Commotion of a multitude, usually with confused speech or uproar; public disturbance; disorderly or riotous proceeding." "tumult, n.". OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/207404?result=1&rskey=vj6K99& (accessed October 06, 2016).

directly vocalized by the crowd to whom it belongs. The ventriloquist's function (the functions of Dunham and Fator), as well as the politician's function (the function of Trump), is ostensibly to channel the "voice of the people," to echo it back to them, and to obtain their approval (ratings). And because, as Boas points out, the concept of "the people" is porous and ever open to definition and interpretation,[44] and because entertainers and politicians want and need to secure the attention and support of the broadest possible demographics, the *vox populi* remains amorphous, polyvocal, noisy. This does not, however, mean that certain frequencies cannot be extracted from the clamor.

If we listen closely to Dunham's "confusion of voices," as I do in the following section, we can hear within its literal and figurative white noise a distinct nostalgia for a past "America" in which direct expressions of sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia were still permissible—the implicit assumption being, of course, that they no longer are. Articulated through the soft lips of a purple puppet from "Micronesia" or the papier-mâché lips of a sombrero-wearing jalapeño pepper on a stick, Dunham's *vox populi* enacts its polyvocality in the service of white supremacy, yet the ventriloquial misdirection at play allows the ventriloquist to repeatedly and effectively claim—and his audience to rest assured and guilt-free—that he is merely an equal-opportunity jester who makes jokes for "everyone." Relatedly, yet in contrast, Fator frames his chameleonic singing voice as a transcendental voice, one whose divine powers permit its assumption of all the "vocal colors" of the rainbow. His voice is not just one voice; it is "the voice," invoking not simply the worldliness of *vox populi* but the otherworldliness of *vox Dei*. Fator's voice's emanation also conjures nostalgia for the unabashed racial ventriloquisms of the nation's performative past (and present), when minstrel songs could be performed without mediating puppets. Like the musical projects of a certain Frank Farian, Fator's act seems wistful

[44] See Boas, "Who Are the People?," *Vox Populi*, 39-71.

for the (enduring) days when white men could still sing soul music and be praised for having the voices of angels.

III. A VOICE FOR "EVERYONE"

Like Nina Conti, Jeff Dunham (b. 1962) is often credited with having breathed new life into the outdated art of ventriloquism. In stark contrast to Conti, however, whose engagement with English avant-garde theater spurred her to take up the practice, Dunham came to ventriloquism the American way; a child of the late 1960s and early 1970s, he saw vents and their dummies performing on television. Shortly thereafter, Dunham relates in his 2010 autobiography, *All By My Selves: Walter, Peanut, Achmed and Me*, his mother bought him an "orange-haired, bucktoothed" replica of Edgar Bergen's dummy Mortimer Snerd, and at eight years old Dunham took up the craft.[45] As Bergen's slow-witted and hickish secondary dummy (the famous ventriloquist's right hand man being the debonair, top-hatted Charlie McCarthy),

[45] Jeff Dunham, *All By My Selves: Walter, Peanut, Achmed, and Me* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 4. The ventriloquist autobiography, like the ventriloquist instruction manual, is both a practical and a peculiar genre. For the contemporary media savvy ventriloquist, a written autobiography contributes to the multiplatform expansion (and thus increased profitability) of his or her act by allowing the ventriloquist, who so often speaks in other voices, to play the part of him or herself—to speak in his or her "own voice," as it were. This written voice, framed as the proper voice of the ventriloquist, furnishes a behind-the-scenes window into the immersive, audiovisual environs of the performance, in the process further "humanizing" the human who animates the puppets that fans have often come to see as more "human," more animate, more alive, than the ventriloquist him or herself. Dunham's autobiography, which arcs from the ventriloquist's self-described "happy, drama-free youth, growing up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Dallas, Texas" (1), through his oscillating career in show business, attendant relocation to Los Angeles, subsequent and growing acclaim as a comedian, and painful divorce, only to close on his rapid remarriage to a younger woman (with whom he now has infant twin boys), cannily subverts the "auto" in autobiography by incorporating commentary from Dunham's dummies into this traditionally individually composed—yet as we know, often ghostwritten—genre. With a tongue-in-cheek nod to the discourses of bipolarity, multiple personality disorder, and schizophrenia often enlisted in the service of ventriloquism's pathology, Dunham flaunts the fact that the author of his career (not to mention his autobiography) is not the man himself, but rather the cast of characters whose popularly recognizable diatribes have sustained his comedic and fiduciary success. He has, he tells his fans, done it not alone, but "all by" *his* multiple "selves." That the ventriloquist *possesses* these selves, however, drives home the point that while Dunham and dummies have built a small empire on the surprises and delights of ventriloquial bifurcation, at the end of the day, Dunham is the puppetmaster who brings home the bacon. *All By My Selves*, then, comprises the mildly experimental American bootstrap narrative of a young white boy from Dallas whose God-given talent and hard work allowed him to transform an outdated, unconventional hobby into a highly marketable form of twenty-first-century entertainment.

Snerd must have offered a particularly resonant stereotype for Dunham to animate in the context of the young ventriloquist's "fairly sheltered life in the middle of the Bible Belt."[46] Growing up in a prosperous Dallas suburb, Dunham was no country bumpkin—no Rick Wayne from Stone Mountain, Georgia, as it were. But the character of the hillbilly, the ventriloquially suggestive category of the slack-jawed yokel, was all too familiar to this southern boy. Of his dummy Bubba J, who can easily be apprehended as Dunham's riff on Bergen's Snerd, Dunham observes, "[he] was very easy for me to write for, simply because I had grown up in Texas and I knew a bunch of folks who were *just like him*. In fact, I actually don't think I'd be much different from him, had one or two things been slightly different for me growing up…."[47] Dunham's self-professed identification with the Snerds and Bubba Js of the world, his ability to channel the persona of the drawling, benevolent hick he *might have become but didn't*, even as his multimillion dollar earnings have pushed him ever closer to the elusive "one percent," has—in a manner only "slightly different" from that of, say, Donald Trump—secured his popularity with white, working class, Middle American audiences broadly construed.

While Dunham's visibility among urban coastal demographics remains spotty despite his act's strong televisual presence, by the late 2000s the ventriloquist had already—at least according to the *New York Times*—achieved "a surreal, ventriloquial megacelebrity," packing arenas across the U.S. and selling millions of DVDs of his televised stand-up specials.[48] After years of touring the country just as the Vaudevillian vents did in their day, with the occasional TV spot thrown in (most notably a 1990 appearance on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*),

[46] Ibid., 114.
[47] Ibid., 275-6.
[48] Mooallem, "Comedy for Dummies."

Dunham conquered television in 2006, with the first of his six Comedy Central specials to date.[49] In the intervening years he has distributed his act across diverse media platforms, an expansionist strategy that has only increased his ability to generate audiences for his expensive, merchandise-heavy, live performances. But for the cancellation of his short-lived Comedy Central series, *The Jeff Dunham Show*, in 2009, Dunham has, to put it mildly, done quite well for himself. *Forbes* recently ranked him one of the eleven highest-paid comedians of 2015, having grossed the majority of his $19 million through concert ticket sales, thanks in no small part to a lucrative residency at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas. Dunham came in at number four, just after fellow ventriloquist Terry Fator, who grossed a cool $21.5 million.[50] If money is life in the scheme of advanced capitalism, ventriloquism is not only not dead, but alive and kicking.

What Dunham's "almost entirely white" and yet "odd[ly]…divers[e]" audience tunes in, comes out, or otherwise pays good money to see, is the spectacle and the sound of someone—or some*thing*—saying what the crowd (allegedly) wants to say but feels as though it can't.[51] Like generations of ventriloquists before him, Dunham wields the dummy—or, in his case, a crew of dummies that together constitutes a kind of sovereign whole—as a truth-telling weapon, a surrogate body through which his altered voice can "tell it like it is" as he innocently stands nearby, speaking in his own seemingly neutral and guileless tone. The pages that follow will chart some of the ways in which Dunham's dummies—puppeteered by Dunham, of course—provide gendered and racialized audiovisual conduits for a particular mode of "anti-P.C." discourse endemic to the contemporary U.S. political climate. This oppositional discourse, the

[49] Dunham's specials include, *Jeff Dunham: Arguing with Myself*, Comedy Central, Apr. 11, 2006; *Jeff Dunham: Spark of Insanity*, Comedy Central, Sep. 17, 2007; *Jeff Dunham's Very Special Christmas Special*, Comedy Central, Nov. 16, 2008; *Jeff Dunham: Controlled Chaos*, Comedy Central, Sep. 25, 2011; *Jeff Dunham: Minding the Monsters*, Comedy Central, Oct. 9, 2012; and *Jeff Dunham: All Over the Map*, Comedy Central, Nov. 16, 2014.

[50] Madeline Berg, "The Highest-Paid Comedians 2015," *Forbes*, last modified October 21, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2015/10/21/the-worlds-highest-paid-comedians-2015/#36a4e30a6a23.

[51] Mooallem, "Comedy for Dummies."

fuel on which Donald Trump's present political campaign so successfully runs, sets itself up as raw, unfiltered, brutally honest, and pragmatic vis-à-vis perceived "liberal," or leftist, discourses of sensitivity, tolerance, and "political correctness"—particularly around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. And though it reaches its audience through a visibly and audibly diverse range of bodies and voices, the "anti-P.C." discourse eagerly consumed by Dunham's many fans ultimately speaks in a single, authoritative voice: the white, masculine, heterosexual voice of Dunham himself. Dunham's proper voice can be heard not only in his exchanges with his puppets, but in the opening stand-up bits he performs at the beginning of each show, which consistently emphasize—through a relatively tame and obscenity-free roster of jokes—the ventriloquist's position as a straight, all-American, family man. After establishing himself as an audiovisually synchronized and consequently unassailable subject, Dunham further cements the authority of his own voice—itself a stand-in for the impossible fantasy of a singular, unified, "voice of white America"—by juxtaposing this apparently polite and reasonable voice with the exaggerated voices of his dummies, whose stereotypical views are rendered extreme in relation to his own. In this way, Dunham can express these views without fully laying claim to them; he can stand *beside* his dummies' "truth-telling" without being held accountable for their discourse. He can be the body that embodies the "middle of the road," even as the rapid-fire dialogues generated by his ventriloquism expose the fineness of the line between neutrality and extremism.

Thus, before we take a closer look at the full constellation of the exaggerated and extreme bodies, voices, and views present in Dunham's act, we must ask: how different is Dunham's reasonable voice from the cacophony of purportedly outlying voices to which he gives voice through his ventriloquism? When it comes down to it, ventriloquial bifurcation makes the distinction well nigh indiscernible. Confesses Dunham in *All By My Selves*, "If characters…say

something I know they shouldn't, then I always look surprised or disappointed and protest what they just said. That's another reason I get away with those sorts of lines. I'm just as stunned and as offended as the audience. So I end up onstage chastising myself for what I just made the characters say."[52] As Richard Sandfield and Nina Conti's practices have shown us, action and reaction are difficult to tell apart in ventriloquism, an effect confirmed by Dunham's above confession. Does the ventriloquist "know" that his dummies are going to say something untoward, then shape his reaction accordingly? Or is he entirely "stunned and offended," responding from a place of surprise? And if the latter, why then does he describe his act as "cathartic" for his audience, and his dummies as saying things "'everyone wants to laugh about, or that you snicker at with one or two friends, but that you could never say out loud?'"[53]

The cast of characters that gives voice to the "everyone" and the "you" that constitute Dunham's silently snickering majority is anchored by three key figures, whose strong personalities, drawn in very broad brushstrokes, have garnered these dummies almost as much fame as Dunham himself.[54] The first member of this holy trinity is Walter, a grinchy old white Vietnam (or, when convenient, Korean) war vet and perpetual naysayer, whose ruddy face is frozen into a scowl, and whose vocal tic, which elicits uproarious laughter from Dunham's audience, is to mock laugh at the crowd—buh-heh-heh-heh!—while craning his neck to stare judgmentally at all present. In Dunham's view, Walter is someone "*everyone* knows"—"They're

[52] Dunham, *All By My Selves*, 12.

[53] Mooallem, "Comedy for Dummies."

[54] In the right hands and with the right looks, puppets have the ability to elicit certain levels of projection, and thus identification, from their human audiences, making them tremendous generators of empathy and other powerful affects. Like Spielberg's E.T., a well-wielded puppet is not only "humanized," but becomes better than human, or "somehow more than human," to use Jack Donaghy's phrase from the chapter's opening *30 Rock* anecdote. A puppet's personality must be at once general and specific, so that there's enough of a draw, enough of a *there there*, to hook people; yet there must also be enough blank space present within the puppet's performance persona to allow for the necessary component of transference. A puppet must be unique, but it must also be enough of a stereotype to suggest familiarity. A puppet can be uncanny, but it must not be as uncanny as a voiceless, stationary doll. Its joint vocality and animacy (its vocal animacy) give a ventriloquist's dummy the special ability to cross over from uncanniness to approachability, warmth, invitation. Dunham well knows this, and has worked hard to mold his dummies' bodies and selves into palatable characters with broad appeal.

either married to him, they work for him, or they're related to him," he insists.[55] Dunham's "everyone" reappears in this description, connoting, as it always does, a confusingly amorphous, generic mass of straight, white, Middle American subjects. Contrastingly, Peanut, whom the ventriloquist describes as his "main character," embodies someone (or again some*thing*) heretofore unseen by and unknown to Dunham's "everyone."[56] A large, purple, soft-bodied simian trickster, Peanut's furnished point of origin is the exotically coded—and successively colonized—elsewhere of "the Micronesian Islands near Guam."[57] His voice has the cadence of what can only be described as a surfer on uppers, and he is relentlessly hyperactive; his persistent invasions of Dunham's personal space often cause the ventriloquist to violently swat him away. Like Conti's Monk, Peanut performs the role of a Gatesian "signifying monkey."[58] Unlike Monk, however, Peanut is not actually a monkey. He is merely the monkey-like representative of "a race of people just like him," thus constituting a caricature whose Orientalism and racialization are hidden in plain view.[59] There is no such thinly veiled ambiguity surrounding the third arm of Dunham's power trio, Achmed the Dead Terrorist. This gravelly-voiced former suicide bomber was the ventriloquist's answer to 9/11, a paranoid, emasculated, joke of a terrorist whose repeated, generically "Middle Eastern"-accented, shouts of "I KEEL YOU!" (translation: "I kill you!") only underscore his impotence. With Achmed, writes Dunham, "I want…my audience to face full-on what we as a country need…to thumb our noses at."[60] Even as the practitioner of a seemingly "clownlike profession,"[61] the ventriloquist asserts, it is his duty to write and perform material that is "unifying, patriotic, and challenging toward any outsiders who oppress…our

[55] Dunham, *All By My Selves*, 139.
[56] Ibid., 141.
[57] Ibid., 144.
[58] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).
[59] Dunham, *All By My Selves*, 144.
[60] Ibid. 248.
[61] Ibid., 241.

ideals as Americans."[62] Dunham's core triumvirate carries out this jingoistic mission by allowing an old white war vet to openly express his (often racist and xenophobic) vitriol while a foreign creature and a menacing terrorist are domesticated and disciplined in the wake of his rants. Of course, it isn't this simple, since Peanut and Achmed *do* talk back to Dunham, and quite a lot. In fact, each member of Dunham's entourage has his say, and what emerges in these moments of ventriloquial bifurcation sometimes contradicts Dunham's stated singular artistic and patriotic purpose. The act of splitting can expose competing desires, alternative lines of flight.

The outer ring of Dunham's puppet circle comprises a cadre of less finely drawn racialized caricatures that are nevertheless equally crucial to the ventriloquist's act. In addition to the slack-jawed yokel Bubba J, who drinks a surfeit of beer and possesses such minimal intelligence that he occasionally crosses over into brilliance—Dunham describes him as "my little white trash buddy"[63]—Dunham's pit crew includes José Jalapeño on a Stick, a sombrero-capped, mustachioed, heavily "Mexican"-accented, jalapeño pepper-shaped face on a pole; and Sweet Daddy Dee, an African-American self-professed "pimp" and Dunham's fictive manager, whose minstrel repertoire ranges from "yo mama" jokes to poking fun at Dunham's un-hip whiteness. Until his retirement in 2012, Sweet Daddy Dee's stereotypical performance of urban American blackness bolstered Dunham's square, white, Middle American persona in a twisted game of opposites. Inversely, the character of Bubba J continues to strengthen Dunham's authority as puppetmaster by—as I have already suggested—visualizing and voicing the nonthreateningly ignorant image of what the ventriloquist himself might believably have become. Whereas Richard Sandfield and Nina Conti's acts each foreground the struggles, pleasures, and pains of bifurcation not only as a ventriloquial practice but as a central condition

[62] Ibid., 242.
[63] Ibid., 274.

of audiovisual, embodied and voiced subjectivity, focusing their explorations on the polarities and resonances in their relations with specific dummies (Willie and Monk), Dunham surrounds himself with an army. However contradictorily, this squadron protects and even camouflages its commander-in-chief: at once subsumed by his puppets, his proper voice subordinated to their collective noise, Dunham is also acknowledged as a—indeed *the*—centralized source of distributed agency.

Dunham's strategic deployment of his symbiotic cast of figures over the linear duration of a single performance can be glimpsed in the ventriloquist's first Comedy Central special, *Arguing With Myself* (2006), whose format echoes that of the live Dunham show I attended in San Diego a decade later, in March 2016.[64] Filmed in Santa Ana before a live audience, the televised version of the stage act is intercut with videotaped asides from Sweet Daddy Dee, who, after an initial appearance in which he "pep talks" Dunham pre-show ("you my man, Jeff," he asserts), retires to the green room sans ventriloquist to comment on—and sometimes skewer—Dunham's gig while plied with scantily clad human women and champagne. Large-lipped, dark-skinned, and sporting gold hoop earrings and a shiny, blinged-out suit, the dummy's verbal tics include somewhat the same "sheeeeeeeit!" as Sandfield's Willie—also, you may recall, a pimp. But where Willie embodied and voiced the radical black alter ego of his establishment-friendly, party-line-towing, black ventriloquist master at the pivotal, culturally bifurcated moment of Bicentenniality, Sweet Daddy Dee is an "obvious and trite" parody of a pimp, played by Dunham in blackface and blackvoice thirty years down the line.[65] The sole point of separation between Dunham's portrayal and the historical, yet obviously enduring, practice of blackface minstrelsy is the fact that Dunham's "black face" (which he describes as "ethnic, but not racist")

[64] The special spans 90 minutes including commercials, with the act itself being about 70 minutes long.
[65] See also Dunham, *All By My Selves*, 272, for Dunham's description of Sweet Daddy Dee.

and "black voice" are, in the ventriloquist's case, synchronized to another body—that of his dummy.[66] This distanciation is heightened by Sweet Daddy Dee's visual autonomy from Dunham (an affordance of the televisual context) as well as by his "managerial" authority over the comedian. The dummy's empowered position as the cool black man to Dunham's square white family man is manifestly intended to excuse the act's intense performance of audiovisual racialization—while simultaneously sanctioning its unabashed expression.[67]

As I have already mentioned, Dunham's stage act begins with a few minutes of solo stand-up before the ventriloquist introduces and dialogues with his puppets one-by-one. In his opening monologue, Dunham—clad in "business casual" attire—establishes himself as an everyman, which is to say as a family man (by making fun of his mother-in-law), a straight man (by making an involved gay joke), and an all-American man (by asserting that though he lives in Los Angeles, he is thrilled to be in Santa Ana where the show is being taped). Unlike the stand-up routines of Richard Pryor, which, as Glenda Carpio has argued, often used techniques of conjuring, minstrelsy, and ventriloquism to channel the black noise of "freedom dreams," Dunham's stand-up is about being exactly who he is—a white heterosexual man, a regular guy, a "normal" person.[68] While Pryor's conjurations frequently involved exaggerated performances of blackness that were—not entirely, but in part—calibrated to discomfit white audience members, Dunham's routine functions to provide his predominantly white audience members with a safe, neutral point of identification. *If the guy running the show is me*, Dunham seems to indicate, *you've got nothing to worry about. No one will judge your laughter at these puppets, because at*

[66] Ibid., 270.
[67] Ibid., 272-3.
[68] See the coda of the first chapter and Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 73. As I relate in Chapter 1, Carpio borrows the formulation of "black noise" from Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92.1 (2005), 3. On "freedom dreams," see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).

the end of the day, they're me, and I'm not judging. Alongside this logic runs a competing rationale: *They said it, not me, and I'm you, and we're good*. The paradox of bifurcation sustains this delicate, yet durable balance: if the puppets *are* Dunham, it's okay; if they're *not* Dunham, it's okay too. Whether one identifies or disidentifies with what is uttered,[69] one will be protected by the scrim of the ventriloquist, the filter through which all excitable speech passes.[70]

Having established the lack of risk involved in enjoying the act to follow, Dunham introduces Walter, whose livelihood is, as Dunham puts it, "giv[ing] his points of views on all kinds of subjects" before ridiculing the audience's laughter at his answers—which of course only causes the crowd to laugh harder. Walter starts off crotchety but mild, making jokes about the weather and other such trivialities, but the topic quickly turns to his decades-long marriage. The embittered misogyny he directs toward his unnamed wife is a genuine crowd-pleaser, drawing sidesplitting guffaws from men and women alike. "She rolled out of bed, jumped on her menstrual cycle, and ran my ass over," he says of his encounter with his wife earlier that day, later comparing wives to cars that leave one wanting a new model after several years of marriage. At one point he awkwardly transitions into a joke about Indian women who wear *bindis*, remarking that they're like recording buttons on video cameras, or "ready" lights on coffeemakers. Throughout this routine, in which the old, white, male dummy champions the objectification, or more appropriately, dummification, of any and all women, Walter runs the show, with Dunham acting as his appendage. When the dummy has control of the room, the ventriloquist does little to protest his puppet's indecorousness: Dunham's recurrent gestures in the wake of Walter's various indecencies include visibly gritting his teeth, shaking his head,

[69] On "disidentification," see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[70] On "excitable speech," see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

softly saying "I'm sorry" or "stop it," and even chastising the dummy off to the side, both sets of lips flapping wordlessly to the audience's great delight. For accompanying each of these gestures is a sly smirk, a knowing look out at the room, a glint in Dunham's eye that authorizes the crowd's uproarious laughter even as the ventriloquist mock-attempts to stifle the misogynistic, racist, and xenophobic discourse that produces it.

We are reminded, here, of Richard's laugh, audible in the moments between Willie's jibes and the "respectable" ventriloquist's staid replies, and apprehended via the duo's vinyl records, whose sonic materiality conveys a black noise that sounds more loudly in the absence of a visual track and its attendant optics of racialization. In contrast, however, Dunham's wielding of Walter stages an aggressive, audiovisual redoubling of white heterosexual masculinity, wherein the struggle between ventriloquist and dummy breaks down to the polarity between the polite, "politically correct," and therefore emasculated white man and the white man who says what he wants to say. While this split may echo the dichotomy between Richard's respectability politics and Willie's radical, even Afro-pessimistic race critique, Dunham and Walter's dynamic is not a materialization of double consciousness. Rather, it is a self-reinforcing enactment of the kind of "oppositional" whiteness that Anthony Harkins associates with the affirmative re-coding of terms like "hillbilly" and "redneck" in the wake of the perceived advancements of "African Americans and other minority social groups."[71] In making a visibly weak display of resistance to Walter's hate speech, Dunham sanctions its expression, while at the same time enticing his audience, through their partial identification with the polite-appearing ventriloquist, to indulge in Walter's display free of guilt, since they themselves are neither saying these things, nor even supporting a performer who directly says these things. Dunham and his audience can feel especially good about Walter's misogyny, xenophobia, and racism, because the dummy isn't

[71] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 5-6.

human, or is "somehow more than human," in the words of neoconservative one-percenter Jack Donaghy. Ventriloquism's constitutive displacement, the art's grounding in misdirection, thus offers the "silenced majority" a material *vox populi*, one that audibly speaks what "Joe average" just can't say out loud.

If Walter provides a sometimes too extreme point of identification for Dunham's audience—one that conveniently can be abdicated for an identification with the ventriloquist's comparatively less hardened white masculinity—Sweet Daddy Dee provides a point of differentiation for Dunham and his fans alike. In *Arguing With Myself*, the pimp-cum-manager is introduced to the crowd as someone the ventriloquist "respects," a word that foreshadows Dunham's mock deference to the "black" dummy, performed with another glint in his eye, this time authorizing his audience to laugh simultaneously with and at the puppet—the "with" being what makes the "at" possible (fig. 4.1). Since the bulk of Sweet Daddy Dee's offerings concern the foibles of American whiteness and the indignity of being tethered (one might say enslaved) to the most generic of white men, Dunham's mostly white audience members are also incited to laugh at themselves—a feat divested of its potential threat in the presence of a painted "black" body manipulated by a white man. Dependent on this very man for the dummy's ability to voice his dissent, Sweet Daddy Dee delivers ironic statements like, "I'm kinda like coffee; before you experience my brown goodness, I gotta go through a big-ass white filter." Dunham even goes so far as to include an exchange wherein the ventriloquist remarks to Sweet Daddy Dee, "I know a lot of white people emulate the African American culture to make themselves seem cooler." "Yeah, yeah," replies the dummy, "black folk got a word for that. Irritating." Dunham's self-interpellation, his indirect acknowledgment of his "emulation" of "African American culture," allows him to continue his blackface minstrel show under the dubious protection of his own self-

awareness. Here he self-consciously takes a page from the U.S. liberal's playbook (Liz Lemon's bible), which holds that white folks' sentience of their own prejudice negates their racism. In one fell swoop, Dunham justifies his minstrelsy (at least sufficiently enough for Comedy Central to air his shows time and time again) and sticks it to the white liberals he well knows will "call him out." Thus through Sweet Daddy Dee, Dunham continues to consolidate the "oppositional" whiteness earlier embodied by Walter, perversely furthering his achievement of this goal by making the pimp's "black" body speak its own instrumentalization. What gets the greatest laugh of all, however, eschews reference to blackness or whiteness: "As for my Mexican brothers and sisters," quips Sweet Daddy Dee, "you learn English motherfuckers! How about that?"



Fig. 4.1 Dunham parries with Sweet Daddy Dee

Bubba J's routine follows this minstrel show, as if to reassure the viewer that "any race" is fair game for Dunham's instrumentalization. Big-eared and bucktoothed, the dummy sports a Florida baseball cap and a U.S.A. t-shirt that rides up to reveal a substantial beer gut, which spills over jeans tucked into snakeskin cowboy boots (fig. 4.2). His verbal tic is a slow, nonlinguistic chortle, suggestive of a throat filled with molasses. When Dunham asks him what he's been up to that day, he replies, "I been watchin' NASCAR and drinkin' beer," nodding like

a dashboard bobblehead. NASCAR is crucial to Dunham's construction of white Middle America; he references the pastime over multiple acts and TV specials to foment in-group humor. Prior to Bubba J's entrance onto the stage, Sweet Daddy Dee had in fact already made a joke about NASCAR being "another dumb-ass cracker sport" to pave the way for Bubba J's predictable love of car racing. Dunham goes on to probe Bubba J's excessive drinking habits as well as his tendency toward incest, with the crux of almost every joke being a misunderstood word or expression. For instance, Dunham asks Bubba J if he has a designated driver when he drinks, or if his alcohol abuse has ever provoked an intervention. To the former question Bubba replies, "What the fuck is that?" and he thinks an "intervention" is a kind of venereal disease, which he claims to have caught once from a second cousin. "Have you ever been to an AA meeting?" Dunham asks Bubba J. "AA is for quitters," he replies, and the audience's laughter swells. Prompted by Dunham, he goes on to describe his ugly wife, whom he met at a family reunion at the state fair: "She was leaning up against the Ferris wheel, making it tilt, sunlight glistening off her curlers, corn-dog in one hand, a Budweiser in the other."

The crowd cheers loudly at this and Bubba J's other distillations of country tropes. Indeed, Dunham and his audience both appear to take unbridled pleasure in revisiting what seems a dated, and yet still entirely resonant, complex of white cultural stereotypes—one-liners that might appear on gas station beer koozies. Dunham's staged relation to Bubba J affirms that the ventriloquist is the dummy's intellectual superior while also foregrounding the former's fondness for and acceptance of the dummy's backwoods behaviors. Dunham thus frames Bubba J as a backwards, yet benign character; unlike the Pumpkin-gone-bad that we see at the end of the *30 Rock* episode, Bubba J is not a heckler. The joke is often on him, but only deceptively so. For more often than not, the joke is with him. Whereas Sweet Daddy Dee and Peanut play tricky

others to Dunham's straight white man, antagonizing him as a matter of course, Bubba J is Dunham's stunted familiar. This slack-jawed yokel is the Middle American one doesn't love to hate, because there's no reason to hate him. If he is not, in the manner of an idiot savant, unintentionally gracing the audience with gems of wisdom stemming from misheard or misunderstood language, his ignorance merely shores up the intelligence of Dunham who, as an emancipated version of the same, can then ironically perform the kind of minstrelsy that might put Bubba J in stitches at the state fair. After all, where is the KKK in this redneck portrait? Unlike Walter, Bubba J doesn't spout hate. He gets off scot-free, because to Dunham he represents the purest kind of "good American," one who has been "left behind" by the forces of liberalism and political correctness, a fantasy thematized by his double (ventriloquial and characteristic) anachronism.



Fig. 4.2 Dunham and Bubba J

For reasons of space, I will avoid a detailed description of the remainder of *Arguing With Myself*, which features Peanut and José Jalapeño and revolves around jokes about non-able-bodied people and the general category of "Mexicans." For the time being, I want to underscore the way in which Dunham's use of blackface and blackvoice to frame his first television

special—his "return" to one allegedly anachronistic form to inaugurate his "reboot" of the always already anachronistic cultural form of ventriloquism via a newer medium—foregrounds the ventriloquist's and his audience's hankering for such modes of good old-fashioned American entertainment as minstrelsy and ventriloquism to be, quite simply, *okay again*. In the words of *All By My Selves*' front matter, likely written by the ventriloquist's publicist, Dunham has taken "what many considered an outdated art form and made it cool again." Rather than asking the valid question, "Was ventriloquism ever 'cool' to begin with?," I suggest that we read the aforementioned "cool" as less of a hip kind of cool (à la Sweet Daddy Dee, as it were) and more of an "it's cool"; an "it's okay"; a "don't worry"—a reassurance that you (meaning Dunham's particular "you") can laugh at these things and you will not be punished for it. As Dunham's manager, and as his act's inbuilt judge, the minstrel figure of Sweet Daddy Dee creates a "safe space" within which Dunham's live and at-home audiences can accordingly enjoy the ensuing parade of stereotypes free from both judgment and guilt, comfortably consuming the representations that an hysterical culture of "political correctness" has persistently denied them. Dunham describes his careful calibration of Sweet Daddy Dee to be a non-racist, racist caricature, writing, "If I didn't do this right, I would easily be labeled a racist. On the other hand, if I was *too* politically correct, it wouldn't be funny."[72] Yet, he notes, when he tested the dummy's appeal across the country before the special was taped, it was the urban and black members of his audience who responded "most favorably" to Sweet Daddy Dee, while it was the white Southern folks who laughed "tentative[ly]," cowed by the fear of "reinforcing old stereotypes."[73] This latter response, writes Dunham, "was the opposite of what I was trying to

[72] Dunham, *All By My Selves*, 272.
[73] Ibid., 273.

accomplish."[74] Elsewhere, he describes his mission as "mak[ing] fun of prejudice."[75] In my reading, however, Dunham's goal is rather to "make prejudice okay again" in much the same way that Donald Trump seeks to "Make America Great Again": by inciting the "silenced (white) majority" to action through centralized emissions of the pent-up (white) *vox populi*—by saying the things "we all want to say but can't."

At the Dunham performance I attended earlier this year, whose audience took up significant space in a basketball arena with more than twelve thousand seats, Trump was on the agenda. When the crowd laughed especially loudly at Walter's usual bit, the dummy intoned, "It's not a Trump rally! Calm the hell down!" This admonition produced an even more enthusiastic response. Later, the old vet insisted that, "there's not a good choice amongst" the current presidential candidates. Dunham then suggested that Walter run for President. At this, the crowd went wild.

IV. "THE VOICE OF ENTERTAINMENT"

While Jeff Dunham's ventriloquism often employs visibly and vocally racialized figures to stage "cathartic" emissions of reactionary discourse, Terry Fator's (b. 1965) ventriloquial practice primarily hinges on the ventriloquist's ability to reproduce a known catalogue of racialized voices through song. Billed on his performance paraphernalia as a "singer, comedian, [and] celebrity impressionist," Fator is widely applauded for his skill at imitating iconic black vocalists such as Etta James, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and Marvin Gaye—alongside other white American favorites such as Garth Brooks, Elvis, Roy Orbison, and James Taylor. Plastered on Las Vegas billboards and glossy, oversized brochures, Fator's tagline as "The Voice

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 268.

of Entertainment" emphasizes the chameleonic materiality of the ventriloquist's voice above all else—his singular aptitude at singing in a diverse array of vocal grains (fig. 4.3).[76] Unlike Dunham's puppets, with their comparatively distinct personalities and back-stories (and whose faces and mottoes have been branded and affixed to sellable items from t-shirts to travel mugs), Fator's puppet cast—which numbers a dozen regular members—provides the ventriloquist with a rapidly rotating selection of differently gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies through which to channel his ever-changing voice, a voice that, because it can be any voice, is ultimately empowered to be *the* voice in the biblical manner of *vox Dei*, "the voice of God."[77]



Fig. 4.3 Fator publicity image

The religious analogy is appropriate, for it recalls Fator's strict Christian upbringing in Dunham's own hometown of Dallas, Texas. There, as a young boy, Fator attempted to justify his desire to take up ventriloquism (as well as his fascination with all other things "magic") to his

[76] The brochure for Fator's show at the Mirage, procured in July 2013, reads, "The Voice of Entertainment, Singer, Comedian, Celebrity Impressionist, Terry Fator."

[77] The term "voice of God" has also been used to describe omniscient voiceover in film, particularly in the documentary genre. See Charles Wolfe, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God': The Place of Voice-Over Commentary in Classical Documentary," in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 264-80.

devout father by claiming that he "wanted to be a ventriloquist as a part of [his] ministry."[78] But as he notes in his 2008 autobiography, *Who's the Dummy Now?*—whose punny, psychoanalytically rich title reflects the ventriloquist's enduring *ressentiment* even after having symbolically "killed the father" who ridiculed his dummy-love—his interest in ventriloquism was forged in the fires of vocal impersonation sans dummy. Fator came to "vent" not through television, but through comedy record albums; he cultivated his vocal prowess by listening to others' voices and then training his own voice to approximate theirs. Still too immature to grasp the adult humor of the jokes on the albums he so voraciously consumed, Fator nevertheless realized that accents and inflections could garner just as many laughs as words. After mastering sketches by Bill Cosby and "José Jiménez," he performed for his parents' white Texan milieu:

> In a few days I had pretty much memorized both albums word-for-word and was able to recite any of the routines using the same inflections as Bill Cosby and José Jiménez, much to the delight of my parents and their friends. José Jiménez was a comedian who would do his comedy using a Spanish accent and I remember the adults around howling with laughter every time I would start off one of his routines with those immortal words: 'My name is José Jiménez!'"[79]

Tellingly, the "comedian" Fator describes as "José Jiménez" was in fact the white, Jewish-American comedian Bill Dana. A popular fixture on the 1960s television comedy circuit, Dana "played to Peoria," entertaining U.S. audiences in the Bible Belt and beyond by performing in brownface as the fictional, Spanish-accented, Bolivian character "José Jiménez." While Dana did not actually "brown up" for these performances, his minstrelsy demonstrates the enduring popularity of audiovisual racial caricature well beyond its purported decline. In the absence of the visual aesthetics of his minstrel show, Dana's comedy records peddled racial ventriloquism par excellence. It was Dana's racialized voice to which the young Fator was drawn, though the ventriloquist appears never to have discovered Jiménez's fictional nature. Fator's

[78] Terry Fator, *Who's the Dummy Now?* (Sydney, Australia: New Holland Publishers, 2008), 37.
[79] Ibid., 22.

autobiographical slippage, his—or his ghostwriter's—misidentification of Jiménez as the comedian "do[ing] his comedy using a Spanish accent" is illuminating, for it suggests that even to the adult Fator, a "Spanish accent" is always already a humorous affectation, even if its provenance is an actual "Hispanic" individual. Imitating the respective voices of black American and fictional "Bolivian" comedians, the young Fator thus came to ventriloquism through vocal racial caricature seemingly without realizing that he was, at least part of the time, performing a racist impression of a racist impression.

Developed at the fertile nexus of childhood naïveté and white supremacy, Fator's propensity for doubling, his penchant for impersonating the impressionist and ventriloquizing the ventriloquist, is now the grown performer's bread and butter. Fator's (re)discovery of the crowd-pleasing capabilities of double ventriloquism came when he was forty years old, after years of unsuccessful appearances on the fair circuit singing in rock and country cover bands (with the occasional ventriloquist bit thrown in), and later, hawking a mixed bag of stand-up, ventriloquism, original songs, and a Michael Jackson impression, which he omitted while the pop star was on trial because he "felt it was in bad taste" (due to its association with pedophilia rather than its manifest combination of racism and homophobia).[80] As Fator tells it, in 2005, after witnessing a number of staged karaoke acts, he decided to try something new with his puppet Maynard Thompkins, who plays the character of an Elvis impersonator whose comic caveat is that he doesn't actually know how to sing any Elvis songs. Rather than ending the show—as he traditionally did—with an argument between ventriloquist and dummy over Thompkins's refusal

[80] Fator, *Who's the Dummy Now?*, 140. Fator has since reintroduced the Michael Jackson impression to his act. "Disguised" in a wig and sunglasses, and wearing the requisite glove, Fator parries with his dummy Walter T. Airedale in character as Jackson before the two sing a song together. The skit frames Jackson as a racially and sexually compromised figure, juxtaposing his soft falsetto and gestural effeminacy with Airedale's Southern twang and presumed straight masculinity before interweaving the two voices into a queer medley. See "Terry Fator as Michael Jackson," *YouTube*, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2v5icAQM_E.

to deliver the appropriate impersonation, Fator induced his puppet to sing a popular country number instead. "I started [a] Garth Brooks song," he writes, "and began, through Maynard, to sing in Garth's voice without moving my lips…. After the show almost every person in the crowd came up and said that it was one of the most amazing things they had ever seen and that I should include more impressions through puppets into my act."[81] Fator's realization of the novelty and appeal of channeling a voice proper to someone else through the lips of a surrogate body is autobiographically framed as an unwitting revelation, one that echoes the ventriloquist's childhood discovery of the howls of laughter provoked by his unconscious impersonation of Dana's caricature of José Jiménez. The adult act, which traffics in white U.S. Southern and country tropes, reverse-mirrors the juvenile act, which adopted and recontextualized the coastal language of Jewish-American brownface minstrelsy. The pleasures that inhere in the production and reception of the gimmick are not detailed, the constitution of the audience is not described; what is known is simply that the device is "amazing"—it works.

Two years later, in 2007, Fator would win the reality TV talent show *America's Got Talent* after initially flooring skeptical judge David Hasselhoff with his puppet Emma Taylor's rendition of Etta James's "At Last." "Oh, no, a ventriloquist," quipped Hasselhoff upon Fator's first appearance, whereupon the white male ventriloquist opened his girlish white puppet's smiling mouth and a mature, throaty, "black female voice" emerged, to the great consternation and delight of all present.[82] After his *AGT* victory, Fator's rise was meteoric. Buoyed by talk show appearances—including a spot on Oprah in which, as Fator loves to tell it, his black puppet Julius alleviated the racial problematics of being a minstrel dummy wielded by a white puppetmaster through his ability to sing Marvin Gaye with perfect authenticity—Fator's tele-

[81] Fator, *Who's the Dummy Now?*, 141.

[82] "Terry Fator Audition on AGT featuring Emma Taylor singing AT LAST," *YouTube*, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WahdIES7Gg.

visibility spawned a $1.5 million deal for a few months' residency at the Las Vegas Hilton, then a $100 million deal for five years in residence at the Mirage hotel and casino on the Las Vegas strip, where he continues to perform in a theater that is now named for him.[83] Thus while Dunham's stand-up-inspired verbal ventriloquism regularly finds shelter on cable networks like Comedy Central, Fator's vocal ventriloquism, which veers less toward comedy and more toward magic, whimsicality, and even sentimentality, has a brick-and-mortar home within the surreal, simulacral geography of the Entertainment Capital of the World.

Like Dunham's, Fator's shows feature a succession of sketches with individual members of his extensive cast of characters, as well as more limited forays into solo performance. In Fator's case, going solo involves the ventriloquist either covering others' songs or singing songs he himself has written *as himself*, as opposed to channeling the songs of other artists through the mouths of his archetypal puppets. In addition to the Etta James-impersonating Emma Taylor; the not-quite-Elvis-impersonating Maynard Thompkins; and Julius, the "African-American" soul singer who "croon[s] like Nat King Cole [and] groov[es] like James Brown"; Fator's troupe includes, among others, the gay white male diva Berry Fabulous and the "true country superstar" Walter T. Airedale—Fator's take on the slack-jawed yokel.[84] While the latter puppet lacks the brutishness of Dunham's Bubba J, Airedale's counterpart, Julius, possesses a manner softer than that of Dunham's Sweet Daddy Dee, yet still repeatedly chides Fator for his white lack of soul. The joke, of course, is that Fator is the one doing both the chiding and the soul-singing—since he is the only living soul present. As I have already observed, Fator's aforementioned self-characterization as "The Voice of Entertainment" boasts that the ventriloquist's voice can be any voice regardless of race, gender, and even species (his act also contains a Roy Orbison-

[83] For a clip of Fator's appearance on Oprah see "Test," *YouTube*, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObF_ONpBSEg.

[84] These descriptions come from Fator's Mirage brochure.

impersonating turtle named Winston), which in turn makes his voice *the* voice because it can do anything. This circular logic resembles Liz Lemon's claim, quoted at the start of the chapter, that "no part of America is any more American than any other part"—that America's sameness, i.e. its Americanness, lies in its difference and vice-versa. Like Lemon's statement, Fator's tagline invokes the U.S. liberal rhetorics of post-raciality and equality so often mobilized to justify the kind of racist minstrelsy the ventriloquist performs with Julius. Concurrently, Fator consolidates his own white, masculine, Middle American image through Walter T. Airedale's—as well as the ventriloquist's solo—country music routines, which reaffirm the genre's supposed centrality to the nation whose heterogeneity is in fact Fator's greatest source of inspiration and income.

Fator's 2009 DVD, *Live from Las Vegas*, captures the arc of his show at the Mirage, which, as I witnessed firsthand in July of 2013, unfolds in a theater that resembles the set of a reality television competition, recalling the ventriloquist's breakout moment on *America's Got Talent*. Spot-lit, surrounded by neon light displays and video screens, and backed by a live house band, Fator seems at once central and superfluous to his own act. Unlike Dunham's, Fator's comportment is infused by a certain earnestness. It is as if he wants his audience to know that he is more than just a funny man. His humor is PG-rated, and his solo numbers often seem intended to tug at the heartstrings. On *Live from Las Vegas*, he performs a saccharine cover of the Bee Gees' "I Started a Joke" after his opening puppet bit with Winston the turtle, after which he remarks to the audience, "after seeing me on TV, most people don't even realize that *I* can *sing*." He follows this statement with a wry smile and a pregnant pause, during which he is jointly applauded for his singing and his ventriloquism—which he has crucially just claimed as *his* singing, too. Fator then introduces Walter T. Airedale, who immediately gets to the task of wooing—or rather, objectifying—female audience members with his Southern twang. "I see me

some wimmins," the dummy observes, before a benign strip club reference, going on to pun: "I'm the kinda guy that can make Sheryl Crow! I'm the kinda guy that can put Carrie Underwood! I'm the kinda guy that can leave Clay Aiken—but I ain't that kinda guy!" The crowd and Fator laugh heartily at the gay joke that ends this string of one-liners, perhaps because, in addition to the usual homophobia, Airedale's braggadocio is extreme enough to appear overcompensatory. Indeed, the dummy shortly claims to have something up his diminutive sleeve that will make all the women in the house "hot for Walter." This something is not a lyrical song, but a performance of yodeling—a style of singing, or calling, that foregrounds the voice's rapid alternation between a so-called natural pitch and a higher pitch, usually a falsetto.[85] As the agility of Fator's voice is put on display, the camera often excises his body from the frame, making Airedale look even more like the voice's origin.



Fig. 4.4 Fator as Michael Jackson, performing with Airedale

If Bubba J is Dunham's dimwitted avatar, the dummy that makes the ventriloquist look suave, Walter T. Airedale is the figure Fator himself wishes to be. There's not much to this slack-jawed yokel other than his all-too-readily expressed love of ladies and his apparent

[85] According to the OED, to yodel is to "sing or call using a distinctive style of vocalization characterized by repeated rapid alternations of pitch between the low chest voice and the high falsetto or head voice." "yodel, v.". OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/232032?rskey=02Keu9&result=2 (accessed October 06, 2016).

yodeling prowess. Airedale is not abject, like Bubba J, but he sports the same cowboy boots and jeans beneath a rhinestone-encrusted shirt in the colors of the U.S. flag, topped off by the requisite cowboy hat. Where Fator is chaste and restrained, Airedale is sexually expressive. If he is a wingman, he is the wingman who has you wing-manning for him at the end of the night. His yodeling is a mating call, growing faster and more urgent as the performance elapses. Seamlessly elided by Fator's positioning of yodeling as the sex-song of the white American countryman is the form's hybrid history, dating back not only to the practices of Northern European settlers, but also to the field hollers of black slaves in the American south.[86] For in Fator's puppet world, yodeling is the province of the white American male, as is soul music, whose vocal imitability must be staged again and again in the face of its racialized contestation. In his unquestioned expertise at yodeling, also a contested musical form, Walter T. Airedale supports Fator's self-characterization as country while emphasizing just how vexed such a characterization actually is.



Fig. 4.5 Fator performs with Julius

When Julius enters Fator's act, the "black" dummy is described as an "other entertainer" to whom the ventriloquist has kindly given a guest spot. Insists Fator, as Julius, in racialized blackvoice, "I can do something you cannot do." Responds Fator, as his white self, "What is it

[86] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 238-9.

you can do that I cannot do?" Replies Julius, "I can sing with…*soul*," at which point the crowd claps and the camera awkwardly hones in on the few black members of Fator's audience (who may have been clapping at something else entirely). Julius continues to berate Fator, his dialogue approximating a "reverse-racist" rant: "You genetically challenged," he says to Fator; "you a pasty white ventriloquist; you a cracker." Fator pauses, mock-shocked, as the audience oohs and aahs at this white racial slur. These fighting words are the "pasty white ventriloquist's" cue to show Julius what is what, by singing, through the dummy's "black" body, a medley of the Platters' "Only You" and Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On." This vocal demonstration occurs, of course, under the pretense of Julius demonstrating to Fator how to sing soulfully, but everyone is in on the charade. The reactionary message is clear: Fator's voice can be just as soulful as the voice of a black man, and it would be racist to claim otherwise. Further, assuming the role of the racialized, essentialized, oppressed musical performer enables Fator to perform in blackface and blackvoice with little blowback. The dynamic eerily mirrors that between Dunham and Sweet Daddy Dee, wherein the white ventriloquist's alleged awareness of his own "pasty" whiteness, mediated through and confirmed by the "black" puppet, renders the enactment of the puppet's "blackness" not only acceptable, but a commentary on contemporary (post-)race relations—in the eyes and ears of a certain audience, that is.

As I have argued, Fator's showmanship is about what the ventriloquist can do with his voice—or more precisely, his vocal instrument. Unlike his counterpart Dunham, whose ventriloquial skill is mobilized to externalize the kind of reactionary, "anti-P.C.," discourse that his implicitly white constituency wants to discharge but feels it can't, Fator uses his ventriloquism to reinforce the white voice's sonic agility, its ability to do all the things other voices, especially "black voices," can and more. Whereas Dunham stakes a claim for an

encompassing white voice—the voice of his "everyone"—on predominantly rhetorical grounds, Fator focuses his practice on (re)establishing the white voice's material primacy. Like a blue-eyed soul singer, Fator wants to prove that vocal ability is "not about race," but about talent. And as *America's Got Talent* confirms, alongside other such U.S. reality talent shows in the "post-racial" U.S., the America that's seen to have "talent" is largely white.[87] As ventriloquists, Fator and Dunham comprise two sides of the same coin; each practitioner differently uses the form, with all its bifurcational possibilities, to recover a perceived American cultural loss. This fantasized disappearance is none other than the loss of the white voice's supremacy—its power to say, and to do, whatever it pleases. Put otherwise, both ventriloquists' practices furnish a fantasy "white voice" that demands to be heard "again" (in Trumpean language).

[87] Eriq Gardner, "Fox Beats 'American Idol' Racism Lawsuit," *Hollywood Reporter*, November 20, 2014, accessed October 6, 2016, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/fox-beats-american-idol-racism-750812.

EPILOGUE
Trump's Voice

Even a dummy can hear that the bygone "America" invoked by the current U.S. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's popular slogan, "Make America Great Again," is a resonant echo of the "America" lambasted by Richard and Willie's radical vinyl ventriloquism in the era of the U.S. Bicentennial forty years ago. This fantasy "America"—as the black ventriloquist duo, alongside their inspiration Richard Pryor, pointed out in 1976—conveniently guts U.S. history, eliding the nation's enduring legacies of genocide and slavery and shilling the myth of the country's originary whiteness. It is not, however, Trump's campaign slogan, powerful though its words may be, that captivates the audiences—that "galvanizes the base," as it were—of the much beloved and much ridiculed businessman, reality television star, and now, non-metaphorical politician. Rather, Trump's appeal seems to stem from the desire expressed in the third epigraph that opened this chapter: his propensity for "saying what we all want to say but can't say."[88] Indeed, Trump has positioned himself as a "voice," as *the voice*, that will finally speak out against the "politically correct" discourse that has silenced "the American people": "The forgotten men and women of our country—people who work hard but no longer have a voice: I am your voice," he declared at the close of the 2016 Republican National Convention.[89] The real estate mogul-cum-TV-star-cum-politician is famous for speaking off-script, for "telling it like it is," for staging the vocalization of things that, in Jeff Dunham's words, "you could never say out loud."[90] As this dissertation has shown, Trump's celebrated

[88] Williams, "Donald Trump 'saying what we all want to say, but can't say.'"

[89] Philip Rucker and David A. Fahrenthold, "Donald Trump positions himself as the voice of 'the forgotten men and women,'" *Washington Post*, July 22, 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-speech-at-republican-national-convention-trump-to-paint-dire-picture-of-america/2016/07/21/418f9ae6-4fad-11e6-aa14-e0c1087f7583_story.html.

[90] See Jenna Johnson, "As news of Trump's taxes breaks, he goes off script at a rally in Pennsylvania," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-

ability to speak the allegedly unspeakable is a key function of the ventriloquist's dummy.[91] What distinguishes Trump from the usual political puppets, however, is the absence of a discernible ventriloquist. For unlike George W. Bush, who was constantly relegated to Vice President Dick Cheney's knee during the seemingly endless period of the former's dubious presidential career, Trump appears beholden to no one, a horror movie ventriloquist's dummy that uncannily operates on its own, like Corky Withers' Fats.

As a dummy without a ventriloquist, Trump can, and does, make a point of accusing his rivals of dummification. At the RNC, he framed Hillary Clinton as "a 'puppet' of corporations and elites…[sure to] 'keep our rigged system in place.'"[92] Paradoxically, this kind of accusation is extremely effective amongst his supporters, who, ironically, love him for exemplifying the puppet's freedom to spout whatever invective comes to mind. Surely the politician's words matter, but my own feeling is that it matters less *what* Trump says and more that he has cultivated the appearance of saying *something*, really anything, that otherwise cannot be said. For a close examination of his actual language reveals that there is still so much left *unsaid* by this high-profile dummy, so much that remains implicit within the chaotic, yet fundamentally interpretable, stream of consciousness that appears to constitute his discourse.[93] After all, like Dunham, Trump will name "Mexicans," "immigrants," and "Muslims," as personae non grata in his "America," but there are other groups he fails to indict as vociferously. Indeed, there are still things that this dummy "can't say," confirming the fact that "political correctness" informs Trump's language just as much as it does many other politicians'. What differentiates him from

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politics/wp/2016/10/02/as-news-of-trumps-taxes-broke-he-goes-off-script-at-a-rally-in-pennsylvania/; Mooallem, "Comedy for Dummies."

[91] A function that, it should go without saying, has been put to varying ends.

[92] Rucker and Fahrenthold, "Donald Trump positions himself."

[93] For a discussion of the codedness of Trumpean language, see Chris A. Smith, "How Politicians Talk About Race and Gender Without Talking About Race and Gender," *California* 127, no. 3 (2016): 27-33.

the rest of the lot is the reigning fantasy, held by those on the left as well as on the right, that his strings have been cut, that he performs as freely and divinely as a Kleistian marionette. The powerful fantasy of unbridled speech that attends to Trump has equally captivated Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, those on the supposedly opposite poles of our dual-party system. This is why liberal arguments whose heft hinges on the things Trump has said, citing their lack of logic, their fascistic bent, et cetera, will have utterly no bearing on the man's popularity. Trump's pull arises from his vocalization's appearance as unfettered. And Trump well knows this, which is why he flouts teleprompts and cues, debate preparation, and "party lines." His act may, as ventriloquist acts often do, end up going badly. My point, however, is that its allure is less about language and more about voice.

In a recent *Washington Post* article in early 2016, a journalist analyzed Trump's accent, writing that, "Trump's supporters often praise how the politician gives voice to harsh truths. But that voice itself, that unmistakable instrument, has been a noteworthy element of Trump's populist image. Though he grew up in privilege…Trump never shed his Queens accent. Today, that accent helps him summon the stereotype of the blunt, no-nonsense New Yorker."[94] The reporter has a point, that Trump's accent, his New York inflection, makes him sound no-bullshit, even pragmatic, in spite of the politician's immense wealth and privilege. Yet the analysis only goes so far. For the "forgotten" Americans to whose unspeakable longings Trump claims to give voice are largely not New Yorkers with Queens accents. (As an aside: Bernie Sanders undoubtedly also emits New York-accented speech, and though the two politicians' bases have had some overlap, they generally have not appealed to the same constituencies.[95]) Trump's

[94] Jeff Guo, "Donald Trump's accent, explained," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/09/whats-up-with-donald-trumps-voice/.

[95] For a discussion of the similarity between Trump's accent and Sanders' accent, see Axel Bohmann, Erica Brozovsky, Salvatore Callesano, Noli Chew, Kirsten Meemann, Lars Hinrichs, and Patrick Schultz, "Two

effectiveness, then, lies not in his language or even his "no-nonsense" accent, but in what communications scholar Jennifer Mercieca has identified as the rhetorical strategy of "paralipsis."[96] Writes Mercieca, "paralipsis…enables [Trump] to publicly say things he can later disavow," later defining the Greek term as "(para, 'side' and leipein, 'to leave')…leave to the side."[97] Once again, we must observe that "leaving to the side" is precisely what ventriloquism enacts, placing dummy alongside ventriloquist so that the former can say what the latter "can't." In Mercieca's reading, Trump is both ventriloquist and dummy, able to speak the unspeakable in one voice and disavow that spoken unspeakable in a voice materially identical to the first.

That Trumpism is ventriloquism, and not just in the metaphorical sense, has not gone lost on Terry Fator, who, as an actual ventriloquist and a proud Trump supporter, has been open about his appreciation of the politician's artistry. "I'm a huge Trump fan," he crowed on Fox News in May of 2016, affirming that he and his wife will vote for the politician come the 2016 presidential election. Fator appeared alongside a new puppet—a larger-than-life, toupee-crowned Trump dummy he recently added to his Vegas repertoire (fig. 4.6). "With somebody as colorful



Fig. 4.6 Fator and Trump, the consummate ventriloquist's dummy

Candidates – One Accent," *University of Texas at Austin Linguistics Research Center*, March 20, 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, http://sites.utexas.edu/lrc/2016/03/20/two-candidates-one-accent/.

[96] Jennifer Mercieca, "How Donald Trump gets away with saying things other candidates can't," *The Conversation*, accessed October 5, 2016, https://theconversation.com/how-donald-trump-gets-away-with-saying-things-other-candidates-cant-55615.

[97] Ibid.

as Trump," the ventriloquist began, "—and I don't do anything derogatory," he continued, cutting himself off mid-sentence, as Trump himself might have done. "It's all fun," Fator went on, "it's like, you know, the hair," he said, then doffing the puppet's orange mop. "I don't really do political humor," he continued, "but really it's how does Trump feel about something…. So I'm not making a political statement in my show; I'm letting Trump say what he feels about something…." After a few moments' more banter with anchor Sean Hannity, Fator let Trump "say what he feels," which amounted, quite simply, to the phrase "I'm gonna make Mexico pay for it!," at which point Fator had the puppet sing a few bars from Pink Floyd's "The Wall." Awkwardly, and for a few moments too long, Hannity laughed. The dummy hadn't said much of "what he felt" about anything. He'd simply repeated Trump's speech, like a broken record.[98]

[98] All citations in the paragraph from Fator's appearance on Fox News' *Hannity* on May 26, 2016. See "Terry Fator adds 'Donald Trump' to his Las Vegas lineup," *YouTube*, May 26, 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoZ_Jq5LN7Q.