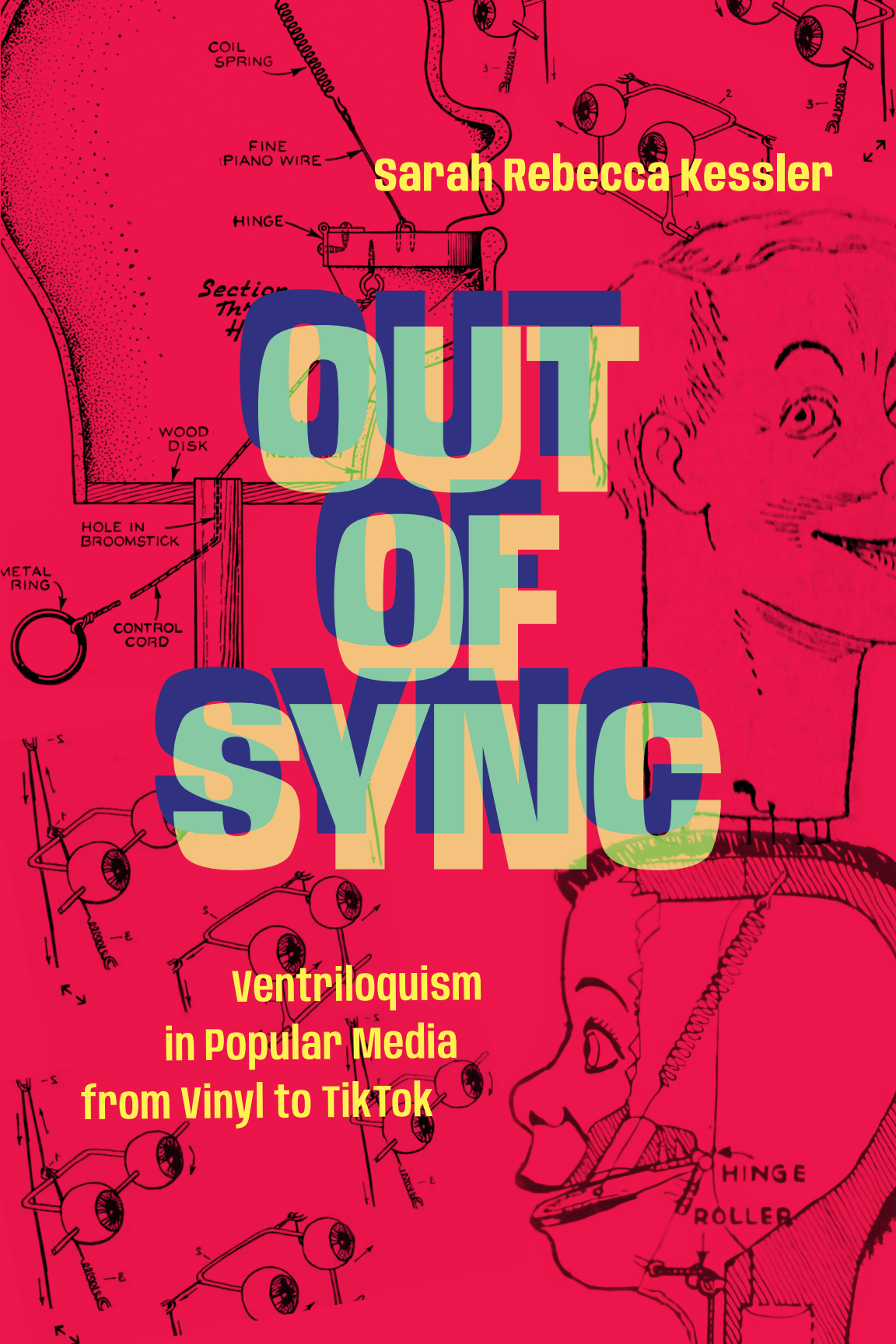




Sarah Rebecca Kessler

OUT OF SYNC

Ventriloquism
in Popular Media
from Vinyl to TikTok

Out of Sync



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Out of Sync

Ventriloquism in Popular Media
from Vinyl to TikTok

SARAH REBECCA KESSLER

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*For Grandma and Oma
and Lily and Corky*

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Introduction

Out of Sync

I'm the misdirection, dummy! While we're bull-shittin' you could bring an elephant on the stage!

—Fats (Dennis Alwood), *Magic*

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

In the 1978 horror film *Magic* (dir. Richard Attenborough), a youthful Anthony Hopkins plays 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 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 his sleights of hand have been executed.¹ *Magic*'s central plotline arcs around Withers's anxiety over taking his career to the next level by putting his ventriloquial magic show on primetime television—a feat that would (oddly but necessarily for plot advancement purposes) require a medical examination. Fearing the exposure of his own mental instability, a stereotypical schizophrenia

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whose outward manifestation is his dummy alter ego, the ventriloquist flees his talent agent and seeks refuge with an old flame. The triangle that ensues among Withers, the unfortunate love object, and Fats—the id to Withers’s ego, the Mr. Hyde to his Dr. Jekyll—has deadly consequences. If you’ve ever seen any horror movie about a ventriloquist, you already know how *Magic* ends: with the dummy who speaks the unspeakable doing the undoable.

Before his homicidal downfall, however, Withers’s antiquated ability to contort his voice and illusorily channel it through Fats’s 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, TV, and iPhone viewers reflexively look to the bodies they see onscreen as the origins of the recorded voices they hear emanating from audio speakers. As Withers’s 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’s ventriloquism makes 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 So no matter how anachronistic the spectacle of his ventriloquism may appear—no matter how dated the ventriloquist-dummy pair may seem in the context of late twentieth-century US popular culture—Withers’s knack for vocal manipulation, his skill at synchronizing voices and bodies that aren’t supposed to go together, retains an allure and an effectiveness that persists 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 depiction of 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. But *Magic* also speaks to the contemporary assumption that ventriloquism is an anachronistic form that will inevitably fail to retain its magical purchase in the context of a more implicitly ventriloquial audiovisual medium such as television. “Magic has had a little trouble on the tube,” observes Withers’s agent, “because you can’t misdirect the goddamn camera.” Thus, Withers fears putting his act on TV not only because the physical exam might expose his so-called split personality; he also fears bringing his live performance to a medium whose alleged sophistication—whose camera’s immunity to misdirection—might expose his own all-too-human maneuvers.

In the end, Withers's fear of double exposure is both confirmed and made ridiculous by *Magic*. For as a sound film in the horror genre, *Magic* uses all the weapons in its audiovisual arsenal to convince us of Fats's eerie autonomy from his master, in the process demonstrating ventriloquism's continued appeal to the viewer. In this film, as in the other twentieth- and twenty-first-century case studies in this book, the "newer" (ventriloquial) medium of cinema does not render the "older" (vaudevillian) performance of ventriloquism moot. On the contrary, ventriloquism's remediated appearance in *Magic* as an "awkward sign of the workings of the works," suggests novel ways of thinking about both the film and the ventriloquist act.⁴ Ventriloquism amplifies the overlaps between the "newer" audiovisual medium and the "older" audiovisual practice, the relations between sound and image, and the dynamics between body and voice.

In this book, I argue that the seemingly outmoded cultural phenomenon of ventriloquism is a key site for understanding prevailing anxieties about media and mediation in the digital era. Ventriloquism stages a scene of mediation: Before an audience, an actor trained in the art of lip and tongue manipulation imperceptibly synchronizes their speech to the moving lips of a dummy, whose voice, having apparently 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 practice boasts a growing plethora of media afterlives, while also continuing to serve as political shorthand for the mindless, mechanical reproduction of another's speech. You'll find, as you read this book, that the word *ventriloquism* is often used to describe cultural forms and practices distinct from stage ventriloquism, such as lip-syncing, Foley art, subtitling, dubbing, sound effects, sync sound, artificial voices, the list goes on. Why, I ask, is ventriloquism—which by the way remains a thriving entertainment industry—still the go-to analogy for such a diverse and contemporary array of audiovisual phenomena?

Out of Sync: Ventriloquism in Popular Media from Vinyl to TikTok insists that ventriloquism's circulation as a popular metaphor and its continued prevalence as a form of contemporary entertainment, alongside the art's underacknowledged legacies of audiovisual syncing and mediated misdirection, offer 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 digital era—even as the practice

continues to evoke the cultural detritus of a prior historical moment. As the book's title suggests, the asynchrony of ventriloquism's archaic manifestation in the media-saturated cultural contexts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first 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. At the core of *Out of Sync* is a preoccupation with the problem of synchronization, a spatiotemporal term often used to describe the process by which the sound and image components of an audiovisual medium are made to operate in time with one another. With its first English usages dating back to the early seventeenth century, the verb *to synchronize* can be colloquially translated as “to occur at the same time.”⁵ In the Anglophone popular cultural contexts within which *Out of Sync* primarily operates, *synchronization* is often shortened to *sync* (sometimes spelled *synch*). The term's contemporary iteration has a decidedly moral valence. It can be used approvingly—to describe the timely, “in sync” relations between people, recorded images and sounds, the lips of a pop singer (or drag performer) and the vocal track to which they lip-sync, and other parties. Or it can be disapprovingly deployed to indicate how “out of sync,” say, two people in a relationship are—or a film image is with its accompanying soundtrack, an asynchrony that becomes palpable when onscreen lips do not match up with their assigned voices. As these examples indicate, when one speaks specifically about audiovisual synchronization in contemporary transatlantic popular culture, one is often talking about the (positive) timeliness or (negative) untimeliness associated with mediated pairings of the human body and the human voice.

In *Out of Sync*, I contend that the cultural tendency to moralize—to racialize, to gender, to sexualize, or as *Magic's* mental illness plotline illustrates, to pathologize—the perceived synchronies or asynchronies of particular bodies and voices lends ventriloquism its aura of anachronism as well as its continued purchase. In ventriloquism, a human actor uses a dummy body to dramatize the voice's disembodiment and resynchronization. And as Steven Connor observed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, ventriloquism seems like an archaic practice because voices themselves sound like echoes of a bygone era. The notion that our voices are the most unmediated means of communication we humans have remains powerful, but it's also been compromised by our growing awareness of the artificiality of our own and others' voices—their purportedly increasing lack of what Roland Barthes fantasized as the “grain” that makes

every individual voice sound different.⁶ Palpable in both popular culture and academic scholarship, this shift is registered by music listeners' indifference to recorded and live uses of technologies like Auto-Tune and pop performance practices like lip-syncing; sound theorists' historically informed arguments that human voices are culturally shaped technologies and that audiovisual synchronization is a special effect as opposed to a natural occurrence; and philosophers' more abstract declarations that all voices are ventriloquial, that one never fully possesses or "owns" their own voice because one can never pinpoint the exact place it comes from.⁷ At the moment, it would seem, the era of the voice's privileging as a raw, unfiltered expression of human selfhood 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 scholars invested in both the abstract category of "the voice" and the more capacious category of "voice" concur, the "rapid naturalization of the technologically mediated voice" that occurred in the throes of the development of sound reproduction technology was possible because the voice was already understood as a reproduced sound, a sound whose sound was and is conditioned by the sounds of other voices.⁸ As Annette Schlichter has argued, not only is speech performative but voices, the material means by which speech is typically sounded, are themselves performative, taking their cues from the world outside the body rather than emanating from fundamental, unassailable sources.⁹ Mladen Dolar argues, for his part, that the voice is always already disembodied, since it emerges from a literal hole in the body, an echoic abyss, a resonant "void."¹⁰ Whether implicitly or explicitly, these perspectives each claim that voices aren't original but rather ventriloquial—that they derive from somewhere irreducible to the body that appears to produce them.

In the face of voice's OG status as a relic whose closest analogue is a vaudevillian performance practice most consider dead, *Out of Sync* argues that, like bodies, ventriloquial voices matter.¹¹ This book breaks from Connor's cultural history of ventriloquism—which, the author argues, ultimately constitutes a "history of the voice"—as well as from more recent 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.¹² *Out of Sync* also intervenes in film and media studies debates about the overarching ventriloquial qualities of audiovisual media by asking how these ventriloquial media are 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.¹³ 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, gendering, and sexualization. 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, gendering, and sexualization 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. Black studies and queer theory have long documented the positioning of racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects as "behind the times" or "out of time"—as not adhering, either corporeally or conceptually, to a normative linear temporality.¹⁴ *Out of Sync* accordingly connects the asynchrony of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized subject with the anachronism of the remediated ventriloquial voice to see what the literalization of this layered relationship can tell us about the problematics of and possibilities for vocality, audiovisuality, and mediation in contemporary transatlantic culture.

Each of this book's case studies homes in on a remediated enactment of ventriloquism at the turn of the twenty-first century, examining its chosen object at the textual level while also placing it in historical and cultural context. In this way, *Out of Sync* 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 book begins with an examination of the radically race-critical 1970s comedy albums of the African American ventriloquist duo Richard & Willie, which remediate ventriloquism through phonography to vocalize the noisy doubleness of Black responses to the effacement and silencing of the history of US slavery. My second case study takes up ventriloquism's mobilization as racialized and queered metaphor through an analysis of the late 1980s–early 1990s lip-sync scandal wrought by the vocal and bodily asynchrony of the Afro-German pop group Milli Vanilli, an event that provides a clear window into what I call the "cultural politics of synchronization." In its later chapters the book turns to the contemporary multimedia performances of the self-deprecating British ventriloquist Nina Conti and her jingoistic American counterparts Terry Fator and Jeff Dunham, arguing that while Conti's documentary film work undercuts

the genre's frequent claims to "give voice" to marginalized subjects by foregrounding the bifurcated relations between ventriloquists and dummies, Fator and Dunham's lucrative ventriloquial practices channel complementary versions of an imagined vox populi that hearkens back to a fantasy prior US cultural moment when straight white men could "say what they wanted to say" directly, without the need for ventriloquial mediation. Finally, *Out of Sync* examines how TikTok users implicitly invoke ventriloquism as an alibi for any charges of racism, sexism, and homophobia that might result from their cross-racial, -gender, and -sexuality lip-sync performances on the app.

Voice Studies, Ventriloquism Studies

Out of Sync's dual focus on the material dimensions of contemporary mediated ventriloquial performances (i.e., "actual" ventriloquial practices of the recent past and present) and ventriloquism's ongoing 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 book perhaps most directly contributes. As Annette Schlichter and Nina Eidsheim have noted, the voice, while understood as a material and physiological entity in scientific contexts, has been largely "devocalized," or divested of its sonic materiality, within Western philosophy, critical theory, and popular discourse. "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."¹⁵ But Schlichter and Eidsheim not only lament that voice, having lost both its body and its voice, is now merely a floating signifier for an ineffable agency in Western cultural contexts. They also implicitly take to task the voice's metaphorization as *ventriloquism*—as a disembodied operation—in recent voice theory and elsewhere. Exemplary instances of the voice's ventriloquial metaphorization, and thus its double-disembodiment, can be found in the heavily cited works of Mladen Dolar and 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).¹⁶ *Out of Sync* argues that such theorizations of the voice as ventriloquism "by its very essence" would be more compelling

if they considered 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 its audiences feel.¹⁷

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 materiality. It is *Out of Sync*'s dual contention that (1) if, as Dolar and others have claimed, voices are essentially ventriloquial, the practice of ventriloquism has much to contribute to our understanding of voice and vocality, and (2) if, as Schlichter and Eidsheim argue, the voice has been theoretically and philosophically devocalized and disembodied, we can 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. Most crucially, however, *Out of Sync* insists that (3) 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."¹⁸

This book is far from alone in proposing ventriloquism, not to mention the many other, more modern instantiations of the disembodied voice made possible by newer technologies of sound reproduction, as a prime starting point for the voice's scholarly reconsideration. Connor has already historicized ventriloquism's Western iterations, beginning with the Delphic Oracle, who mythically operated as Apollo's "mouthpiece," and ending with twentieth-century technological manifestations of the ventriloquial, including "ventriloquist films" like *Magic* that represent ventriloquism in its latter-day incarnation of human-with-dummy.¹⁹ The overarching goal of his psychoanalytically and phenomenologically informed 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,"²⁰ a fantasy that, *Dumbstruck* demonstrates, anteceded sound reproduction's technological rending of voice from body. In the wake of the voice's technological disembodiment, 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.²¹ This might explain some of ventriloquism's enduring anachronism—its at once anticipatory and antiquated appearance—in the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century period spanned by

Out of Sync. But 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. Ventriloquism has made a winding transition from oracular utterance through the polyphonic stage ventriloquisms of the early nineteenth century to the "ventriloquial duality" of the still-vaudevillian ventriloquisms of today (which typically feature the isolated pairing of ventriloquist and dummy that had become standard practice by the close of the nineteenth century). In explaining this trajectory Connor cites the art's growing "implicat[ion] in the eye," its turn toward a more visual mode of expression and interest.²² Invoking what has been extensively theorized as a broader Western cultural shift toward the "hegemony of vision," Connor implies that ventriloquism correspondingly transitioned into a practice that audiovisually synchronized the now-iconic body of the ventriloquist's dummy to the previously disembodied voice.²³ This synchronization process materialized what he 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."²⁴ Ventriloquism had always furnished a "repertoire of imagings or incarnations" of the vocalic body,²⁵ a variant set of containers for the uncanny disembodied voice (Michel Chion's "acousmètre").²⁶ But the ventriloquist's dummy in particular was characterized 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."²⁷

As *Out of Sync* demonstrates, the ventriloquist's dummy as we know it today still constitutes a profoundly racialized and gendered anachronism in the form of a puppet. Connor's cultural history posits the late nineteenth 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 over the century that followed.²⁸ In contrast, *Out of Sync* argues that an analysis of the art's more recent manifestations throughout transatlantic popular culture demonstrates the extent to which ventriloquism as both practice and metaphor has a mutually constitutive relation to such processes. Rather than interpreting ventriloquism's vocal disembodiments and bodily resynchronizations as appeals to a primal or universal sense of the uncanny, I argue that ventriloquism and its metaphorization give us a window onto the means by which certain voices and bodies are themselves codified as "uncanny" or asynchronous—a window, in other words, onto

the audiovisual dynamics of racialization and gendering. In the book's second chapter, I propose the "cultural politics of synchronization" as a way to conceptualize these dynamics' recent and contemporary operation. Yet we have only to revisit, say, the Mechanical Turk of the late eighteenth century to glimpse the extent to which racialization and the "uncanniness" of the ventriloquial voice have long been coextensive.²⁹ Indeed, Connor himself gives us many examples of the ways in which gender's binary construction has enduringly dictated and been dictated by the voice's "uncanny" dis- and re-embodiment.³⁰ In its focus on remediated ventriloquisms, *Out of Sync* 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.

In pursuing these lines of inquiry in *Out of Sync*, I am especially indebted to contemporary scholarship in the areas of Black studies and queer theory. I also recognize the crucial contributions of film and media theoretical explorations of the voice, as well as those of the overlapping field of sound studies. In engaging with these media-centric fields, *Out of Sync* 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.³¹ Put otherwise, in this book I understand voices as mediated phenomena, which means that studying, for example, the (ventriloquial) voice in cinema—as Michel Chion and Rick Altman do—can model a valuable approach to studying the (ventriloquial) voice itself. Similarly, *Out of Sync* 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.³² This central aim of sound studies challenges those of us interested in the historically privileged category of the voice to thoroughly consider voices as sounds. Accordingly, this book 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. I thus begin not with the assumption of sound, media, the voice, or ventriloquism as deracinated or neutral objects that are then racialized or gendered. Rather, I position Black studies and queer theory as the central epistemologies through which *Out of Sync* approaches its study of the ventriloquial voice.

Racialization, Ventriloquism, and Racial Ventriloquism

Unlike most academic and popular considerations of ventriloquism to date, *Out of Sync* argues that we cannot talk about ventriloquism without talking about race. In this book I contend that ventriloquism's frequent critical invocation, particularly in contemporary scholarship and commentary on Black popular culture, demonstrates its unique value as an analytic tool for conceptualizing racialization as an audiovisual process tied to dominant regimes of synchronization. Following scholars of Black media, culture, and performance such as Daphne Brooks, Glenda Carpio, Paul Gilroy, and Alexander G. Weheliye, I insist in *Out of Sync* that 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."³³

When ventriloquism is invoked in discussions of race and popular culture, it is often deployed as a metaphor for minstrelsy.³⁴ Like ventriloquial performance (a practice historically synchronic with blackface minstrelsy in the US 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 the alleged visual and auditory components of Blackness to construct an audiovisual racial caricature rooted in the fantasy of the fixed yet aberrant natures of Black skin and Black voice, whose respective transposition onto and vocalization from the throat of the white performer 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.³⁵ The practice, which Eric Lott refers to as "a case of popular racial ventriloquism," accomplished a great deal of this objective 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.³⁶ Minstrelsy had "the infantilizing effect of arresting 'black' people in the early stages of childhood development."³⁷ Before a white audience, Blackness was imaged and sounded as stunted, asynchronous, untimely. The disjunct between the minstrel's adult-sized body, visibly re-pigmented, and his contorted voice, speaking in baby talk, created an anachronistic spectacle.

There is an abiding connection, *Out of Sync* argues, between the racializing practices of blackface minstrelsy and ventriloquism's historical and contemporary iterations—a linkage that has been ignored and effaced in mainstream histories and theories of ventriloquism.³⁸ Ventriloquism and blackface minstrelsy were “skills” often mastered by the same performers, “talents” often performed alongside one another on the same nineteenth-century stages. One cannot isolate the history of blackface from the history of ventriloquism; both practices involved racial mimicry and 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 not merely the result of a process of “sociological fixing” that occurred with the increased dummification of the transcendently uncanny voice but must be understood as the ventriloquial materialization of a white supremacy that configured and continues to configure Blackness as a profound anachronism. 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. If we are “all” ventriloquial, some of us are more ventriloquial than others—and the latter are reprimanded accordingly. In Chapter 2 I consider a case in which the “ventriloquism” of racialized pop music performers provoked especially severe levels of public punishment, while chapter 4 examines the blackface and other minstrel acts of contemporary mass-mediated ventriloquial performance.

However as chapters 1 and 2 of *Out of Sync* demonstrate, African American and Afro-European cultural practitioners have powerfully critiqued, resignified, and redeployed the histories and practices of ventriloquism and its audiovisual racialization. Fundamental to the book's exploration of Black ventriloquial cultural production, as well as to its theorization of what ventriloquism can do and undo, is the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness.³⁹ While Du Bois uses a visual metaphor to describe the “second-sight” one possesses in this split capacity (a doubling materialized in Black ventriloquial practice), I read Du Boisian double consciousness and its ventriloquial manifestation through Weheliye's “phonographic” treatment of the former. Weheliye argues that the splitting of sound and source 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 (audio-)visual dynamics of racialization.⁴⁰ Materially and metaphorically, ventriloquism's separation of voice and body is profoundly phonographic. Thus, in contrast to minstrelsy's "racial ventriloquism" and ventriloquism's minstrelsy, which together position Blackness as anachronism, the phonographic ventriloquism examined in chapter 1 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 cuts through the very heart of Western modernity.

Queer Temporalities, Queer Asynchronies

Observing that "in modernity's various self-representations, racial difference has operated as the sign of anachronism tout court," Elizabeth Freeman argues that, like the Black ventriloquisms mentioned in the previous section, queer cultural practices, too, recode their own alleged anachronism as "queer temporality."⁴¹ Responding to the historical positioning of queer bodies and collectivities as out of step with normative temporality—as behind the times, ahead of the times, or, as Connor argues of ventriloquism, at once (and thus uncannily) behind *and* ahead of the times—Freeman offers the notion of "chrononormativity" to describe capitalist heteropatriarchy's "use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."⁴² Chrononormativity, she writes, is an "enforced synchronicity" that is differentially classed, gendered, and, one must reemphasize, racialized.⁴³ While for Freeman the human body is the principal site of chrononormativity's administration of processes of synchronization, in *Out of Sync* I listen in particular for the ventriloquial voice, amplifying this voice to emphasize chrononormativity's audiovisual operation. This book asks what the temporal arrangements of voice vis-à-vis body and sound vis-à-vis image reveal about processes of racialization, gendering, and sexualization as they are mapped onto and mediated through vocalizing bodies. I also use the book's primary topic, ventriloquism, to chart voice-body and sound-image relations that reconfigure dominant modalities of synchronization and thereby suggest alternate temporalities as well as spatialities.

Among these relations is the ventriloquial positionality of *bifurcation*, discussed in detail in chapter 3. While this term generally denotes 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 their own lips out of sync with their speech. The concept can also be applied to dummy ventriloquism, wherein the ventriloquist keeps their lips as still as possible while otherwise speaking legibly, so that the puppet beside them appears to do the talking—another kind of asynchrony. I argue that ventriloquial bifurcation can 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 this book explores, one speaks not either “as oneself” or “as another.” Rather, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s words, one “speaks nearby,” such that the other is neither possessed (“given a voice,” “spoken for”), nor exclusively self-possessed (“speaking in her own voice”).⁴⁴ As Eve Sedgwick might concur, ventriloquism, I argue, opens us to the possibility of speaking beside or alongside both self and others, in lateral relation, creating an expanded field of possibilities.⁴⁵

In the context of the contemporary media-saturated West’s orientation toward 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 leading national historical discourses. The pop cultural trajectory charted in *Out of Sync* demonstrates that ventriloquism is exceptionally positioned to at once reinforce and reconfigure transatlantic fixations with audiovisual syncing across media—including the “human medium” of the vocalizing body.

Ventriloquism from Puppets to Conversational Agents

Chapter 1 of *Out of Sync* examines the phonographic ventriloquism of the Los Angeles-based 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 & 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 US 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 in which the characters of Richard & Willie enact a tug-of-war between acquiescence and resistance to white supremacy. In the audible gaps between their linguistic expressions of these respective polarities, I argue, "black noise" sonically materializes.⁴⁶ This "extralinguistic mode" of response to white supremacist historicization can also be traced through Pryor's comedy.⁴⁷ 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 & Willie.

The book's second chapter focuses on ventriloquism's deployment as metaphor in the case of the excessively publicized Milli Vanilli lip-sync scandal of the late 1980s–early 1990s. Visually fronted by Afro-German performer Robert "Rob" Pilatus and Afro-French performer Fabrice "Fab" Morvan, Milli Vanilli was a pop music act conceived by 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 a number of unseen vocalists and musicians. When audible skips in the audio playback compromised the duo's lip-sync act during a live performance, Pilatus and Morvan were widely accused of ventriloquism. Farian's career, on the other hand, 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 a complex "ventriloquist act" directly correlated with US audiences' interpretations of the duo 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 via the policing of audiovisual synchronization.⁴⁸ In closing, I examine Milli Vanilli's often ironic representation in

contemporary US art and media projects, which both critically redeploy and fetishize the group's enduring untimeliness.

Out of Sync's third chapter continues the book's foray into the twenty-first century, arguing that the material practice of ventriloquism has more to offer to documentary cinema than a convenient (and typically negative) metaphor for the deceptive 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 details 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 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 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 chapter of *Out of Sync* 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-woke" discourses of the present-day United States. Both hailing from Texas, these self-styled down-home, white American ventriloquists frame their respective transmedia practices—which encompass film, television, and live multimedia performances—as good old-fashioned entertainment with modern bells and whistles. Their updated, anachronistic acts are hugely popular among noncoastal and nonurban white US audience segments 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 (white)

Americans.⁴⁹ Through detailed analyses of both ventriloquists' *modus operandi*, I argue 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." Like all attempts at consolidation, Dunham and Fator's differential yet interlinked performance strategies fail to furnish a unified voice under whose umbrella "America" might take refuge. Nevertheless, these complicated performances produce nostalgia for the fantasy moment of such a voice's unbridled expression.

The book's fifth and final chapter takes up the controversial social media platform TikTok, whose origins in a lip-sync app render it the contemporary moment's most salient ventriloquial analogue. TikTok users frequently engage in cross-racial and cross-gender lip-sync performances, which at once evoke and invoke the history of blackface minstrelsy that grounds so many of *Out of Sync's* case studies while also suggesting new directions for the cultural politics of synchronization. This problematic play is enabled by what I call the "ventriloquial alibi," an implicit citation of TikTok's affordances as a platform whose very endgame is lip-syncing, and whose users therefore cannot be taken to task for simply realizing its purpose—even if the results sometimes resemble a racist practice whose anachronism is too often taken for granted. *Out of Sync* then closes with a brief epilogue that examines the emergent phenomenon of ChatGPT, asking why ventriloquism, in all its apparent archaism, is so frequently metaphorized to describe the artificial intelligence engines proclaimed to herald our collective future. Is the claim that ventriloquism is anachronistic itself misdirection? This book argues that the constant reassertion thereof in fact distracts us from ventriloquism's material and conceptual centrality to the audiovisual practices that emerged after the art's alleged death as a cultural form.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 404.
- 2 Attenborough, dir., *Magic*.
- 3 Michel Chion writes, “In one sense the voice is the first of special effects—the one requiring the fewest accessories, the least technology and money.” Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 169.
- 4 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 404.
- 5 As of 2026, the online edition of the *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines *synthesize* as “to (cause to) happen at the same time.” Tellingly, the verb’s very meaning collapses compulsion and agency.
- 6 Barthes, “Grain of the Voice,” 179–89. See also Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, for an account of the voice’s historical privileging as an unmediated means of communication in Western culture.
- 7 See Chion, *Voice in Cinema*; Altman, “Moving Lips”; Doane, “Practice of Sound”; Sterne, *Audible Past*; Eidsheim, “Synthesizing Race” and *Race of Sound*; Tobias, *Sync*; Weheliye, “Desiring Machines”; Smith, “Laughing Machines”; Mills, “Media and Prosthesis”; Hilderbrand, “Sex Out of Sync”; and Baron et al., *Media Ventriloquism*. See also Žižek, *On Belief*, and Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*.
- 8 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 411.
- 9 See Schlichter, “Do Voices Matter?”
- 10 Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, 42.
- 11 See Schlichter, “Do Voices Matter?,” and Schlichter and Eidsheim, “Introduction: Voice Matters.”

- 12 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 43.
- 13 See Eidsheim, "Synthesizing Race"; Carson, "Gender of Sound"; Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*; Lordi, *Black Resonance*; Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*; James, "Gendered Voices and Social Harmony"; and Wallace, *King's Vibrato*.
- 14 See Glissant, "~History/-Histories-Stories"; McKenzie, "Glissant on Time and History"; Keeling, "Looking for M—"; Ahad and Ibrahim, "Black Temporality in Times of Crisis"; Edelman, *No Future*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Freeman, *Time Binds*; and Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*.
- 15 Schlichter and Eidsheim, "Voice Matters." The authors borrow the term *de-vocalization* from Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 14.
- 16 Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, 70; Žižek, *On Belief*, 58.
- 17 Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, 70.
- 18 Schlichter and Eidsheim, "Voice Matters."
- 19 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 47, 412.
- 20 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 43.
- 21 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 40.
- 22 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 399.
- 23 For examples and critiques of this tendency, see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*; Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
- 24 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 35.
- 25 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 35.
- 26 Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 21.
- 27 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 400.
- 28 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 400.
- 29 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. Hidden inside the bowels of the automaton was a human chess player who actually made all the moves. See Poe, "Maelzel's Chess-Player," 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" (253).
- 30 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 nor the will to debate in this book), 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 nineteenth

century, the adolescent male body will become the primary sufferer of this annihilation. *Dumbstruck*, 409. For my part I do not believe that the historical record supports this alleged shift.

- 31 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*, 18.
- 32 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, *Audible Past*, 2.
- 33 Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” 3. Best and Hartman’s concept of “black noise” will be explained later in the introduction and will be further unpacked in chapter 1.
- 34 For an example of this usage, see Banerjee, *Ethnic Ventriloquism*.
- 35 See Jennifer Lynn Stoeve’s book *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.
- 36 Lott, *Love and Theft*, 106.
- 37 Lott, *Love and Theft*, 147.
- 38 For an example of blackface’s effacement from histories of ventriloquism beyond Connor’s, see Burns, *Other Voices*.
- 39 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.
- 40 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 6.
- 41 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 80.
- 42 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.
- 43 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 39.
- 44 Minh-ha and Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” 87.
- 45 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8–9.
- 46 Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” 3.
- 47 Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 73.
- 48 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 57.
- 49 Williams, “Donald Trump.”

CHAPTER 1. BICENTENNIALITY AND BLACK NOISE

1 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 212.

2 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.