from Jaimie Baron, Reuse, Misuse, Abuse
The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital
Era, Rutgers University Press: N.J.:2020

Ventriloquizing the Social "Unconscience": Natalie Bookchin's *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*

The limited length of the preceding examples—which is common to online videos—also limits the complexity of their rhetorical strategies. I now turn to a longer piece made for exhibition within an art gallery whose form allows for much more nuance and therefore deserves a more extensive unpacking in terms of both its effects and its ethics. Natalie Bookchin's video installation *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012) can be considered a form of verbal collage and a work of archival ventriloquism. In this case, however, the ventriloquized subject is not a single, named individual but, rather, a group of anonymous individuals. Rather than an instance of racial ventriloquism, Bookchin's piece is ventriloquism about race—specifically about African American masculinity—and attests to the potential for archival ventriloquism to reveal discursive and ideological trends within contemporary culture.

Now he's out in public and everyone can see is a sixteen-minute, eighteen-channel loop designed to be displayed on monitors dispersed around a dark room. Clips of various men and women of different ages and ethnicities—all appropriated from YouTube video blogs, or vlogs—appear periodically on different monitors, speaking about various news stories involving prominent African American men. Yet, the specific names of the men are never mentioned, so it is up to the viewer to sort out the various stories as they are filtered through many perspectives. Through this chorus of voices, a complex kaleidoscope of contemporary views on African American masculinity emerges. Collectively, these videos attest to the continued discursive struggle taking place around blackness and masculinity. In drawing on YouTube video blogs, Bookchin's work also raises many questions about this relatively recent format through which anyone can send a virtual missive to an unknown and unspecified audience. Furthermore, it traces the limits of what different people understand as allowable speech about Black masculinity in contemporary culture as they are renegotiated and realigned by digital technology. By "speaking through" a variety of voices and bodies, Bookchin's work of archival ventriloquism constitutes a "cartographic gaze" that maps not the (endlessly mapped) Black male body but, rather, the discourses about that body.

Mark Anthony Neal has argued that what he refers to as "the 'legible' Black male body" is "continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture."[50] He further notes that "the most 'legible' Black male body is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment."[51] The trope of the Black "thug" circulates constantly in popular culture, becoming familiar and hence immediately legible through its repetition. What is striking about the four men we ultimately discover to be the topics of the YouTube vloggers' discourse—Barack Obama, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michael Jackson, and Tiger Woods—is the fact that they do not fit this model of legibility. Within Neal's framework, these four men possess "illegible" Black bodies that thwart our expectations, that refuse to be clearly Black. In the case of Obama, Gates, and Woods, this is partly rooted in their genetic heritage. Obama is the son of a white American mother and a Kenyan father. Although he

explicitly identifies as African American, both his blackness and his Americanness have been challenged. Gates, although he also identifies as African American and has devoted his academic career to studying African and African American lives, revealed after he had his genome sequenced that he has more European ancestry than African. Meanwhile, Woods, who is often celebrated as the first African American golf champion, does not identify as African American but rather as a person of mixed race. And finally, Michael Jackson, although of African American heritage, bleached his skin so that he appeared increasingly white. Moreover, beyond their complex genetic and physical relationship to blackness, all of these men are (or were, in the case of the late Jackson) extremely affluent and successful. Although they all appear or once appeared physically Black, their achievements radically disrupt the widespread societal expectation that Black men are "thugs" in need of surveillance and containment. In fact, their illegibility seems to be one of the reasons that the YouTube vloggers feel compelled to speak about these men, whether to condemn them, defend them, or both. Even those who are sympathetic to these men are involved in a process of attempting to increase their legibility, thereby participating in the surveillance and disciplining of these Black male bodies. These men's involvement in public "scandals" opened the door to these attempts to reinscribe them as legible Black bodies—in other words, as criminals.

One common frustration the vloggers express is that their subjects cannot be easily and immediately known. Towards the beginning of the loop, one girl complains, "I don't know what race you are." "No one knows the first thing about him," adds a young man. "Even his name's a mystery," says another young woman. This short series of statements about an unidentified "he" and "him" all point to "his" illegibility. No one knows the first thing about him. Even his name is a mystery. And most disturbingly of all, his race is uncertain. Such articulations of "his" illegibility are then countered by a variety of attempts to make "him" legible.

In one section, legibility is explicitly tied to a faith in government documentation. Several men join together saying in unison, saying, "You gotta show your ID." A young white woman then commands, "State your full name and place of birth." "Why can't he produce his real birth certificate?" two people ask at once. "Here's my birth certificate," says an elderly white woman sitting in front of an American flag. "Where's yours?" "He may or may not have been born in the US," says another man, while yet another asserts emphatically that "he wasn't born in the US." A white man in sunglasses complains, "I don't see any proof." Some of the vloggers are clearly concerned in this section with then-President Barack Obama, who was famously accused of not being eligible to be President of the United States because he was—so claim his detractors—actually born in Kenya. However, the assertion that "you gotta show your ID" is likely a reference to Henry Louis Gates Jr., who refused to show his identification when police came to investigate him for breaking into what was, in fact, his own house. Regarding both cases, the vloggers' call for documentation reflects a desire to ground and stabilize identity in an officially sanctioned government document. The ID card or birth certificate seems to hold the promise of making legible identities that these vloggers find frustratingly obscure.

The vloggers then turn to quantification and neologism to attempt to fix "his" racial identity. "He's just as much white as Black." "He needs to be Black." "What type of Black man says that he is 56% white?" "According to him, he's more than 56% white." "50% of yourself is Black and 50% is white." "So he's more of a white guy. He even said so himself." Some of these are likely references to Obama, who has a white mother and a Black father. Others probably refer to Gates, who announced that genetically he is 56% white. Then a woman says, "He's not all Black. He's

Caucoblasian." And a series of voices echoes, "He's Cablasian." These vloggers are clearly discussing Tiger Woods, who coined the term "Cablasian" for himself to reflect his combination of Caucasian, Asian, and Black heritage. Like the emphasis on documentation, this recourse to numbers and racial terminology indicate the vloggers' need to see race as determinable.

Yet, as Bookchin's piece demonstrates, it is not just their racially complex genetic heritage or physical appearance that upsets the vloggers. It is also their cosmopolitanism, which conflicts with dominant notions of Black masculinity tied to "the hood," to a fixed, local, and therefore to a more ostensibly "authentic" Black identity. As noted above, Obama, Gates, Woods, and Jackson all are/were very affluent men, Woods and Jackson particularly so. Meanwhile, Obama and Gates both have a great deal of cultural capital given their elite educations and high-ranking jobs in government and university, respectively. In one section of the piece, the vloggers emphasize the wealth of their subjects: "This dude, was comin' home—" "He came home in his Escalade—" "Escalade" "Cadillac Escalade" "$80, 000 SUV" "He was driving a 2009 Cadillac SUV" "Driving his Escalade on his million-dollar-plus compound" "At 2:30 in the morning" "He comes home" "Trying to get into his house" "With his hired driver" "With his chauffeur" "His chauffeur" "Who also happens to be a Black man." Here, the vloggers slip between references to Woods and Gates. Woods's involvement in scandal began when he crashed his Escalade into a fire hydrant outside his house at 2:30 A.M. one night; it was later revealed to have been precipitated by an argument with his then-wife, Elin Nordegren, who had discovered that Woods had been unfaithful. When Gates, also late at night, found that the door to his house was jammed, he and his African American driver tried to get into the house another way. Regarding both Woods and Gates, the vloggers emphasize their privilege—the price of Woods's Escalade and home and the fact that Gates has a hired chauffeur. In addition to emphasizing "his" wealth, this focus on "his" car and driver implicitly gesture toward their mobility, "his" ability to go where he likes in his expensive vehicle or hired car.

The vloggers also focus on the fact that the four men in question precisely do not live in the "hood." "Now uh, he lives in ..." "—let's pick a place like—" "Florida." "Bensonhurst." "Cambridge, Massachusetts." "Which is in like, you know, a suburb area up there." "We've seen it so many times, the brother with the suitcase who moved to the suburbs, don't want to give back to his people in the hood, he just abandons them." "You know, this is a very upscale, very nice neighborhood." "It's a nice neighborhood." "A predominantly white neighborhood." "Suburban, affluential [sic]." "A predominantly white neighborhood, if you will." "In a gated community." "In this Harvard house." "He's got an amusement park in front of his house." "What does he think, he's better than me and you?" ... "You draw attention to yourself Black man, when you go living in all white neighborhoods, Black man." The vloggers' discourse in this section actively contributes to the policing of these men's identities, reinforcing the problematic notion that certain spaces are for white people only and that Black men must be immobilized within a particular location.

In his analysis of Jay-Z's career, Neal poses the question: "Can a nigga be cosmopolitan?"[52] Neal ultimately answers in the affirmative, suggesting that Jay-Z provides a model for a hip-hop cosmopolitanism. He writes, "A hip-hop cosmopolitanism is undergirded by desires for physical, social, and economic mobility, including ... a mobility from or even within the essential tropes—playa, pimp, hustler, thug, nigga—that define contemporary mainstream hip-hop masculinities."[53] However, the acceptance of hip-hop cosmopolitanism does not appear to extend to a wider African American cosmopolitanism. The wealth, power, and mobility of Obama, Gates, Woods, and Jackson clearly generate some degree of resentment among the vloggers.

Even those vloggers who we would assume not to be racist—for instance, those who appear to be African American—seem to want to fix these men's identities.

Indeed, a number of apparently African American vloggers seem to take genuine pleasure in metaphorically rescinding these men's cosmopolitan identities by opposing it to blackness. In a later section, the vloggers chorus continues: "There's a time and a place to show your blackness." "Now what a person does in their own personal life that's their business, but he messed up when he walked out that door. Now ..." "—the metamorphosis started happening, right?" "If he wasn't never Black before—" "He, he, he, he's changing colors!" "—the motherfucker is Black as hell right now." "The blackness is coming out of him." "You Black now, honey." "He's Black now, goddammit." There seems to be a certain satisfaction that the vloggers—African American and otherwise—find in putting the Black man "back in his place." As Jacqueline Bell, in her excellent thesis on Bookchin's installation, points out, "the vloggers' descriptions of blackness both rely on and work against an understanding of race as biological ... 'Color' is identified as changeable—celebrities were always visually identified as African American but only 'became' black ... when the scandals erupted."[54] While the vloggers implicitly acknowledge the fluidity of blackness as a category, they simultaneously deploy the notion of blackness as part of an attempt to arrest their subjects' identities. In fact, the cosmopolitanism of Obama, Gates, Woods, and Jackson appears to be couched by the vloggers firmly within a discourse of borrowed privilege rather than earned identity. In this sense, the scandals—around Obama's birth certificate, Woods's altercation with his wife, Gates's arrest at his own home, and Jackson's rumored pedophilia—transformed illegible bodies that could not be easily read according to the established tropes of Black masculinity into legible Black bodies in need of renewed surveillance. The slightest hint of "scandal" opens the possibility that this mobile cosmopolitanism may be rescinded and that these men may be transformed back into legible Black men, immobilized both literally and metaphorically. The vloggers themselves thus become part of the surveillance apparatus that seeks to define the acceptable contours of Black masculinity.

Bookchin's piece as a whole, however, refuses to be complicit in this act of surveillance, toying with our own surveillant desires. By refusing to give us the names of the men under discussion, by mixing up the commentary so that we can only rarely be sure who is talking about whom, by editing the vloggers' speech in fragments, by having the vloggers speak simultaneously from multiple monitors, Bookchin reinscribes illegibility at multiple levels. While the vloggers try almost desperately to define and contain their subjects, Bookchin actively works to undo this containment. As she weaves together these multiple intersecting narratives, she returns to "him" his right not to be fully known.

In addition to raising questions about legibility, Bookchin's piece also explores the limits of what can be said about race in the digital era and how technologies such as digital video and video-sharing websites like YouTube allow for certain articulations that might otherwise not be made. While these technologies may be legitimately celebrated as a democratic development that allows more voices to be heard, when this speech becomes derogatory—or denigrating—the politics of these vlogs appears more fraught. In her analysis of Bookchin's installation, Erica Levin notes that, "What [the vloggers] share in common is the act of passing judgment on the public figures they discuss and dissect."[55] Unfortunately, this judgment often takes the form of racist statements that many of us would wish were no longer sayable. At one point in the video, numerous vloggers simultaneously state, "I'm not a racist." Then there is a pause followed by the word "but ..." This phrase, when spoken within the context of a YouTube video blog, often indicates a double denial of responsibility. First, it denies

responsibility for any racist content to follow. Second, because what is said to the video camera and posted on YouTube is not addressed to anyone in particular, it is therefore not responsible to any specific viewer or listener. Armed with this phrase and this technology that offers itself as a silent and implicitly sympathetic interlocutor, vloggers feel authorized to speak about and, more importantly, pass judgment on a variety of subjects. Some make explicitly racist statements: the blond white woman who states that "they have a completely different psychological makeup than we do ... they're physically wired in a totally different way than we are"; the young white woman who quips, "What's the matter? Can't keep the black dragon in the pants?"; the man with a European accent who snaps, "Don't lie to me, boy!"; the heavyset older white man who says, "In the past, he would have been serving me coffee." These speakers seem to have no awareness that those viewing their vlogs might not share their views. The digital video camera and the video-sharing platform offer no resistance to any assertion. These are monologues, shared publicly, but with no apparent anticipation of debate or dialogue. Bookchin's loop, however, creates an alternative context for this literally irresponsible speech, most likely unanticipated by the vloggers. First of all, her installation offers us as viewers an opportunity to judge the vloggers as they pass judgment on Obama, Gates, Woods, and Jackson. Levin notes that "viewers are invited to respond in kind by finding ways to classify and situate each speaker within a larger social matrix: this one a tea partier, that one a Tiger Woods apologist or perhaps a Michael Jackson super-fan." Second, her installation creates the illusion of a polylogue rather than a monologue, at least gesturing toward the need for conversation rather than unfiltered pronouncements.

The ethics of Bookchin's appropriation are complex. This is not private speech in that the vloggers did put their videos onto YouTube, making them public and therefore opening themselves up to public scrutiny—just like their subjects. Yet, like Charles Ramsey, these are private individuals, not public figures in positions of power. Hence, Bookchin's misuse of their video posts cannot be read as political satire in the same way as can "States of the Union—Bill Clinton" or "The Reagans Speak Out on Drugs." It can, however, be read as a form of social critique, aimed not so much at the individuals whose voices, words, and images she appropriates but rather at the wider discourse on race refracted through these individuals. While we get brief glimpses of each speaker, their individual identities are largely submerged into the polyvocal chorus.

It is worth noting that this justification is similar to that claimed by Dominic Gagnon regarding his appropriation of YouTube videos of Inuit people for *of the North* (see Introduction). He argued that the videos were already online and therefore fair game and that his film was less about the individuals than it was about their acts of online self-representation. The greatest difference between *of the North* and *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, however, has to do with the respective foci of the clips that Gagnon and Bookchin appropriate. Whereas Gagnon clearly searched for videos of a particular people and place (likely using terms like "Inuit," "Eskimo," or "north"), Bookchin was looking for *commentary* on specific Black public figures. Her video is organized around a set of discursive tendencies rather than an ethnic group or geographic locale. Gagnon's film solicits an objectifying ethnographic and potentially denigrating gaze vis-à-vis the unidentified Inuit people in the clips he appropriated. We are asked to judge not what these people have to say about a topic but, rather, their "way of life" as selectively presented by Gagnon's compilation and editing. Moreover, the viewer is placed in an outside, seemingly omniscient position. In contrast, although it is possible to read a denigrating gaze into Bookchin's piece—some of the speakers do appear naïve, vindictive, or just racist—the denigration does not

seem to be aimed at the particular speakers who briefly flit by but rather at the naivety, vindictiveness, and racism of contemporary (online) discourse. What is being ventriloquized is not so much the vloggers themselves but, rather, the racist underbelly of our society, the social unconscious or—more precisely—the social "unconscience" that allows racist things to be thought and said aloud online. Moreover, while the video blogs seem to solicit a complicit gaze—in other words, an audience that simply accepts whatever is said—Bookchin's piece solicits a gaze that is not only cartographic but also dialectical. It is cartographic in that, although it does not aspire to the scope of big data analysis, it does map a wide range of views on Obama, Gates, Woods, and Jackson, offering a cross section of popular opinion. It is dialectical in the sense that by combining these divergent voices in a colloquy, it places the viewer in the position of negotiating and synthesizing the various positions articulated.

The ethics of archival ventriloquism stand to become even more complex with the rise of new technologies that (will soon) allow users to convincingly imitate a particular speaker's voice and vocal patterns. The Jordan Peele video discussed at the opening of this chapter demonstrates that we are already on the cusp of a whole new era of archival ventriloquism. In 2017, Supasorn Suwajanakorn, Steven M. Seitz, and Ira Kemelmacher-Shlizerman of the University of Washington published a paper entitled "Synthesizing Obama: Learning Lip Synch from Audio," alongside which they included the results of their synthesis, a video of Obama in which the image of the former president convincingly appears to match existing, unaltered audio; however, the image was, in fact, a computer-generated simulation.[56] The video image is perceptually convincing, and the content is not absurd; indeed, it matches an unaltered recording of something Obama actually did say. To the casual viewer, there would be no reason to suspect that this is a vocalic body onscreen rather than a recording of Obama's actual speaking body. The same year, a Canadian company also unveiled a new technology called Lyrebird, which can "clone" a voice based on only a minute of indexical audio recording of that voice. This development suggests that "artificial intelligence is making human speech as malleable and replicable as pixels."[57] Adobe, Google, and Apple have been working on similar technologies. Hence, it is surely only a matter of time before it will be possible to use software to "ventriloquize" another person without any need for him or her to actually have said the words in question, combining synthesized voice recording and manipulated video recording to make videos that look and sound perfectly indexical when they are not. This suggests that problems of "framing," with its intentionally misleading misrepresentations, will become ever more frequent and perceptually convincing. And this means that ventriloquized subjects will have no more agency in the process than actual ventriloquist's dummies, "spoken through" as if their own voices, bodies, and acts of verbal signification no longer belong to them at all. Nevertheless, practices of archival ventriloquism—particularly when they do not obscure their constructed form—continue to serve a productive critical function, revealing latent tendencies about politics and society through voices that unwittingly contain their own undoing.