

Laughter without Reason and the Reproduction of Sound

THE
SILENCE



DELIA CASADEI

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Risible

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of Sound*



Delia Casadei



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Introduction

Let's begin with a journey into the language of laughter. To most contemporary readers the word *risible* means something to be laughed at, and more specifically, something to be mocked or derided. This has not always been so. Only since the eighteenth century has *risible* increasingly come to denote only the object of laughter rather than the subject who laughs, with the laughter coming to have a derogatory connotation. For most of its long linguistic life-span, the word *risible* also meant simply "capable of laughter."¹ In this forgotten earlier meaning, *risible* (and its Latin ancestor *risibilis*) also implied laughter as a specifically human property.² Behind these two understandings of *risible*, ancient and modern, lie two very different worlds, two different political philosophies of laughter. Risible 2.0 points to the laughter that is exclusively associated with humor, comedy, and it insists that laughter is something directed at a risible object and so, in some way, explained by its cause: one laughs *at* the risible and *because of* the risible, be it a risible person, thing, phenomenon, or set of associations. As we laugh at the risible and because of it, we assume that laughter has a direction, a point, and meaning that can be verbalized.³ By contrast, Risible 1.0 tells us nothing about the cause of the laughter or its object; it simply summons laughter as a phenomenon of which some beings are capable, a phenomenon that—just by its very appearance—marks the boundary between the human species and its neighbors. In the realm of Risible 1.0, you and I are both risible creatures because we both have the ability to laugh, and so in some way the capacity to register as humans.

The forgotten and rather arcane meaning of Risible 1.0 disappeared with its transformation into Risible 2.0, and I wish here to reverse that disappearance, at least in part. What would happen if allowed the rich and strange meaning of Risible 1.0 to flood the more familiar and cleaner meaning of Risible 2.0? As early as the Latin translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge* in the sixth century CE, and for a long time afterward, humans were routinely defined as risible animals—that is, animals with the unique property of being able to laugh. Yet Risible 1.0 was, from

the get-go, a troubled definition of the human. Risibility bypassed, in uncomfortable ways, the—supposedly—exceptional human capacity for language, reason, and learning and in some ways actively challenged it (laughter being, as we will see, far more like an animal squawk than like reasoned speech). Risible 1.0 defined humans as laughing creatures, and so creatures who are in some way alienated from their own, uniquely human, capacity for language; we could amp this up and say that risibility defined humans as those who fail to be human. The history of this thought, which I trace in this book, has long been hidden in plain sight. In 1727, the philosopher Giambattista Vico hinted at the contradictions of Risible 1.0 by noting that, yes, laughter might help someone feel human, but only because humanity is by definition fragile and already tending toward animality: “Precisely because laughter is a human prerogative, they feel that by laughing they are experiencing that they are men. But laughter comes from our feeble human nature, which ‘deceives us by the semblance of right.’ And, in fact, from this interpretation of laughter, laughing men [*ridiculi*] are halfway between austere, serious men and the animals.”⁴ Risibility for Vico—and, as I argue, for many before him and after him—marked humanity in a moment of disidentification, of loss of species specificity, and so had the power to trouble the very category of humanity which it apparently buttressed. Risibility defines humanity, yes, but humanity intended—as Sylvia Wynter teaches us—as an unstable, violent, implosive category.⁵ Indeed, the capacity for laughter may have become such a powerful philosophical construct precisely because it could hold a foundational doubt about who and what makes a human and how the human-nonhuman boundary is to be drawn through the senses.

But why, other than out of antiquarian fascination, should we stubbornly revive a lost meaning? What about the far less confusing and far more commonly held definition of Risible 2.0? What, in other words, have we to learn by rethinking the meaning of risibility *tout court*? The short answer is that I believe that risibility—consigned as it was to linguistic disuse and so, in some way, to the realm of the unthought—opens up the doors to a history of the phenomenon of laughter that we might otherwise be unable to track. I am interested in seeing what happens once we accept, as we must in investigating risibility’s history, that the cause of or reason behind a peal of laughter is not as important as the event of the laughter itself, and what such an event tells us about those who laugh. If risibility was, at its origin, a strange human property, a way of crystallizing an uncertainty about the human, this uncertainty then became the foundation for the cleansed and simplified notion of Risible 2.0, the *risible* we commonly use today. Theories of laughter have been, usually, theories of Risible 2.0, of laughter as something that needs a reasonable, discernible cause. But even among those who seek to trace the causes for laughter, there has long been a palpable frustration, a tacit understanding that a systematic account of laughter’s causes may be impossible, or even undesirable. I believe that this frustration is not circumstantial but symptomatic of a repressed

truth, something that is both profound and historically documentable: Risible 1.0's foundational doubt about humanity's access to language and reason. That is, Risible 2.0 insists on finding reason for laughter precisely because Risible 1.0 frighteningly set up the human as that which loses its reason, which has reason only by losing it. The breach in the definition of the human brought in by Risible 1.0—the constitutive instability of reason in establishing the human—is addressed, and never resolved, by Risible 2.0. Thus, it is only by reconsidering risibility in its older, messier, and more unsettling implications that we can move past its enduring limitations as a theory of laughter's causes and reasons.

The alternative history of laughter that I tell in this book darts from definitions of “the human” foundational to Western philosophy, through contemporary literature on assisted reproduction and folktales about princesses and divinities who refuse to laugh, to the history of phonography and, at last, the worried listeners of laugh tracks in mid-twentieth-century television. This history links the physical and aural phenomenon of laughter to the production and reproduction of humans, by which I mean both the physical acts of procreating, gestating, and giving birth to humans, as well as the sustaining of human life through economic and social processes, and the very definition—always already political—of what a human is, does, and sounds and looks like. Consider the following example. In one of the dustier, user-deserted corners of YouTube lies a video showing the playback—on a 1920s electrical gramophone—of a 1906 recording by the Neapolitan singer and vaudeville performer Nicola Maldacea. It is called “La risata” (The laugh),⁶ and it sounds like this: the piano plays the intro, a breakneck eight bars in duple meter with ascending phrases that ratchet up energy until Maldacea comes in—not singing, but laughing. It is a very good laugh, a rippling peal of *ha, ha, has* that lands on a low chuckle. But then something odd happens. A moment or two later, the chuckle settles into a loop of hiccuping convulsions: not so much laughter as sharp intakes of breath in a perfectly repeated pattern, a loop that sounds exactly like a skipping record. It's an astonishing trick. Laughter's convulsions and the skipping of the phonograph align so perfectly that I confess to zooming in on the video to see if the needle was stuck in the groove. But no: before our ears, Maldacea uses laughter to transform himself into turnstile and needle, into the machine that is playing back his own recorded voice. His laughter and the skipping record are one. For a brief, unsettling moment, singer and gramophone, human and hardware join in common convulsion, becoming one and the same: becoming risible.

Why did Maldacea, an entertainer famous for his impressions of others, make his laugh sound like a skipping record? Why does the trick still work, phonograph and singer overlapping so beguilingly? The answers to these questions move forward and backward in time, and far beyond the intentions of Maldacea as an artist. The song he sings is a version of a contrafact by Berardo Cantalamessa of a song by the Black American artist George W. Johnson. Cantalamessa's version, “A risa,” is none but the infamous laughing song in Thomas Mann's novella *Death*

in Venice (and its cinematic adaptation by Luchino Visconti), which is sung by a troupe of terrifying itinerant musicians in a courtyard full of wealthy Mittel European patrons in Venice, under the gaze of the horrified protagonist. Before Mann, the song had been picked up in Naples off a phonograph record cut by Johnson. Johnson's song became a global commodity in the 1890s, although his name was all but erased from it in the process. Yet I argue that the relationship between his voice and the phonograph that extracted it passed—in complex ways—into the song's contrafacts, thanks to the particular bind of laughter and phonograph as techniques of vocal reproduction. Indeed, and as we shall see, the history of phonography brims over with the sound of laughter. In the 1920s, records of women laughing at blundering male singers and instrumentalists took over the market. A couple of decades later, sound engineers working in TV devised a taped version of laughter to optimize the cost of studio audiences in American sitcoms, creating the soundscape of ready-made chuckles that haunts televisual entertainment to this day.

Media historians have written about this broad phenomenon: Jacob Smith has made the point that laughter “helped” phonography seem more “human” to audiences in its early days; Maggie Hennefeld theorized laughter as an affect tied to representations of women under capitalism.⁷ In this book I combine and further these arguments—namely, I specify that what Smith calls the labor of “helping” the phonograph can more precisely be called reproductive labor: aiding the continuation of capitalist production, and making, carnally and theoretically, something that looks like a human. The subject of Hennefeld's key insight on the relationship of laughter to gender under capitalism can likewise be articulated as reproductive labor, a labor that tends to be racialized, gendered, and unrecognized. Indeed, this is why laughter was so often, in the twentieth century, a figure for an unsteady type of human, one too animal, or too inarticulate, or too feminine, or too racialized, or too mechanical. But the key to the *reproductive* labor of laughter is that in helping, it also undermines: it reveals that which it aids as discontinuous, treacherous, and far from a natural default. Laughter manages to do this thanks to the particular ambiguities—between sonic proliferation and disruption, between convulsion and repetition—of its sonic profile. To put this another way, the phonograph became implicated in the manner by which reproductive labor crossed over with sound and listening, and it was the sound of laughter that broached and articulated that relationship. Answering questions about laughter and its role in phonography involves, then, complex histories of racialization, stolen songs, human properties, the blur between vocal repetition and mechanical reproduction, and that between mechanical sound reproduction and biological, as well as social, reproduction.

I will be the first to admit that this puts a lot of weight on a single, and apparently rather minor, historical-sonic phenomenon: recorded laughter. I can only hope

that the book as a whole will bear and distribute this weight, and I am emboldened in this by the knowledge that I am far from alone in considering the phenomenon of laughter with such sustained intensity. Indeed, laughter has meant a great deal, politically and aesthetically, in the twentieth century. In his celebrated study *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin famously makes the point that medieval and early French Renaissance laughter was a powerfully physical phenomenon, unrelated to later theories of amusement and wit.⁸ In this sense, Bakhtin offers his readers an image of laughter very much unlike that of his French contemporary Henri Bergson, who is, in many ways, still the most distinguished spokesperson for Risible 2.0—that is, laughter explained as and reduced to a comic prompt. Bakhtin’s laughter, on the other hand, is random, rebellious, messy: it is a technique of the body used periodically, and ritually, by the larger population to (obscenely, loudly) relieve the pressure of their existence on the bottom rung of a theocratic society. Another Soviet literary critic, Vladimir Propp, further elaborated the connections of laughter to biological reproduction of both sexual and nonsexual kinds and rigorously tracked the agrarian economic systems that originally sustained such connections.⁹ The fact that laughter features prominently in the work of the two most famous Marxist Soviet literary historians should, if anything, tell us something about the strength of its relationship to labor, particularly labor that is depreciated and rendered invisible.¹⁰ I see the legacy of this kind of thinking in my own work, as well as the work of contemporary laughter theorists who have greatly influenced me here, scholars such as Anca Parvulescu and Hennefeld, both of whom have examined the more recent relationship among economics, gender, race, and laughter.¹¹

There are, of course, many other glitches (not just laughter) in the history of human vocalizations: coughing, stuttering, spluttering, and other paralinguistic phenomena. Researchers before me have tracked these disturbances as a whole—Steven Connor’s *Beyond Words* and Brandon Labelle’s *Lexicon of the Mouth* are two influential examples.¹² But, unlike laughter, such actions were not annexed, at the dawn of the Western philosophical tradition, as human properties: the disturbances they created did not have the power to simultaneously ground and unsettle definitions of the human and notions of human exceptionalism. So my concentration on laughter is also a methodological insistence that not all sounds that are paralinguistic are created equal, for the simple reason that the discourse that accompanies them is not detachable from them, and laughter came loaded, from the start, with the weight of defining humankind and also of marking the presence of reproductive labor. That is the weight—or the explosive cargo—that it carries, ready for lighting, into the hypersonic, phonographic twentieth century.

Because of this particular angle—a history of Risible 1.0 animated and illuminated by the relationship of laughter and recording technology—this book has a double soul, one that is reflected in its structure. Its two parts are meant not as a sequence but rather as the outlines of two sides of the argument, which

can be combined and rearranged. My contention here is that music and sound studies have something extraordinary to offer to our political understanding of laughter as a sonic and physical phenomenon, and that in turn, this new understanding highlights some key moments in the history of mass-reproduced voices and other sounds. In this sense, historical and theoretical approaches echo each other throughout the book: the sound of laughter in mass phonography helps us see political undertones of laughter that had, in fact, been a part of the theory of laughter all along. To put this another way, part 1, “Laughter without Reason,” explores the philosophical and intellectual history of laughter unshackled from theories of causality, a laughter that is emancipated from the constraint of verbalizing its reasons. This history leads us to consider the long, insistent, and dubious tether linking laughter to the definition, production, and reproduction of the human. Part 2, “Laughter as Mass Sound Reproduction,” investigates the historical links between sound recording and laughter in North America and Europe—with some consideration of colonial markets—between the 1890s and the 1950s. The book is not meant to be read as a sequence—instead, I invite the reader to combine and assemble chapters as they see fit.

And now for a road map to the book as a whole. The first part encompasses the first three chapters, which tackle the intellectual history of laughter in relation to logos and causality, as well as evolving ideologies of humanity and reproduction. Chapter 1 (“Unknown Causes, or the Limit of Logos”) opens by recounting Maya Angelou’s live poetic performance of the mysterious laughter of a Black maid riding the bus home from work. Angelou refuses to parse the laughter as something caused by anything in particular and allows it to hang in the air as a marker of experiences that touch the boundary of the thinkable, sayable, and explainable. I track this suspended laughter as it appears, fleetingly and in a different guise, in the writings of a wide range of authors, from Aristotle through Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant, as well as more recent thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, Anca Parvulescu, and Maggie Hennefeld. The thought that gathers together all these authors is in fact an implicit and productive ambiguity as to what constitutes laughter’s *reason* (and lack thereof). I make the claim that there is such a thing as what I call “laughter without reason,” where *reason* holds both of its traditional meanings in English and Romance languages: *cause*, but also *logos writ large*. Yet the externality and privation of cause and logos implicit in the term *without* also entail a stubborn juxtaposition: laughter is and remains in the shadow of its reasons, even when those reasons are unknown. It is this historical ambivalence with regard to logos that makes laughter a slanted entry point into problems that have plagued scholarship and aesthetics of music for a long time. Laughter’s quality of being a temporary *failure* of language rather than—like music—an extension or overcoming of language lends us an interesting lens through which to consider its political and philosophical significance, as well as

a way of understanding its relationship to writing, sound writing, and the history of phonography.

Chapter 2 (“Risible Creatures”) offers an alternative and, to my knowledge, unprecedented genealogy of laughter, built on its enduring and unsettling relationship to the definition of the human. The chapter opens with a selection of quotes by Renaissance writers from François Rabelais through Michel de Montaigne to Erasmus of Rotterdam. I read these canonical authors of Renaissance Humanism for the doubts they express when they discuss laughter: all of them explore the notion of risibility as an exclusively human property, and all of them seem ambivalent—if not actively frustrated—by this very notion. Engaging with Sylvia Wynter’s famous critique of the notion of “man” across European history—as an exclusionary and colonially inflected concept—I argue that, alongside Wynter’s narrative, we can track descriptive statements of the human that were implosive, full of doubt, and disruptive, and productively so. Investigating laughter’s part in one such statement, I lead the reader backward from Renaissance sources in order to trace the origin of the association of humanity with risibility. This is a work of precision and requires some sharp intellectual commentary. The foundational notion of the human as the only laughing animal is usually attributed to Aristotle, but it is in fact the product of the rather unorthodox use of Aristotle made by Porphyry, whose parsing of the philosopher’s writings on logic went, via Boethius, into the very bloodstream of Scholasticism and from there into Renaissance Humanism. In this tradition, laughter served to plug a kind of ontological gap: the need for a specific human property beyond the possession of language, which humans share with God. The making of this property of risibility, necessary and unstable at once, generates powerful contradictions concerning the possession of language and the boundary between humans and animals. By the time it intersected with sixteenth-century Hispanic colonialism, this line of thinking had morphed into a discourse of a right to private ownership of land and of one’s self—that is, a discourse of natural mastery versus natural slavery. In the eighteenth century, as we saw above, Giambattista Vico exposed laughter as a paradox: the loss of *logos* that is, however, proper and specific to the only animal who has *logos*. Laughter becomes, I argue, a way of naming the particular ways in which humans are sometimes not human. As such, laughter is a powerful political tool for simultaneously reinscribing human exceptionalism (some humans stay human even when they lose human form) and making discriminations between classes of humans (some humans are never fully human to begin with).

In chapter 3, “Laughter as (Sound) Reproduction,” I outline the kinship between the sonic phenomenon of laughter and the history of biological, social, and technological reproduction. I do so by coursing through aspects of the Western tradition—here loosely defined as everything from Greek mythology and the Bible to poetry, phonography, and medical treatises. In what emerges, the phenomenon

of laughter is consistently linked not only to the most carnal aspects of earthly life but to reproduction in particular. This link takes, as I see it, a specific form: the act and sound of laughter aid supposedly “natural” forms of reproduction at moments of crisis. Laughter jolts recalcitrant matter and people into fertility and proliferation. Working through a variety of sources on the physiology and reproductive power of laughter—from Italian reports on the use of laughter in assisted reproductive technology visits through sixteenth-century novels about confined pregnant women to ancient Greek fertility rituals and medical disquisitions on healthy and unhealthy laughter—I pinpoint the ambiguity embedded in the physiology and aurality of laughter. Laughter is at once a disruption of signal (the voice cut up by the epiglottis) and a moment of proliferation in which a single sound is quickly multiplied by repetition. It is this ambiguity that is key to the reproductive understanding of laughter—namely, in being a signal perched between rupture and proliferation, it makes audible a crisis of reproduction just as it swoops in to solve it. Laughter can thus be considered a technological supplement to processes that are construed as natural and gendered (be they gestation, housework, or emotional labor within institutional settings), working to ensure their continuation. Yet it demystifies these processes, revealing them to be the products of labor rather than nature. Following this strand of thought, I recast laughter as an aural marker of what Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora term “surrogacy”: the off-sourcing and hiding of the reproductive labor that it takes to furnish the illusion of a productive, self-determined human individual.¹³

After this, the book moves into its more historical and sound-oriented portion: part 2, “Laughter as Mass Sound Reproduction.” The three chapters in this section deal with, in order of appearance, the relationship of recorded laughter to race, voice, origins, and property; ideologies of contagion through laughter; and fantasies of immunity from ideology. In chapter 4 (“George W. Johnson’s Laughable Phonography”), I tackle the ties of laughter to the racialized recording that started mass commercial phonography in the United States: George W. Johnson’s “Laughing Song” (1892). Most US scholarship understands musical contrafacts such as those of Johnson’s “Laughing Song” primarily as instances of the systematic cultural appropriation of Black culture.¹⁴ By unfolding the practices of listening, transcription, identity formation, and vocalization embedded in the contrafact, however, I suggest that Johnson’s laughter also consists of a rebellious erasure of the lyrical singing voice which constituted, at that time, the true object of desire of phonographic recording. This allows me to extend and amend the traditional interpretation of the “Laughing Song.” Johnson’s laughter is, yes, a ready-made object for reproduction and appropriation, yet it can also be understood as an act of vocal refusal worked out through the phonograph. This forces us to consider Johnson not just as the object of sound reproduction but also as its recalcitrant subject. Calling on the work of Achille Mbembe, I consider Johnson’s gesture to be necropolitical: an act of defiant self-destruction in the face of dehumanizing

practices.¹⁵ Johnson's laughter can be heard as a complex disavowal of his own singing voice, the staging of a pointed abandonment of lyrical selfhood and the liberal ownership of the self.

In chapter 5, "Contagion," I outline the political and historical relation of music, laughter, and metaphors of contagion in the late nineteenth century. In the 1890s, phonograph exhibitors around the world marketed cylinders of laughing songs as a form of pleasurable contagion: anyone who listened to them would be compelled to laugh. Some exhibitors discussed these songs as a form of global contagion, particularly among colonial populations in India, China, and North Africa. We can say, then, that contagion became a figure of success within international capital—the precursor of our contemporary understanding of virality. Yet the ideology of laughter's contagiousness has dark political implications. Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's recent work shows how discourses of contagion emerged in the late nineteenth century as a biopolitical response to anticolonial insurgencies and cholera epidemics.¹⁶ This is also why laughter came to be seen, by thinkers like Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, as a physiological and potentially pathological phenomenon that clings to the colonial subaltern. The logic of contagion was built into the very details of laughing songs as commodities. When, in 1894, the Neapolitan singer Berardo Cantalamessa appropriated Johnson's "Laughing Song," he emphasized—in the adapted lyrics and music—laughter's ties to pathology, subalternity, and contagion. In doing so, he fitted the song to his native city, which was then undergoing a radical and painful political transition while being ravaged by the most devastating bout of cholera in nineteenth-century Europe. Cantalamessa's "A risa" attained national acclaim—as an echt-Neapolitan song—precisely as Naples was being reconfigured as the violent, sick, southern periphery of Europe, showing globalization and racialization as two interdependent aspects of colonial capital. Laughter became the cipher of a newly contagious and racialized vocality, and it constituted a means of making, owning, and selling an infectious, international commodity.

Chapter 6 ("Canned Laughter, Gimmick Sound") reveals the economic rationale for and pointedly political listening practices that accompanied one of the most controversial and widespread uses of recorded laughter: the prerecorded laugh tracks of mid-twentieth-century American televised sitcoms, which soon became a ubiquitous global commodity. Supported by a detailed historical investigation, I argue that this particular use of recorded laughter had its roots in the necessity of abbreviating labor costs—and, more specifically, of abbreviating a form of labor that had not, until then, been recognized as such: the vocal labor of laughter. Through this notion of canned laughter as abbreviated labor, I then consider the enduring legacy of 1950s laugh tracks as ugly, artificial sound—a legacy that finds its origin in the McCarthy era's suspicion of recorded sound as a means of political interference and brainwashing.¹⁷ Going against the grain of previous analyses, I claim that canned laughter emerged as a commodity that was

consumed not so much despite but indeed because of the disgust that many had for it.¹⁸ As a distasteful sound—one constructed as such through discourse—it offered both consumers and producers the comforting (if illusory) belief that the labor of audience laughter could be abbreviated, and in such a way that it would be possible to distinguish, by ear, between “true,” live sound and prerecorded sound. At the close of this chapter is a consideration of laughter as scorned—even actively occluded—aural reproductive labor and as an ever perilous, unsteady signifier of human presence propped up by complex and enduring listening practices.

In many ways, this book argues for laughter to be thought of as a sound, but, as I hope will become apparent, the rather odd reverse statement (that sound should be thought of as laughter) is actually a far better description of the project. Let me state that in a gentler way: the concept of sound is a twentieth-century fantasy tied to the emergence of phonography. Of course, aurality, listening, hearing, and all sound-related activities existed before the twentieth century—but what did not exist before then was sound as a reified, separable category. This is something that sound scholars have known for some time: the twentieth-century fantasy of sound is phonographic, and as such it constitutes sound as an audible, near-tangible entity detachable from its source, half bound to human intention, half bound to language. I am arguing here, though, that such a fantasy of sound was, and could only be, worked out—in ways tracked for the first time in this book—by recording, imitating, discussing, and representing *laughter*. The entrance of laughter in the history of sound and phonography forces us to ask some new questions—namely, what was phonography, such that it attached itself to laughter in order to produce sound as a category? And what was laughter, such that it so readily tangled with phonography? My answers follow two broad courses. First, I argue that laughter was, since the dawn of Western logical categories, a means of preserving the fundamental doubt that humans had about the exceptionalism of their own species—an exceptionalism founded upon the supposedly unique human capacity for logos. This is a doubt that technological advances constantly reanimate and for which laughter became, as I show, a welcome if sinister shorthand. Second, and crucially, laughter’s specific ties to phonography have to do with its long-standing though often unacknowledged roots in biological and social reproduction. Thus, by examining laughter’s role in its establishment, we see commercial phonography as sound reproduction in a strong sense—as the biological and social labor (gendered, racialized, unpaid, and naturalized) of making and propagating sound as such.

In my mind and in this book, then, risibility, sound, and phonography exist in a kind of fold. For those who read this book in print, it is as if they existed at the midpoint of the volume, where the first and second part touch. The history told here appears to be a twentieth-century one: it centers on recording technology and the ways that, through it, laughter became an explosive, racialized, and gendered cipher for the human, on the one hand, and the act of reproduction, on the other.

Yet this history rests on the philosophical and political figure of the risible, which not only long preceded the twentieth century but undergirded the possibility and practice of sound reproduction. The story of the second part of the book—of phonographed and taped laughter and its astonishing effects on those who produced it and consumed it—cannot be told without an understanding of risibility that became subterranean and extremely powerful around the turn of the twentieth century. Conversely, the world of unreasonable cacklers, human-animal mutants, laughing meadows, recalcitrant goddesses, uteri, and machines conjured in the first part of the book would not exist had phonography not dredged it up in its wake. No wonder so many theorists of the risible have been twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers. The particular sound of recorded laughter—convulsive, repetitive, discontinuous, and yet articulate—became a name, for those who heard it, bought it, and consumed it, for some of the most profound fears and hopes of the Western political imagination. It is the history of that name that I imagine, track, and parse in the pages that follow.

PART ONE

Laughter without Reason

Unknown Causes, or the Limit of Logos

In the introduction, I wrote of the relationship between those who are risible in the old sense of the word (i.e., capable of laughter) and those who are risible in the now commonly used sense (i.e., the object and cause of laughter). The old paradigm, what I refer to as Risible 1.0, presents us with a laughter that doesn't need to be explained, whereas the newer one, Risible 2.0, presents laughter as necessarily tied to laughter-worthy objects and people. The distinction between these two definitions seems clear and relatively easy—and precisely for that reason should be regarded with a degree of suspicion. Indeed, the history of the risible (writ large) is a far messier affair than any dictionary entry can relay. The loss of a common word for laughter as an action and event in its own right was a slow, imperceptible process, which, as far as I know, is yet to be tracked in the history of Romance languages. I must therefore return to the places where Risible 1.0 circulated and had traction by tracing backwards from recent moments when there was a heightened need to speak of a laughter whose causes cannot be accounted for. These are times in the history of philosophy that occur as thinkers reach for a phantom limb: a forgotten meaning that vanishes as quickly as it appears, but in a patterned way when observed intertextually. This chapter thus offers a constellation of references to laughter without cause, reason, or sense, which connect to the question of the sound and politics of laughter in the twentieth century.

By way of an opening reflection, then, here is a set of framing questions: Does there need to be a reason for laughter? Is the phenomenon of laughter defined, measured, and ultimately extinguished in the reasons for its occurrence—be they physiological, psychological, societal, or otherwise? If the answer to the latter question is yes, then what happens in the many instances when a laugh has no discernible, utterable cause—all those times when it flares and remains unexplained, like an excrescence on the skin of reason? Where does such a phenomenon belong in the history of thought, and how can we attune ourselves to the traces it has left behind?

In 1988, the acclaimed writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou gave a live performance of her poem “The Mask” to a predominantly white audience in Salado, Texas.¹ The poem takes the form of a loose gloss of another famous poem, “We Wear the Mask,” by the African American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar, published in 1895. Both works explore the ways in which Black Americans conceal their true feelings in order to survive their exploitation and oppression in a white-dominated world. For Dunbar, the mask in question is predominantly a visual one: a smile offered instead of anguish, tears, and rage. “We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes— / This debt we pay to human guile,” reads the opening.² Angelou, in her poetic gloss of Dunbar, renders the titular mask visual, facial, and aural—through the enigmatic and explosive sound of laughter. In the published text of the poem, a series of *ha ha has* cascades across the page in a sinister refrain. Here is the middle section of “The Mask”:

When I think about myself
 I almost laugh myself to death.
 My life has been one great big joke!
 A dance that’s walked a song that’s spoke.
 I laugh so hard HA! HA! I almos’ choke
 When I think about myself.

Seventy years in these folks’ world
 The child I works for calls me girl
 I say “HA! HA! HA! Yes ma’am!”
 For workin’s sake
 I’m too proud to bend and
 Too poor to break
 So . . . I laugh! Until my stomach ache
 When I think about myself.
 My folks can make me split my side
 I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died
 The tales they tell sound just like lying
 They grow the fruit but eat the rind.
 Hmm huh! I laugh uhuh huh huh . . .
 Until I start to cry when I think about myself
 And my folks and the children.³

What does laughter do within the world of the poem? What did it do for Angelou in her many performances of this work? We might be tempted to understand her addition of laughter to Dunbar’s poem as a product of artistic license, as simple contingency: as a spoken-word poet, Angelou needed a sonorous version of Dunbar’s mask for the piece to truly land, so she chose to render it not as a grimace but as a vocal technique. And indeed, Angelou’s laughter does much of the same work as Dunbar’s grin: while outwardly a sign of cheerfulness, it is a means of dissimulating suffering, humiliation, wretchedness, and so, to those who can

understand its double meaning, a signal of precisely the feelings it conceals. It is a form, in other words, of what W. E. B. Du Bois termed “double consciousness”: a mode of being for whites and for Blacks at once, of double speech, of saying two things at once. Dunbar, however, does not lean too much into double consciousness—his poem stays closer to the premise that the grin is a means of desperate concealment. Angelou’s laugh, instead, haunts the room as a space of performance with a genuinely ambivalent force, truly double. The audience does not know what the cackle means, even as it bursts forth before their very ears. To the Black folks in the poem, laughter is no longer simply a mask, but something more powerful: a means of self-soothing, a complex auto-affection, and a form of nonsemantic speech naming unspeakable states of mind (“I laugh [. . .] when I think about myself”). It is, in other words, not simply dissimulation but something closer to an expressive device that articulates the split of the consciousness from which it emanates: the Du Boisian double consciousness of Black folks moving through a white world—caught between attempting assimilation and affirming a Blackness that is always, in some way, filtered through the senses of the whites who behold it.⁴ Of course, Angelou never names this laughter’s meaning outright, but the poem gives the audience enough context to lend it resonance: the intergenerational trauma of slavery, continued political oppression, desperate survival and defiance, the debt of living Black people to their dead. Laughter envoices the simultaneous awareness and willful repression of all this impossible embodied knowledge. All this is carried in a “cloud of unknowing” by the violent vocables punctuating and breaking up the verses of the poem: “HA, HA, HA!”⁵

So powerful is the gnomic cackle conjured by Angelou that her whole performance of the poem in 1988 can be taken—as I will now do—as a short and original tract on the sonic and political act of laughter. Angelou helps us with this by offering a short, striking spoken introduction to her delivery of “The Mask,” in which she narrates the story of how she came by this kind of laughter:

I have, uh, written a poem for a woman who rides the bus in New York City. She’s a maid, she has two shopping bags. When the bus stops abruptly she laughs; if the bus stops slowly she laughs; if the bus picks up someone she laughs; if the bus misses someone she . . . *uh, HA, HA, HA!* So I watched her for about nine months, I thought, Mmh, ah-huh. Now, if you don’t know black features you may think she was laughing . . . but she wasn’t laughing. She was simply extending her lips and making a sound, *HA, HA, HA!* I said, Oh, I see. That’s that survival apparatus. Now, let me write about that, to honor this woman who helps us to survive by her very survival: Miss Rosie, through your destruction I stand up!⁶

Contained in less than a minute of speaking is a staggering act of narrative beckoning and sharp defamiliarization. While Dunbar tells us that the grin is a mask right off the bat, Angelou beholds Miss Rosie’s laugh earnestly at first, drawing her audience into the scene. As Angelou unfolds the opening image of Miss Rosie riding the bus, laughing for no apparent reason, she inhabits, with her readers,

the position of the puzzled (and maybe implicitly white) passenger observing the maid's behavior. Miss Rosie appears as someone challenging our inherited expectations of acceptable public behavior—through her open, unexplained laughter—and so as a figure of unfamiliarity, maybe even danger. The strangeness of the behavior is due not so much to her laughter as to the absence of any reason for it. The bus's movements are incommensurate with Rosie's cackle; she exceeds any reasonable comic prompt. To an onlooker, she does something only the mad do: she laughs without a cause. At precisely this point in the narration, Angelou turns on her audience—with a glint in her eye and an enigmatic smile—and explains that what they are witnessing is not laughter at all. "If you don't know black features you may think she was laughing," she intimates, "but she wasn't laughing. She was simply extending her lips and making a sound, HA, HA, HA!" That which was introduced as a laugh is now morphed into something else, a survival apparatus knowable and parsable only by the Black community. The disarticulated voice of laughter becomes a cipher for a life, a knowledge, a world incommensurable with—among other things—the very audience that is receiving the poem, inimical to the ways they process the world. Yet, at the same time, it also shatters any respectable definition of laughter as an appropriate response to a comic situation, offering us a brief glimpse of a laughter capable of naming the unspeakable.

It is worth pausing over the political implications of this moment of defamiliarization ("you may think she was laughing . . . but she wasn't laughing")—whereby the phenomenal qualities of laughter come unstuck from the signifier of laughter. Such defamiliarization has a storied history. We find, for instance, an unlikely pre-echo of Angelou's preoccupation with mindless laughter and whether it should be called *laughter* in Thomas Hobbes's definition of the word in his 1640 *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*: "There is a passion that hath no name, but the sign of it is that distortion of countenance we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any."⁷ No other passion in Hobbes's treatise escapes language the way that the passion resulting in laughter does. Like Angelou, Hobbes resorts to describing the movement of facial muscles (Angelou: "She was simply extending her lips"; Hobbes: "the sign of it is that distortion of countenance we call laughter") while also declaring laughter removed from standard language and reasons (Angelou: "You may think she was laughing . . . but she wasn't laughing"; Hobbes: "There is a passion that hath no name, but the sign of it is . . . laughter"). Of course, there are essential differences here. Angelou's declaration that Miss Rosie's laugh is not, in fact, a laugh is a bracing act of defamiliarization whereby the definition of *laughter* (as a response to amusement) is shattered by a Black maid riding the bus whose laugh refuses to be interpellated by standard exegesis. Angelou is opening up a pathway for a different kind of laughter: Black, collective, unhemmed by straightforward causality. Hobbes is, instead, and with palpable frustration, coming up against the limit of trying to define the human passion resulting in laughter.⁸

Yet there is—despite the vast gap in tone, purpose, politics, and historical place—a commonality here. The phenomenal qualities of laughter have no discernible cause, and for this reason they become uneasily attached to the very signifier of *laughter*. In admitting neither name nor cause for the laughter-like phenomena at hand, they lead us toward the realization that, when it comes to laughter, rational language (the act of correctly naming laughter as such) and causality (the quest to find an acceptable reason for laughter) are complexly tied together in their failure. When, in his essay “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,” Georges Bataille introduces the question of laughter, he begins by acknowledging a version of this failure—of rational language and of causal discernment—as a key trait of the philosophy of laughter. In working through the problem, though, Bataille manages to rearticulate it in an unprecedented manner:

Beyond the convictions of the authors of each particular theory, fundamentally, we don't know the meaning of laughter. The laughable always remains unknown, a kind of unknown that invades us suddenly, that overturns our habitual course, and that produces in us this “abrupt broadening of the face,” these “explosive noises from the larynx,” and these “rhythmic jolts of the thorax and abdomen” that doctors talk about. Perhaps one final theory remains, which would at least merit application on the most remarkable part, on that which is essential to all the theories that have preceded it, their *failure*. Suppose that the laughable is not only unknown, but unknowable. We still have to envision a possibility. The laughable could simply be the unknowable. In other words, the unknown character of the laughable would not be accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for a reason that we would not happen to know, for lack of information, or for want of sufficient penetration, but because the unknown makes us laugh.⁹

Bataille places himself in a line of frustrated philosophers with whom he shares the failure to name laughter's meaning and cause, joins the musing over the convulsions of the diaphragm and belly, discusses facial contractions. But then he does something unexpected: he offers not just an acceptance of the failure of philosophy to diagnose laughter's cause but a positive interpretation of that failure. Bataille tells us that “the unknown character of the laughable would not be accidental, but essential.” He then proceeds to absolve himself and his predecessors of the responsibility of finding reasonable causes for laughter and redefines its philosophical function as an articulation of the unknown itself.

Certainly Bataille wasn't the first to imagine that laughter has a connection to prerational thought. In 1905, forty-eight years before “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,” Sigmund Freud had linked the mechanisms for making jokes to the ways in which the mind represents the unconscious in oneiric activity—laughter, for Freud, was a releasing of a pressure on the unconscious by the joke, which allows the mind to entertain destructive thoughts without passing them through consciousness.¹⁰ But the beauty of the joke, as opposed to the dream, is that the form of unconsciousness it addresses is collective and—as with professional comedians

and their audiences—public. With his writing on laughter, Freud outlines the possibility of a shared public unconscious, a culturally and politically inflected human hive mind. Bataille's definition of the "unknown" is hardly as clinically precise as Freud's, and his purpose is qualitatively different. His essay ends up making a case for an antiknowledge, an antidialectical, indeed, anti-Hegelian shattering force capable of pointing the way out from causality, logic, and individualism. There is more than an echo, in Bataille's work, of an irrationalist taste for laughter dating, as we will see, to Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche (the latter being one of Bataille's main influences). Yet we should pay special attention here to Bataille's way of extracting laughter from the grip of logic and causality: it is a detachment that is never complete, never fully successful. Bataille's language is riven with negatives. The words *unknown* and *unknowable* dot every line. It is his frank acknowledgment of the failed investigation of laughter's reason, and simultaneous embrace of the lack of true resolution, that makes Bataille such an attractive theorist of laughter.

Here, then, is the philosophical and historical program that follows—in this project—from Bataille's quote. If laughter names the unknown (while protecting its unknowability), then we can map, with a degree of precision, the places and moments in which laughter is audibly detached and yet undetached from reason, logos, and discernible cause. We can examine what people named and unknow when they laughed, listened to laughter, and sang and recorded laughter for others. We can likewise infer what about the precise sound, sight, and feel of a laugh allowed for this kind of unknowing, and also how such an unknowing has been stored, passed, and decoded among communities. I call this project the history of laughter without reason.¹¹ It is a playful term for the loosening of laughter from its causes and verbalized meanings, a name that draws from the slippage—possible in all Romance languages and English—between the two meanings of the word *reason*, which can denote both the cause of an event and logos broadly conceived (rationality, thinking, language, order, and rule). As in the case of many other paralinguistic phenomena, such as singing, whistling, and even stuttering, discerning a cause (reason) for laughter is synonymous with ascertaining the capability for rationality and order (reason) of the person who laughs. To say that one laughs without reason points, always already, to reason as discernible cause for the laughter and reason as the laugher's (dubious) capacity for logos. At the same time, *without* means an externality that is also a juxtaposition, a copresence: laughter is defined because of its uncomfortable externality to a logos it exceeds but does not ever overcome. And, as I explain in detail in the following chapter, laughter's uneasy relationship to logos has been written and rewritten into the core definition of the human across centuries of philosophical thought, with complex political consequences.

We can now begin to sketch the contrast between unmotivated, undefined laughter versus the more codified discourse-laughter by noting that, even today,

most mainstream theories of laughter are, at base, theories of humor and comedy. This means that the most common theories of laughter explain the phenomenon primarily and often exclusively through its causes rather than its phenomenology and effects. A clear case of this is Henri Bergson's powerful *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), whose very title already pins the significance of laughter to its putative causes.¹² Bergson frames laughter as a social corrective for people whose behavior unwittingly challenges social norms while looking easily imitable and not painful. Laughter is, for Bergson, derisive, a way of shaming and controlling people whose behavior does not conform—and of preventing such behavior from being communicated to the well adjusted. Bergson's theory is tight, well argued, and deservedly influential. Yet, as his fellow theorist of laughter Mikhail Bakhtin noted a few decades after the essay's publication, Bergson reduces laughter to a handmaiden of a mechanism for social control, depriving the act of laughter of the power to do anything other than preserve the status quo.¹³ Bergson's laughter is caught in the net of an exegetic model that allows for it to be nothing other (or little more) than the result of a comedic prompt: his laughter makes nothing new happen—indeed, it preserves society from disturbance. Its force is repressive, not expressive, and largely negative, rather than positive. However, even in Bergson's essay, there are poetic glimpses of a laughter charged with independent force, such as in this passage: "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain."¹⁴

Nowhere else in the essay does Bergson conjure laughter before the ear in this way. This passage, though brief, has true rhetorical might: if only for a moment, laughter appears to be a phenomenon with a sensorial and philosophical life all its own. But Bergson instantly recoils from the vision, as if writing it away in the words that immediately follow: "Still, this reverberation cannot go on forever. It can travel within as wide a circle as you please: the circle remains, none the less, a closed one. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group."¹⁵ The image of laughter as a shattering natural phenomenon is reined in by a sociological angle regarding the group psychology of those who laugh. But, perhaps, such is the power of the first part of the quote—the reverberating crash, rumble, and thunder—that it persists in the reader's imagination, overshadowing the more sobering observation that follows.

Bergson's fleeting ambivalence above is not, in fact, an isolated incident. Such spasms of doubt echo through laughter theory's long history, in which diagnoses of laughter's social and psychological causes have brought with them a kind of shadow in the form of another, imagined laugh without sense or reason—

a physiological discharge that cannot quite be accounted for in rational terms. Authors now recognized as leading theorists of comedy and humor often paused to behold this shadow and brought it to the senses of their readers. This “shadow” laughter, the kind that has come to threaten definitions of laughter and so causes the semiotic ungluing we noted in both Angelou and Hobbes, was—like the laughter in Bergson’s description—often tied to natural phenomena and presented as uncontrollable.

Such shadow laughter erupts, for instance, constantly throughout the more recent and hugely influential tripartite model of humor analysis by John Morreall, a religious studies scholar and a cofounder of the International Society for Humor Studies. Given that those interested in explanations of both laughter and the comic frequently use his work, it is worth considering Morreall’s ideas in some depth. His theory of laughter is expounded across his oeuvre, perhaps most exhaustively in his 2009 monograph *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*.¹⁶ In this work, Morreall draws on and summarizes the canon of Western theories of comedy from Aristotle to Freud, synthesizing them into three main categories: the Superiority Theory (laughter is caused by the laugher’s awareness of their own power over a lesser other), the Incongruity Theory (laughter is caused by an expectation that is thwarted), and the Relief Theory (laughter is caused by the discharge of pent-up psychic or nervous energy). These three categories constitute a broadly chronological history of the philosophy of laughter. For Superiority, Morreall draws on Plato and biblical references, as well as Hobbes’s definition in the *Leviathan*. For Incongruity, Morreall uses Kant’s definition of laughter in the *Critique of Judgment*; and for Relief, Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*.¹⁷

Morreall’s acumen in choosing appropriate citations is key to the success of his synthesis of the philosophy of humor, yet to someone interested in laughter as a philosophical entity beyond humor, it is striking how each one can be countered with a passage by the same author pointing quite elsewhere. For instance, to illustrate Superiority, Morreall doesn’t begin with the—perhaps—most celebrated Aristotelian definition of comedy, from the *Poetics*, a definition that has proved influential for all subsequent theories of laughter as derision and mockery: “Comedy [. . .] consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.”¹⁸ Morreall could easily have harnessed Aristotle here to the theory of the origin of humor as a means of asserting superiority through precisely this mockery of deformity—a flaw that is perceived in another without empathy but rather at a distance, and from above (Bergson, another recruit to Morreall’s Superiority Theory camp, echoes the sentiment of distance by declaring laughter to signal an “absence of feeling”¹⁹). Instead, he uses Aristotle only to buttress up a minor theory of laughter as signal and play, by citing a comparatively obscure passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Aristotle [. . .] said in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ch. 8) that ‘Life includes rest as well as activity, and in this is included leisure and amusement.’

Some people carry amusement to excess—‘vulgar buffoons,’ Aristotle calls them—but just as bad are ‘those who can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who do,’ whom he calls ‘boorish and unpolished.’ Between buffoonery and boorishness there is a happy medium—engaging in humor at the right time and place, and to the right degree.”²⁰

Aristotle’s call to moderation with regard to comedy and derision is reminiscent of the kind of equanimity and acceptance of moderate laughter of, say, Renaissance writers such as Erasmus of Rotterdam in his *The Education of Children* (1550).²¹ But the most important point here is that within the Aristotelian output there are at least two—or, as we will soon see, three—quite different reflections on laughter. To point this out is not to say anything other than that the slotting of theories of comedy into categories is an important exercise, albeit one which forces the writer to be selective—sometimes to the point of tendentiousness—with their sources. I want to instead entertain the question of what would happen if we opened ourselves up to the shadows passing between the conflicting definitions of laughter that appear within a single author’s output.

We might, for instance, remember that in counterpoise to the even-tempered appraisal of laughter in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we have the distorted, painless masks of the Aristotelian definition from the *Poetics*. We might also remember that the *Nicomachean Ethics*’ idea of laughter as a relief from serious thought clashes with a passage elsewhere in Aristotle’s output, which defines laughter as a human reflex caused by the quivering of the *phrenes* (the partition separating the upper and lower organs of the body at its middle):

Now that the midriff, which is a kind of outgrowth from the sides of the thorax, acts as a screen to prevent heat mounting up from below, is shown by what happens, should it, owing to its proximity to the stomach, attract thence the hot and residual fluid. For when this occurs there ensues forthwith a marked disturbance of intellect and of sensation. It is indeed because of this that the midriff is called Phrenes, as though it had some share in the process of thinking (Phronein). in reality, however, it has no part whatsoever itself in the matter, but, lying in close proximity to organs that have, it brings about the manifest changes of intelligence in question by acting upon them. [. . .] That heating of it affects sensation rapidly and in a notable manner is shown by the phenomena of laughing. For when men are tickled they are quickly set a-laughing, because the motion quickly reaches this part, and heating it though but slightly nevertheless manifestly so disturbs the mental action as to occasion movements that are independent of the will.²²

It is important to remember that this third definition of laughter would prove as influential as that of comedy in the *Poetics*, albeit in a different realm of knowledge: the laughing animal will become (as we will see in the next chapter) the cornerstone of Western definitions of the human. Note too how, despite this passage’s physiological tone, laughter’s placement at the *phrenes* indicates that it exists, already in Aristotle, at a particular kind of boundary between the higher, thinking and

feeling organs and the lower organs, of feeding, digestion, and reproduction—and that laughter specifically makes manifest a disturbance of the boundary between thought and unthought, in the shape of the phrenes. It is striking that Aristotle takes special pains to decouple *phrenes* (the midriff, as well as the etymological root of the medical term for the nervous system) from *phronein*, one of the Greek verbs for thought and, according to some twentieth-century commentators, an indicator of the particular kind of thinking that allows for the distinction between good and evil, and therefore a political capacity for society and self-government.²³ I will return to the implications of *phronesis*, and its disturbances, in the following chapter, but for now it is enough to note that in the very act of protesting against the semantic slippage of *phrenes* and *phronesis*, Aristotle signals that slippage as already an area of political danger, a place where flesh and thought touch in ways unquantifiable and uncontrollable. And so, just like Bergson's glorious, and too quickly dismissed, description of laughter, the idea of laughter as the boundary between the flesh of the diaphragm and the capacity for moral discernment hangs in the air long after it has been discarded.

Let us open up a few more cases in which authors cited by Morreall for one theory of laughter can be shown—in some fundamental way—to be at odds with themselves. To illustrate the Superiority Theory, Morreall tells us that Hobbes gives the following famous definition of *laughter* in the *Leviathan*, first published in 1651: “Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”²⁴ The Aristotelian idea of derision and the theory of will to power so important to the politics of the *Leviathan* combine in this lucid and merciless definition. But, as we have already seen, in 1640, Hobbes had penned, in *The Elements of Law*, quite another definition of laughter: the sign of a passion without name, which it marks as something as yet unparsed by philosophical discourse. By contrast, “sudden glory” comes packed with disciplining undertones: ones that snap laughter back into causality, political use, and statecraft. For all of the *Leviathan's* political clarity, then, we should pause to notice a fleeting moment of uncertainty, as its author threw up his hands at the sheer impossibility of pinning laughter down to a nameable passion or cause, clutching at its physical manifestation as the only sure thing to report.

A similar double-speak occurs in Immanuel Kant's gloss on laughter in the *Critique of Judgement*. Associated with the diagnosis of laughter as a response to thwarted expectation and incongruity, Kant's famous description goes: “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.*”²⁵ It is striking how, alongside a formal definition concerning expectation and surprise, this definition of Kant's is traversed by a stream of thought about the

failure of logos—the figure of the “understanding” that “can find no satisfaction” and results in a transformation into “nothing.” Morreall suggests that this brief moment in Kant was a trickle leading to a stream as a nascent theory of “irrationalist laughter”—whose definition amplifies the sensuous overcoming of reason at the cost of the painful ambiguity between thought and unthought that Kant outlines here. But the sheer negative force of the “nothing” into which “understanding” is transformed in the act of laughing should give us pause. For Kant, unlike some of his successors, such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, reason cannot be overcome through exaggerated attention to the senses—it can be only turned into nothing, extinguished, in other words, back into the body that writhes and changes. But—so says Kant—we should also beware of counting such bodily changes as any kind of knowledge. In a passage reminiscent of Aristotle’s insistence that laughter doesn’t touch *phronesis* but just the *phrenes*, he delivers a physiological reading of laughter and music as, in both cases, the absence of thought: “Music and that which excites laughter are two different kinds of play with aesthetical Ideas, or with representations of the Understanding through which ultimately nothing is thought; and yet they can give lively gratification merely by their changes. Thus we recognize pretty clearly that the animation in both cases is merely bodily, although it is excited by Ideas of the mind; and that the feeling of health produced by a motion of the intestines corresponding to the play in question makes up that whole gratification of a gay party.”²⁶

Gone is the formal diagnosis of incongruity as cause, but the extinction of thought into nothing appears in both definitions. Though laughter is here reduced to its causes (“that which excites laughter”), those causes are plunged into the unexamined recesses of the body where thought goes to die. The cause of laughter is pleasure through bodily movement, a mindless, convulsive gratification that bears echoes, again, of Aristotle’s musing on “manifest changes of intelligence” and “disturb[ed] mental action,” felt through the quivering *phrenes*. The feeling of touching the very boundary of what can be counted as thinking, and the moment in which thinking melts into physiological discharge, traverses both passages across history and context. What is perhaps unique to Kant are the late eighteenth-century signifiers attached to the disturbance of thought: pleasure, a worrisome nothingness at the other side of thought, and music, perched alongside laughter upon the boundary of thought and unthought.

UNREASON AND LAUGHTER

It is hard not to be swayed by the arrival of music—via Kant, the unwitting gateway drug to nineteenth-century aesthetics—on the philosophical scene of this chapter. All the more so since music appears by way of a mention of the bowel-like movement of thought into nothing. Musicologists have long bristled at Kant’s shrugging dismissal of music as a lower form of aesthetic practice, too bound up with

the body to deliver the free play of ideas that painting and literature more easily provide. The answer to Kant's dismissal is, perhaps, the story of the constitution of the fields of music criticism and then academic musicology at large and can be summed up as follows. Either one attempts to argue for music's ability to enact a free play of ideas just as well as the other arts—a perspective that draws on the more even-tempered aesthetics of the eighteenth century—or, and this is perhaps the more hegemonic position, one recasts the relation of music to the body as a positive form of irrationalism: deliverance from language, reason, and all manner of epistemological oppression, a return to the senses, access to a truth so intensely physical that it loops back into the metaphysical. My journey through “shadow laughter” so far could now easily take a turn into the same irrationalist bend, and indeed, there is something attractive, even generous, about steering laughter—whose aesthetics are far less well developed than those of music—into the intellectual boulevard that validated music as a subject of philosophical and academic inquiry. Yet that is not the path I am laying here. Though they may, on occasion, both be found at the boundary of thought and unthought, music and laughter perch unequally across the limit. Beheld as they both may be by Kant's ear, laughter's philosophy, once sufficiently unglued from mere theories of humor, has the power to take us somewhere that music cannot.

Put simply, laughter is not capable of effecting the same sensual overcoming of language that music so readily affords; though it may occasionally deliver us to a place of joyous unreason, the ticket to such a place, in the case of laughter, is far costlier, the journey less reliable, and the ecstasy often undercut by doubt. This is not to say that laughter has not received its fair share of coverage by philosophers who aggressively questioned the place of reason in conceptions of knowledge. Nietzsche's idea of the godless, emancipatory laughter of the Superman,²⁷ Schopenhauer's notion of laughter as a diagnostic tool of the ungluing of essences and appearances,²⁸ Bataille's philosophy of laughter (to an extent), and even the shattering cackle of Hélène Cixous's feminist Medusa²⁹ (to which we will return later) are all chapters in a distinguished and sometimes searingly political history of irrationalist laughter. Yet the true power of laughter as a philosophical object is that it sits so uneasily with reason and logos broadly conceived. I mean this in the sense that it both stubbornly sits with reason and logos and does so while audibly squirming. That is, laughter is both tied to discourses of logical causality—theories of humor and comedy—and also always shy of them; it is tied to language and reason and yet regularly unsettles these faculties. Its links to reason, logos, and causality are as unsteady as they are impossible to sever; laughter answers to a gravitational pull toward reason, a necessity for rational accountability, from which music—by the late nineteenth century—had been summarily excused. No

such excuse has been dispensed for laughter. For all that it disrupts and falls short of logos, it is also forever bound to its remains, to its undoing.

In making a case against an irrationalist embrace of laughter, it is important to attempt a degree of precision with epistemological stakes. That is: What does a rational approach to laughter allow us to access that an irrationalist approach cannot? What are the political implications of laughter as a form of knowledge? The best version of an answer is, in this case, the Foucauldian version. Summoning Foucault's seminal work on the history of madness, we can say that laughter forces the questions of what the cutoff between reason and unreason is, where it is placed, why there, and by whom. Indeed, it is striking how laughter, though not an overt part of this project of Foucault's, can be mapped easily onto his very language when he writes, in the 1961 preface to *History of Madness*, that

the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason is the origin; the grip in which reason holds non-reason to extract its truth as madness, fault or sickness derives from that, and much further off. We must therefore [. . .] speak of that gesture of severance, the distance taken, the void installed between reason and that which it is not, without ever leaning on the plenitude of what reason pretends to be. Then, and only then, will that domain be able to appear, where men of madness and men of reason, departing from each other and not yet separate, can open, in a language more original, much rougher and much more matutinal than that of science, the dialogue of their rupture, which proves, in a fleeting fashion, that they are still on speaking terms. There madness and non-madness, reason and unreason are confusedly implicated in each other, inseparable as they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange that separates them.³⁰

Let's place laughter within this poetic and yet quite precise Foucauldian turn and then map the ways in which the project here departs from the bounds of a Foucauldian theory of history. If, as Foucault says, there is a gesture of severance between reason and unreason that makes them appear distinct, lending reason the ideological shine of plenitude and leaving unreason as its mere, impoverished reversal, laughter is one of the many unsevered sinews discovered at the site of the cut, the anti-ideological bridge between two realms we have been conditioned to understand as separate. Laughter, then, is no tool to make the case for madness as a valid alternative to reason (for, remember, it is their being severed into different categories that concerns us here). Even less accurate is the idea of laughter as a prelapsarian vestige, something to remind us of a happier time, when reason and unreason were not severed but instead happily folded into each other. Laughter is instead the "original," "rough," and "matutinal" language that speaks the dialogue of reason and unreason's rupture. Especially moving, to me, is the fact that Foucault outlines the space between reason and unreason as a space of rough language.³¹ In its boundedness to language—as its failure, malfunction, and undoing—laughter can also be understood as a knitting outward of language away from

discourses of reason, but one that is treacherous, unstable, operating, in Foucault's words, "in a fleeting fashion."

Foucault's project in *History of Madness* was a political one—one that rearticulated the presence, in history, of people who had been disciplined and confined on the grounds of their lack of reason. Indeed, this book illuminates the medical practices that have purported to sort the sane from the insane and the ways in which these supposedly neutral practices quietly worked in tandem with the disciplining methods of corporal punishment, prison, and execution. Social inequality and poverty, imposed racialization, and noncompliant forms of sexuality and gender expression all took the name of *madness* at one point or another. It is no coincidence that the most unsettling, most unreasonable laughter—the laughter that is most readily written out of history, whose meaning flies in the face of any tidy theory of causality—is that of racialized, gendered, and poor people. Though Foucault himself did not write about laughter in any sustained way, there is a distinguished trail of scholarship tracing precisely this link and tension between laughter and disciplining practices. In her starkly original 2010 book *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*, Anca Parvulescu devotes her first chapter ("The Civilizing of Laughter") to how the very practice of laughter has been, since medieval Christianity, subjected to a kind of biopolitical monitoring: a discourse around the ways in which the body needed to be held and controlled in civil society. Though the particular conditions of this monitoring changed over the course of European history—Parvulescu tracks the ambivalence toward laughter from the Bible and medieval biblical commentary through early modern discourses on the passions and physiognomy to budding medical practices regarding the control of the body, face, and eyes—the concern with curbing and harnessing laughter's energy persists throughout. Another key contribution to thinking of laughter as a political phenomenon in its own right—one with a unique capacity to disturb hegemonic practices of the body—is Jacqueline Bussie's *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (2007), which traces laughter throughout its long, negative Christian tradition (from Augustine and St. John Chrysostom through lesser-known figures like Oecolampadius to Reinhold Niebuhr) and recasts it, thanks to modernist literature, in a positive light, as an act of defiance and rebellion in the face of political oppression.³² These kinds of archeology of laughter challenge its ties to reason via various theories of humor and comedy. The laughs that pervade Parvulescu's and Bussie's books do not have a discernible cause and are often alienating, frightening, or confusing, but also—such is the argument of the authors—full of liberatory force for those who are laughing, as well as those willing to heed them and join them.

Perhaps the most famous archeology of laughter's relationship to liberation from oppression was propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin—a tutelary deity in any project considering laughter beyond the lens of humor. For Bakhtin, laughter was famously a practice of the body that was collective, oral, political, and celebratory

before it became codified into literate theories of causality and comedy in the eighteenth century:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.³³

Bakhtin’s rhetorical broadening of the phenomenon of laughter is done in a few, expert moves: the dismissal of comic prompts, the disinterest in psychological analysis, the disregard for the individual as a category, and finally the collapse of the boundary between the object and the subject of laughter. In short, with festive laughter, it is difficult to know why one laughs or indeed who exactly is laughing. Bakhtin’s disdain for the subsequent shackling of laughter to codified systems of causality rings loud and clear as, later in the same text, he makes a distinction between festive laughter and “reduced laughter” (the laughter associated with irony, humor, and sarcasm): “The disintegration of popular laughter, after its flowering in Renaissance literature and culture, was practically completed, and marked at the same time the end of the formative phase of the satirical or merely amusing comic literary genres that were to prevail in the nineteenth century. The genres of reduced laughter—humor, irony, sarcasm—which were to develop as stylistic components of serious literature (especially the novel) were also definitely formed. We are not concerned with the study of these phenomena.”³⁴ The reduction that Bakhtin diagnoses in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary laughter is a matter not simply of intensity but of political might. Festive laughter has, for Bakhtin, the power to suspend liturgical authority, warp the word of God, and joyously bring the most elemental parts of the body into typically monitored, sacred spaces. Although, in Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival, such reversals are—rather than permanent revolutions—mere daylong events to be resolved by a return to the status quo, the anarchic, chthonic power of festive laughter lingers, in his prose, after that return.

My project here is to combine the kind of modernist archaeologies offered by Parvulescu and Bussie but also Bakhtin—with their bold historical overviews and their stark abandonment of humor and comedy as exegetic lenses for laughter—with the Foucauldian insistence on the state of in-betweenness of reason and unreason. I am not interested, that is, in offering up laughter as a kind of liberatory reversal (however fleeting) of the strictures of logos, of disciplinary practices, of traditional power structures. Rather, I am interested in the way that laughter inhabits the split of thought and unthought and how it sounds out the rough, matutinal language of all that dwells there. I believe that the history of laughter

without reason is the history of laughter's emergent doubleness, of its biopolitical placement at the limit of that which thinks and that which cannot think—both within the human body and within society at large.

TOWARD A HISTORY OF LAUGHTER AS SOUND

What, exactly, remains once we strip laughter of its reasons; what can be glimpsed, heard, touched at the boundary of reason and unreason? The question is particularly urgent when, as in this book, we move within the confines of a discipline invested in sound and music as specific ways of knowing, living in, and responding to the world. Sidestepping the issue of causality—and its relationship with discourses of reason writ large—offers us a potential pathway into a kind of phenomenological reduction, where we can lift laughter from its origin and cause and evaluate it at some kind of sensuous face value. Such a phenomenological reduction could easily yield the particular *sound* of laughter: repetitive, detached, and accented, with occasional whoops and wheezes, usually fast, with every pitch consisting of a cluster of breath and vowel, making up a melodic contour as the voice goes up and down. In many ways, this book traces the process by which laughter became thinkable and audible primarily as a sound. This parsing of laughter allowed—so I argue—for the activation of a web of long-standing political and intellectual associations (within the episteme of laughter as response to humor and comedy) with issues of language, reproduction, and definitions of the human. The fact that laughter could be understood as a properly sonic phenomenon is not a foregone conclusion and hardly an immediate consequence of its perilous attachment to reason. Indeed, so much more is involved in the act of laughing than just sound—and the literature on laughter tells us as much—whether it is the broadening of the face, the rising and falling of the chest and stomach, or the internal twinges and convulsions of the diaphragm.

The late Renaissance and early modern discourses of laughter often made a point of describing it as a physiological phenomenon, setting aside issues of causality. These descriptions featured voice and sound but never foregrounded them. Instead, laughter was understood as a phenomenon made up of all kinds of tactile and visual stimuli as well. The physician and philosopher Laurent Joubert considered laughter to be composed of three phenomena. First, convulsion of the diaphragm: “We have [. . .] found the source of the risible faculty, showing [. . .] how the heart is moved by such a condition, working upon the aloof diaphragm. For these are the principal instruments of the act called laughter, or laughing.”³⁵ Second, a broken-up voice: “Since laughter is never unaccompanied by the shaking of the chest, it is impossible that one not hear the air coming from the mouth (or at least the nose), making a spasmodic noise.”³⁶ And last, a visual component in the movements of the face: “The third of the inseparable accidents of laughter is

the stretching of the thinned lips with the widening of the chin, never lacking in even the slightest laugh.”³⁷

This kind of mechanistic and phenomenal account, tracing the anatomy of laughter from diaphragm to face, continued into the seventeenth century (remember Hobbes’s “distortion of countenance”), in the same gleefully medical tone. See, for instance, Descartes’s description of laughter in his 1649 *The Passions of the Soul*:

Laughter consists in this: [1] blood coming from the right cavity of the heart through the arterial vein, suddenly and repeatedly swelling the lungs, compels the air they contain to come out forcefully through the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate and explosive cry; and [2] the lungs as they swell and this air as it emerges each push against all the muscles of the diaphragm, chest, and throat, and thereby make the ones in the face that have some connection with them move. And what we call Laughter is only this action of the face, together with that inarticulate and explosive cry.³⁸

If this rich description managed to discuss so many elements of the act of laughter—both its physiological causes and its physical manifestations—in what way can laughter really be claimed as a sound in a strong philosophical and historical sense? Are we impoverishing the philosophical account of laughter when we yank it, exclusively and perhaps tendentiously, into the realm of the sonorous?

The short answer to this question can be given in this way: Accounting for laughter as something *different from* comedy and humor is very much a twentieth-century endeavor. That century—for many reasons to do with its complex and ever-changing relationship to writing—was famously preoccupied with ideas of sound and noise. Laughter really began to be thought of as a political and philosophical event only in the profoundly sonorous twentieth century. The question of sound is threaded through laughter because of the methodological conditions under which the issue of laughter without reason emerged.

The long answer goes something like this: Laughter without reason exists, and can only ever exist, in a historical fold. Laughter as a phenomenon in its own right, independent of rational explanations or causes, is in part the result of a backward projection by thinkers who wished to write the history of an idea—laughter without causes or reason—that haunted them in the present. This is not to say that these thinkers’ interpretations were baseless or unfounded—on the contrary, they brought to light a rich tradition, particularly in antiquity, the medieval era, and the early modern period (but also, for those willing to hearken to it, long after), that treats laughter independently of humor and as a political and philosophical event in its own right. We have already seen much of this lineage here: Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Laurent Joubert, René Descartes. Yet the unearthing and championing of such a tradition as an implicit alternative to dominant theories of humor and comedy was a twentieth-century scholarly phenomenon—one that began, perhaps, with Mikhail Bakhtin’s rediscovery of an oral, bodily laughter capable of

temporarily suspending the power of liturgy and canon in the Middle Ages³⁹ and stretches up to Anca Parvulescu's reevaluation, through modernist literature, of laughter as a recalcitrant early modern passion at the edge of the body-mind split. To be mindful of the fact that these theories of laughter are, essentially, modernist conceptions of a distant historical past does not mean to discount them—I am not attached to any idea of reconstructing history “as it really was”—but rather to acknowledge and honor the particular way in which modes of writing history gain traction and poetic power. I am in the same fold as these authors and wish not to leave it but merely to inhabit it with a degree of self-awareness. The obvious modernist bias of many twentieth-century writers on laughter is here neither criticized and dismissed nor excused as a thing of its time or a matter of poetic license. Instead, I want the sound of laughter without reason to be explored and acknowledged as a way of thinking history at the inevitable, imperfect fold of one's own time and the time of others.

On a broader scale, though, it is essential to remember that it has been twenty- and twenty-first century philosophy, literature, and music that made the most convincing case for laughter to be treated as an event in its own right. We see this in Georges Bataille's concept of laughter as a sign of the unknown (1953) and in Hélène Cixous's insistence on a laughter-based feminine writing charged with the power to explode the strictures and linearity of masculine—or phallogocentric—writing (1976). We hear it in, say, the modernist flair of Velimir Khlebnikov's 1909 “Incantation by Laughter” (which opens Anca Parvulescu's book on laughter) and in Maya Angelou's 1988 laughing retelling of Paul Dunbar's “The Mask.” Parvulescu discusses the role of laughter in twentieth-century modernism most eloquently when, glossing Alain Badiou, she writes:

If, following Alain Badiou's recent encounter with it, the [twentieth] century is to be imagined as a beast, subjectivized as “the century,” the question is: What kind of beast has it been? What passions have tormented it? In 1909, Khlebnikov's poem came to announce that one of the century's passions will have been the passion of laughter. In Khlebnikov's poem, laughter is a variation on what Badiou calls “the passion for the real,” which brings forth the real's own passion for the present, with its joys and horrors. Badiou writes: “Is there or is there not within the century a will aimed at forcing art to extract from the mines of reality, by means of willful artifice, a real mineral, hard as diamond?” In the twentieth century, art would indeed take up the task of extracting, through a range of artifices, bits of the real (or fantasies thereof) out of the mines of reality. Laughter, its very sound, is such a bit.⁴⁰

In Parvulescu's writing we find laughter clasped into twentieth-century modernism as a kind of technologically assisted excavation of a primal sound—specifically sound rather than any other sensorial experience. I want to throw into question the mining metaphor offered by Badiou, as well as be more precise about the privileged relationship of laughter and sound assumed in Parvulescu's quote. The work of writers like Bakhtin—and indeed Parvulescu, who tracks the history of laughter as a bodily practice across the Western philosophical tradition—was

inspired not merely by a rush to the sublime or the real but by a genuine desire to forge documented, thoughtful connections with emergent theories of laughter from the past. The twentieth century's bias toward laughter was not only a matter of extraction but the occasion for some profound reflections on the fact that laughter had never really been accounted for in terms of its causes and putative reasons.

We can also put more pressure on the idea of laughter's privileged relationship to the sonic. Parvulescu here voices precisely the fantasy of what laughter was to twentieth-century writers: a shard of reality distinct from their own neuroses, capable of yanking their thought into an ever exotic version of "the real." If laughter is a pervasive entity in the twentieth century, we can be a little more dispassionate about the reason for its role as "sound." The uneasy relationship to logos, to reason, that I have documented in this chapter extends out into laughter's tense relationship to the technology of writing. Laughter is both easy to write down as a series of vocables (and has been written down as such since at least Aristophanes's *Peace*) and also evidently at odds with Western alphabetic writings' lack of concern for intonation, speed, and contour.⁴¹ In transcriptive practices such as oral history, laughter, and the ways it meddles with intelligible speech, has often been difficult to notate—a problem that has generated some interesting literature in its own right. Most important, though, sound reproduction and the emergence of phonography optimized the writing of laughter, and laughter (as we will see in chapters 4 and 5) worked to render phonography profitable, user friendly, and transparent as a medium. Laughter and phonography lent each other a kind of aura of immediacy and but also bound them, in ways more profound than perhaps we realize, to the political and philosophical implications of technological and biological reproduction. It is simplistic to say that the twentieth century was a noisy, sonorous, or listening century. A more forgivable generalization would be that the industrial West became, at the turn of the twentieth century, especially concerned both with the optimization and mechanization of writing and transcription and with the romantic erasure of writing, a return to a kind of prelapsarian sonic sublime. Laughter has been linked with these twentieth-century fantasies of writing capable of capturing and rendering sound in its imaginary, pure entirety. Yet if we pay attention, we can also hear, in laughter, something more: the thirst for extraction through writing; the simultaneous impulse to repress and erase the ugly labor of extraction; and the drive to enjoy the loot as a shard of the real—as a reminder of a state of nature. Laughter without reason is a phonographic event, and phonography became, at key moments in its history, coextensive with the act and sound of laughter.

Finally, if laughter without reason poses new questions about the relationship of laughter to causality, its deep ties to phonography mean that such issues are closely linked to the problem of sound sources in all of their various iterations: Murray Schafer's schizophonia, Pierre Schaeffer's acousmatic (and its recent critique and redefinition by Brian Kane), Michel Chion's *acousmètre*, and more simply the problem of copy and original, as Jonathan Sterne frames it in *The*

Audible Past.⁴² The two problems become entangled at the moment when “Why is this person laughing?” intersects with “Where does the laughter come from?” Laughter—particularly laughter whose cause is indiscernible to its listeners—can disrupt the identity, intention, and indeed basic personhood of the laugher. As we will see in chapter 2, laughter has a long history as an unsteady but persistent cipher for the human. Much of the philosophical history of laughter is a warning against the dangers of the loss of logos, intention, and reason; at the same time, that history involves an association of laughter with those construed as not-quite-human, meaning that laughter without reason makes subalterns audible in their life at the edge of society, as we saw with Maya Angelou’s conjuring of Miss Rosie at the beginning of this chapter.⁴³ When Bergson wrote in 1900 that “our laughter is always the laughter of a group,”⁴⁴ he meant that it is a tool for the many to enforce convention on those who contravene, but we could flip that—as did many twentieth-century Western philosophical discourses on laughter, starting with Bataille—to say that even single laughers are, by their own laugh, divided into a disorderly multiplicity.⁴⁵ Laughter is here a sound that comes from no one—perhaps a more-than-one or a fewer-than-one—and as such it is truly, genuinely, and politically acousmatic: it marks the limit to which a voice may be tethered to a recognizable, human individual, the limit after which that tether may strain or snap. I echo Nina Eidsheim’s insight that the fundamental condition of the voice is acousmatic: the identity of the speaker/singer is always untraceable, blurred, divided, and complex.⁴⁶ Yet if we are now readier to accept that all voices are schizophrenic, nonpresent, and semidetached from their source, if we are told that all hearing is mishearing, it is undeniable that—to paraphrase Orwell’s famous dictum in *Animal Farm*—some voices are more acousmatic than others, more schizophrenic and misheard than others, and that the misapprehensions often follow rather obvious patterns of race, gender, and class. The question is how that unequal aurality—the tendency of some voices to be less intelligible, less tethered to language and personhood—came to be constructed and become exploitable as such.⁴⁷ The history of that process features the joint history of laughter without reason and laughter on record.

Risible Creatures

If any thing is a man it is risible, and vice versa.

—PORPHYRY, 268–270

It is a faulty definition which fits something other than what it defines.

—ERASMUS, 1535

LAUGHTER AGAINST HUMANITY

We can begin at the heart of the liberal, secular Humanism of the North European sixteenth century—the era of Rabelais, Erasmus, and Montaigne. This is a tradition known, in the broad coordinates of European intellectual history, for its thinkers’ classical erudition and visceral distrust of medieval theology and ecclesiastic institutions, the emergence of colonial ways of knowing, and most of all, the invention of the privileged category of the human: a living creature unlike any other, capable of language, reason, learning, and self-determination in the world. Make no mistake, though: the workshop of the creation of man is, like all ideological foundries, a hot and messy place. The task of distinguishing men—of convincingly showing them to be qualitatively different—from all that surrounds them is lengthy, difficult, and impossible to complete. There is the attribution of unique and, what is more, inalienable properties, such as the gift of speech and the capacity for reason, love, and political organization—which humans demonstrate, at best, only some of the time. Then there is the severing of ties from the animal world, even as human life is composed of so much animal need: shelter, reproduction, food, community, and play. But most troubling of all—and rising urgently with the dawn of coloniality—there is the question of whether there may be people who, though they look like fellow speaking, thinking bipeds, may not, in fact, be “human” at all. In this ideological workshop, the newly minted human is not just a clean, abstract determination but the result of a repeated, guided attunement of the minds that have invented him and now claim to behold him in the world.¹ The task of the humanist

is to figure out a philosophical method that will serve to recognize and honor this new creature, wherever it may be found. The senses must be retuned—especially the noble senses of sight and hearing, which receive stimuli at a distance and thus avoid risking physical contact with the dubious flesh of the nonhuman.

How is this new sovereign creature to be known, conjured forth from the background, and kept distinct from it across time and space? While the modes are many, I propose to focus on one of the most curious and perhaps distinctive: the phenomenon of laughter, routinely singled out for the purpose of sorting men from others. And that is where the story of this chapter begins: in the stubborn but, as we shall see, unsteady association of laughter with the emerging figure of the human. Laughter is where François Rabelais begins the second book of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, with a few verses addressed directly to the reader:

Mieulx est de ris que de larmes escrire
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

It is better to write of laughter than of tears
Because laughter is the property of man.²

These same verses feature at the beginning of other scholarly treatments of the history of laughter—such as Michael A. Screech's *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* and Daniel Ménager's *La Renaissance et le rire*.³ Small wonder: Rabelais's opening is oracular in tone, offers a definition of the human, and is resonant with classical references, most notably the passage in Aristotle's zoological treatise *On the Parts of Animals* which specifies that "no animal but man ever laughs."⁴ Yet the same scholars who cite it also quickly remark that beneath the surface, Rabelais's dictum is full of irony and uncertainty. As Ménager writes, the key is Rabelais's deeply improper use of the word *propre*, which quickly comes apart at the seams when scrutinized for philosophical rigor:

In fact, Rabelais's formula is not at all Aristotelian. It was the Middle Ages that repeated ad nauseam that laughter was the property of man, and Rabelais, who knew medieval tradition well, was surely aware of this. Hence a disconcerting paradox: a Scholastic expression (the notion of proper) is used to formulate a new idea. The surprise increases when we consider that Rabelais has in fact betrayed Aristotle's thought. In his passage on laughter, Aristotle made no use of the notion of "proper." Like a good naturalist, he limited himself to stating that "no animal laughs except man." This remark features in the middle of a series of scientific observations regarding the fat of the reins and viscera. Nothing could be further from metaphysics. Laughter, therefore, is but a particularity of the animal species known as man. Exactly the way that neighing is a property of horses. Aristotle's prudence here is all the more remarkable because it was he who coined the logical category of the "proper." But when the *Topics* give examples of the different kinds of proper, they do not mention laughter. We can therefore say that Aristotle never wrote that laughter was the property of man.⁵

Two tiers of distortion are involved in the making of Rabelais's famous dictum: first, the Scholastic insistence on making laughter man's "proper," and then Rabelais's knowing and ironic use of that property to define man. The larger point here is not, of course, to slap anyone's wrists—not Rabelais's and least of all the Scholastics—for their unorthodox use of Aristotle. Rather, it is to take the doubts situated at the heart of the statement "rire est le propre de l'homme" as something more than a series of failure and mistakes. An anamorphic thought was created and maintained in the act of stitching together Aristotelian logic, zoology, and definitions of humankind in this way. Ménager mentions that the effort to suture laughter to humankind through an improper use of the category of "proper" wasn't even Rabelais's in the first instance: it was the work of the Scholastics. The medieval historian Helen Adolf expands on this by specifying that Aristotle chose to define the human by means of other properties in the *Organon*: "Aristotle, himself, as far as I can see, when dealing with the *proprium* in his logical writings (*Categories* and *Topica*), did not use the 'risus capax'; instead, he said, e.g., 'capable of learning grammar' or 'capable of receiving knowledge.' But his school certainly did."⁶ The idea of laughter as a property of humankind that caps Rabelais's magnum opus was part of a continuous effort across centuries. It was an effort sustained within a tradition that prided itself on drawing its methods directly from Aristotle—and yet repeatedly misappropriated and amplified a minor passage on laughter to define a core property of man, as a creature capable of complementing and even subverting the more orthodox properties of reason and learning.⁷ The question, then, is why should laughter be the occasion for such deliberate, inveterate impropriety—and what happened when, philosophically and politically speaking, laughter installed itself at the viscous core of Humanism's sovereign creature?

Indeed, aside from Rabelais, there is evidence that humanists chose to conjure the trope of laughter as man's proper even when they knew that this was a faulty definition, if only as an example of what not to say and think. In 1535, one year after the publication of Rabelais's *Gargantua*, Erasmus betrayed more than a little impatience when—tellingly, in *De ratione concionandi*, or *The Art of Preaching*, a treatise about oration and therefore implicitly concerned with viable logical categories—he overtly turned (unlike Rabelais) his back on medieval Scholasticism and dismissed the issue of laughter:

Vitiosa autem est definitio, quae quadrat in aliud, quam quod definitur: aut definiti vocabulum in aliquid competit, in quod non competit definitio. [. . .] Porro risibile, quod homini ceu proprium tribuitur, videtur et canibus et simiis commune.

It is a faulty definition which fits something other than what it defines. Or else, the word of the definition concerns something that does not belong to the definition. [. . .] Such is the description "able to laugh," for what is attributed to Man as his *property* seems to be shared with dogs and monkeys.⁸

Despite the overall dismissal of the doxa of laughter as human property, there is something deeply evocative about Erasmus's turn of phrase here: a "definition which fits something other than what it defines." Instead of simply writing off "able to laugh" as a useless description, Erasmus leaves a blank space ("something other") for the human-animal hybrid to whom laughter might actually belong. And, in the spirit of Ménager's analysis of Rabelais, we might also note that Erasmus too is using Scholastic language even as he ostensibly censors Scholastic philosophy: he refers to laughter as *homini proprium*, "the property of humans," as did Rabelais, and uses another loaded Scholastic term, *risibile*, which specifically means "able to laugh" (and not "ridiculous"). *Risibile* is the word used by Boethius in his Latin translation of the *Isogoge*, Porphyry's (Greek) introduction to Aristotle's categories, the core text of all Scholasticism and likely the first text to stitch laughter together with humanity. Boethius, in his *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, doubles down on the link between humanity and laughter:

omnis homo risibile est et nulla alia species risibili potest proprio nuncupari
 every man is risible, and no other species can be properly called risible⁹

From there on out, risibility has remained a debated but never renounced property of the human—a term turned over by Arabic-Hebrew commentators like Ishak Ibn Suleiman and Latin-language Schoolmen like Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus.¹⁰ The human ability and potentiality to laugh was, by the time Erasmus picked it up, a linguistic and logical trope, and so his open dispute of its use is a moment of rupture, a desire for a new definition cleansed of that "something other" implied by the term *risibile*. Elsewhere, as Anca Parvulescu has documented, Erasmus comments on the need to encourage laughter (though, crucially, in moderation) in children.¹¹ This acceptance of laughter in moderation is one of the common Renaissance solutions to the quandary of risibility as a human property—Laurent Joubert, in his *Traité du ris*, also resolves the question with calls for moderation.¹² But moderation is a practical solution, not a philosophical one—and we see this when Erasmus raises and entertains true doubt about laughter in *The Art of Preaching*. When he takes Porphyry's *homo risibile* trope to task, he is not only extending the capacity to laugh to animals but also, perhaps, briefly entertaining a creature that is neither quite human nor fully animal. Hence that tantalizing hint at a "something other" from which the proper definition of humankind must be differentiated.

Michel de Montaigne also seems to have sensed the presence of this "something other" conjured by the ability to laugh. Take, for instance, the following consideration of the anatomical properties of humans from his "Apology for Raimond Sebond," one of the lengthier and more famous of his *Essays*:

Quoy ceux qui naturellement se changent en loups, en jumens, et puis encore en hommes? Et s'il est ainsi, comme dit Plutarque, qu'en quelque endroit des Indes, il y aye des hommes sans bouche, se nourrissans de la senteur de certaines odeurs,

combien y a-il de nos descriptions fausses ? Il n'est plus risible, ny à l'avanture capable de raison et de société: l'ordonnance et la cause de nostre bastiment interne, seroyent pour la plus part hors de propos.

What shall we say of those that naturally change themselves into wolves, colts, and then into men again? And if it be true, as Plutarch says, that in some place of the Indies there are men without mouths, who nourish themselves with the smell of certain odours, how many of our descriptions are false? He is no longer risible, nor, perhaps, capable of reason and society. The disposition and cause of our internal composition would then for the most part be to no purpose, and of no use.¹³

“Something other” indeed. The world of the quote is a heady blend of classical and early colonial fantasy-scapes, populated by werewolves and mouthless people. Yet that is not the strangest part of Montaigne’s quote. Having no mouth seems far more serious an obstacle to being human than changing oneself into an animal at will. Why? Because a mouthless person (who, lest we worry, can still feed themselves through smell alone) cannot laugh—“he is no longer risible.” The pivot from anatomical observation to the attribution of linguistic and political faculties is astonishing, and done entirely by naming laughter as the mouth’s most important function—even more important than eating. So powerful is laughter as a marker of the human that its anatomical impossibility manages—far more than lack of reason or society—to throw into question any anatomical definition of the human (“our internal composition would [. . .] be to no purpose, and of no use”). Risibility now stands in a not quite but nearly transitive relationship to reason and society (the two defining traits of humankind provided by Aristotle in book 1 of the *Politics*). The creature with a mouth to laugh with, the risibile creature, is evoked at this limit, flanked by mutants and monsters, poised to cross over into humankind proper.

The human capacity to laugh seems to have the power to open—for us and for the philosophers who conjure it forth—a space of true doubt. The genealogy of this space can be traced to what the critic Sylvia Wynter names “descriptive statements” of humanity, “master codes” elaborated and adapted for the purpose of sorting the truly human from those who are less-than-human.¹⁴ We experience these master codes whenever we encounter overused axioms (often Aristotelian in origin) such as “Humans are the only animals with the gift of language” or “Humans are by nature political animals” or, indeed, “Humans are the only animals capable of laughter.” Western definitions of the human were often Aristotelian—not in the sense that they stemmed directly from Aristotle, but in the sense that they were recognizable yet tendentious riffs on Aristotelian doxa that served to legitimate political distinctions. Aristotle’s definitions of humans in the *Politics* as “possessing language/reason” and “by nature political animals” have undergirded, either in turn or together, most “master codes” and “descriptive

statements” since early Christianity.¹⁵ Wynter offers the example of the theologian John Mair’s 1510 adaptation of Aristotle’s “by nature political” definition as a way of arguing that native populations in the “New World” were, by nature, incapable of governing themselves, thus giving classical and religious legitimation to colonizers.¹⁶ But there are so many others beyond that example—from the struggle, in late antiquity and medieval Scholastic logic, to define humans in relation to God and animals both to Giorgio Agamben’s famous use of Aristotle’s two definitions from the *Politics* to sketch out the realm of bare life versus political life in *Homo Sacer*.¹⁷ I am here making the case that the history of these political definitions of the human is tied to laughter in profound ways that are yet to be examined. To be precise, risibility—the ability to laugh—was a crucial piece of this adaptive Aristotelian doxa of the human. Ever since Porphyry’s introduction to Aristotelian logical categories, the two definitions from the *Politics* (the language/reason one and the politics one, that is) were accompanied by an ungainly third definition: “every man is capable of laughter” (“omnis homo risibile est”). This third definition is less serious, less stable, and indeed less legitimate—insofar as Aristotelian orthodoxy goes—than the others. As we saw in Ménager’s gloss of Rabelais above, the notion of the exclusive relationship of laughter to humans was picked up from Aristotle’s zoology (a body of knowledge distinct from the discourse on statesmanship of the *Politics*) and then jammed, *ob torto collo*, together with the other two. But despite its spurious credentials, the “risible” definition of humankind stuck. It persisted, in ways I will examine and discuss, across centuries, often in implicit or even direct tension with the other two definitions. The question thus becomes: why? Commentators across the centuries acknowledge that risibility is actually unhelpful as a definition of the human; indeed, it seems a definition capable of wreaking havoc on other definitions of humanity. Then why is risibility so amply sustained, so thoroughly flagged—even if in a gesture of frustration or bemusement—when discussing the human? What has it meant, and what does it mean, to say that the human is risible?

The task of investigating the relationship of risibility to the definition of the human is always already a political task. This is because, as Montaigne’s classical-colonial fantasy might already intimate, defining the human also means deciding who is worthy of being treated as a person rather than an exploitable, unreasonable animal or even a thing. Wynter makes a helpful distinction between the historically constructed, politically exclusionary category of “Man” (the implicitly male, European, wealthy individual that is vaunted as the true human subject) and the empirical reality of the millions of humans who have been deemed “not men” and so been racialized, dehumanized, and enserfed. In her seminal essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument”—with which I am in

conversation throughout this chapter—she famously tracks what she interchangeably calls “adaptive truths-for,” “descriptive statements,” and “master codes” for “Man.” Wynter’s adaptive truths-for are epistemological linchpins, terms that enact our ways of knowing while blinding us to the fact that such ways of knowing are constructed and political. “Man” is, for Wynter, an ideology appearing to define all of humankind while in effect positing an “ethnaclass” (white Europeans) as the only true humans, leaving the rest of humankind to be systematically exploitable and expendable. The master code of “Man” works through the enserfment and exploitation of its shadow “Other,” the nonhuman, a nonhuman whose lower rank came to be established through constructions of race in the sixteenth century: “It was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes), that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness—to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other.”¹⁸

For Wynter, language creates and then enacts “Man”—ostensibly an ahistorical, not culturally contingent idea of the human that is in fact implicitly modeled on European clerical and lay elites and so excludes most of humanity. In examining our way of speaking and knowing the human through time, we can learn to see the constructedness of our own current definition of the human and open ourselves up to a truer, fairer understanding of humanity at large. Wynter’s range in outlining this master code stretches between the Scholastic era and the 1950s, showing how apparently neutral definitions of the human were in fact inventions constantly adapted—theologically, juridically, philosophically, and practically—so as to uphold political distinctions between those who were so deemed and those who were, in some way, “Other.” Throughout her argument, Wynter insists, though, on a particular understanding of the ideology of man as being composed of two moments: first, the invention of “Man,” and second, the obfuscation, the repression of the invention of “Man” as such, so that this ideology may be taken at face value by those who inhabit it. Wynter’s argument works energetically against this systematic historical repression of the inventedness of the category of “Man,” urging her readers to engage in a corresponding process of analysis and demystification of constructions of the human that serve the systematic exploitation of ethnic minorities and the Global South, including Indigenous and Black populations. Our ideas of the human emerged as part of the invention of hierarchies between pure and impure, reasonable and unreasonable, free and enslaved, and they tend to obscure the vast swath of humanity that has been exploited so that a small, powerful elite of Europeans could present itself as a universal. We are faced with the impossible but urgent task of taking stock of the ideologies that created our privileged category of humanity—“the buck” (this is Wynter’s parting shot) “stops with us.”¹⁹

The argument of this chapter places laughter firmly in Wynter’s history of “descriptive statements” of the human, by way of contributing to the intellectual

and political project she outlines in her essay. But at its deeper level, my work here is also a way of engaging some of Wynter's methodological assumptions in how she chooses and reads her sources (her understanding of the history of ideologies in particular, and her readiness to embrace a positive, "nonadaptive" version of the human). Wynter's survey of such a portentous historical field is in part based on a modified Foucauldian perspective. She tracks epistemic shifts in the definition of "Man" but rejects Foucault's idea that historical ways of knowing (epistemes) are a series of utterly discrete blocks which, though in sequence, are actually disconnected from one another—the space of transition between epistemes being, for Foucault, one that is deeply unreliable and impossible to map. She writes that Foucault "oversaw [. . .] that such a discontinuity [. . .] was taking place in the terms of a continuous cultural field, one instituted by the matrix Judeo-Christian formulation of a general order of existence. That, therefore, these shifts in episteme were [. . .] shifts in what can now be identified [. . .] as a politics that is everywhere fought over what is to be the descriptive statement, the governing sociogenic principle, instituting of each genre of the human."²⁰

Wynter's insistence on a continuous politics of being, on a kind of common ground across the epistemes, is probably connected to her investment—after Franz Fanon and Gregory Bateson—in a nonracist, nonadaptive version of humanity that can serve as the basis for a different kind of politics. This is indeed the reason for Wynter's distinction between "Man" as ideology and "humanity" as reality. The first is an ideological construct, while the second is a quasi-empirical truth lying beneath the ideology of "Man," to be rehabilitated by scholars in a fashion parallel to how scientists discover empirical laws. In the argument that follows, laughter serves, in many ways, as a doubt lodged within the metaphysical definition of "Man," yet I don't think it offers a simple path toward the broad, empirical humanity that Wynter aims for. I'd say this is because the question that laughter raises can, as we will see, be resolved all too easily by confirming either the exceptionalism of Man (as he to whom logos always returns and ultimately belongs) or the inherent inferiority of racialized Others (they to whom logos never belonged in the first place). I therefore use the word *human* throughout as a kind of uncomfortable mash-up of Wynter's "Man" and "human"—a "Man" in crisis and a "human" not yet figured, a cracked ideology whose leakages might help us yet.²¹ In other words, I hope that in beholding the doubt that was long placed—through laughter—at the heart of the human, we might reconsider, to paraphrase Denise Ferreira da Silva's commentary on Wynter's political legacy, the method by which we chose to answer the question of "who and what we are."²²

I am offering here the history of risibility as the history of epistemological doubt, of genuine recalcitrance at the limit of ideology. As such, it follows and morphs alongside adaptive descriptions of the human like a shadow, showing them up as constructed even as it comes in to sustain them. (Something similar will happen when laughter combines with ideologies of reproduction, as we will

see in the following chapter.) Methodologically speaking, my hope is that by introducing the history of risibility into the epistemology of the human, I can show how doubt and recalcitrance too are and always have been made part of any collective epistemic field by the very people who make and inhabit it. They persist as much as the binaries (for Wynter, human/nonhuman, pure/impure, redeemed/sinful, reasonable/unreasonable, selected/dysselected) that they throw into question; indeed, sometimes they are articulated by some of the same people who set out such binaries and distinctions. This leads us to consider the political role of discourse. As da Silva powerfully argues, Wynter departs from Foucault by making race a fundamental determinant in establishing the very idea of the human in the sixteenth century and parses racializing discourse not as a secondary consequence but as the fundamental cause of economic and juridical infrastructure of discrimination, exploitation, and subjugation. Thus, Ferreira da Silva argues, Wynter restores the realm of the symbolic to a kind of political primacy.²³ But it isn't, to me, always clear what place confusion, doubt, and recalcitrance hold in Wynter's long-ranging joint epistemology of humanity and race. Her means of showing epistemological recalcitrance is, perhaps, mostly to model it herself—and to pick it up mostly among twentieth-century anticolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. Her account of the thought of the sixteenth-century Spanish missionary and theologian Bartolomé de Las Casas (who was heretical in how he argued, theologically, for Indigenous rights) is the closest she comes to attributing epistemological emancipation to actors in the historical past. Wynter may be at her most Foucauldian—methodologically speaking—when she posits herself as the critical analyst of the twists and turns of epistemes while emphasizing that such critiques are almost impossible for nearly all of her historical actors. Western intellectuals, in her telling, have been and are constitutively blind to their own work in upholding the ideology they inhabit. But she also imagines, in passing, that there are quickly repressed realizations of “fugitive truths” regarding the instability, contingency, and perilousness of the human subject and its rootedness in racialization.²⁴ I would argue that such fugitive truths are, maybe, not so fugitive, nor as quickly repressed as we may think. The history of laughter's relation to humanity—the history of risibility as a human property—suggests how, much more broadly, every epistemic field comes with its own self-destruct button, its own means of implosion, and the adaptation and preservation of such means of implosion are as much the product of intellectual labor as anything else. Of course, activating the means of implosion is wholly different than building the mechanism and maintaining it for posterity—and Wynter, perhaps rightly, counts the activation of the mechanism only by anti- and decolonial thinkers. What I am arguing here is that even at the most seemingly hegemonic core of the ideology of the human—in the thoughts of some prominent figures of Western philosophy, be they Aristotle, Porphyry, Montaigne, Erasmus, or Vico—the mechanism was fitted, and then maintained, with a deliberate fault.

THE LAUGHING AND THE RISIBLE

As various historians have remarked, the Latin term *homo risibilis* became a stock phrase in medieval Aristotelian logic—namely, the vast apparatus of commentary on Aristotle’s six texts on logical categories and structures of argumentation, commonly referred to as the *Organon*. Yet, as Ménager reminds us in his gloss on Rabelais (quoted above), Aristotle never mentions laughter in the *Organon*. It was introduced—pilfered from Aristotle’s *On the Parts of Animals*—in the process of rendering the *Organon* into a cogent logical system fit to demonstrate the existence of God and the constitutively subordinate place of humankind in relation to God, as well as humankind’s higher standing in relation to animals. This theological system is generally associated with thirteenth-century Scholasticism (Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus), a tradition known for its very lengthy, strict, and rather dry linguistic passagework. Yet the groundwork for Scholastic logic was laid much earlier, by Neo-Platonist philosophy and specifically Porphyry, the third-century Phoenician logician and philosopher who authored the *Isagoge*—the introduction to Aristotle’s logical categories. The entrance of laughter into the foundational logical system of Western philosophy can thus be pinpointed, with relative precision, to Porphyry’s *Isagoge*; it entered the bloodstream of the Western philosophical tradition writ large soon after, never to leave it. Porphyry wrote the *Isagoge* in Greek and likely read Aristotle in Greek; the *Isagoge*’s cogent and compact explanation of Aristotle’s logical categories became a philosophical vademecum, a road map to argumentation and thinking. It circulated widely in Greek and was translated into Arabic and Aramaic; it was then translated into Latin by Boethius and through this translation entered Christian theology and served as the bread and butter of philosophical argumentation well after the Scholastics, Humanism, and the Reformation. In other words, Rabelais but also Montaigne and Erasmus knew full well the place of laughter in this system of logic. For them, laughter was no mere matter of Scholastic nitpicking but instead an essential part of their humanistic training.

Because of the foundational role of Aristotelian-derived logic even beyond Scholasticism, the figure of *homo risibilis* was both impossible to dismiss and yet difficult to swallow. The reason for this was that risibility had—within Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and beyond—a necessary and yet thorny relationship to reason and language. When Erasmus questioned the use of risibility as a marker of humanity, he was indeed glossing Porphyry. Immediately after dismissing risibility, Erasmus went on to conclude that, if anything defined humanity’s difference from animals, surely it was logos:

Rursus periclitabimur, ne multa animantia affectent haberi pro hominibus. Constat enim in multis et simplicium agnitionem esse, et simplicium dispositionem et discursum, ut dialectici vocant syllogisticum, cum aliud ex alio colligunt. Adde his memoriam et reminiscentiam, quae singular in brutorum genere compertiuntur experimentis. [. . .] Porro risibile, quod ceu homini proprium tribuitur, videtur et

canibus et simiis commune. Sed nihil proprium accedit ad vim differentiae, quam τὸ λογικόν εἶναι, id est fandi compote; nullum enim animal proprie loquitur praeter hominem.

Again, we will run the risk that many brute animals will compete to be regarded as men, for it is clear that in many there is both a recognition of simple concepts and a putting together of simple concepts, as the dialecticians call it, a syllogistic discourse when they deduce one thing from another; add to these memory and recollection, each of which is found by experience in some type of brute animal. [. . .] Such is the description “able to laugh,” for what is attributed to Man as his *property* seems to be shared with dogs and monkeys. But nothing comes closer to the essence of the difference than τὸ λογικόν εἶναι, that is, capable of speech, for no animal truly speaks except man.²⁵

Indeed, why couldn't reason and language stand in as the fundamental human properties? Why was laughter ushered in to define the human in Porphyry's logical edifice? In the *Isagoge*, he specifies that humans are mortal, unlike God, and that they have reason, unlike animals.²⁶ But these are not “properties”; they are “differences,” qualities that emerge only by comparison and so set out the place of humans vis-à-vis other beings. As someone exposed to Hellenistic Christianity, a disciple of Plotinus inhabiting a religious-philosophical world that was already inching toward monotheism, Porphyry needed an example of a property to establish the important difference between God and human—something that belongs only and exclusively to a given species, a single positive quality that they share with no other kind of being. Mortality obviously cannot serve—all animals are mortal—but neither can logos, because God is and has logos first and foremost. Making logos a property would cause a collapse in Porphyry's epistemological structure. In other words, to give logos to humans as a property would be illogical and—in the language of the more persecutory later forms of Christianity—heretical. Something else must serve as an example of human property. So it was that, riffling through Aristotelian texts, Porphyry would have come across the comment on laughter in *On the Parts of Animals* (τὸ μόνον γελᾶν τῶν ζώων ἄνθρωπον, “among the animals, the only laughing one is the human”),²⁷ plucked it from its physiological context, and used it to plug a hole in his logical edifice—the gap left by the necessity for a human property uncommon to animals and God both. Laughter thus took its place in the edifice of Western logic in the category of property.

This initial moment of rehoming laughter from Aristotelian zoology to logical property is, even in Porphyry, already strange. Porphyry presents laughter in his section on property—namely, as the fourth and strongest kind of property, the kind that pertains to one species only, and all members of it, all the time:

Proprium vero quadrifariam dividunt. Nam et id quod soli alicui speciei accidit, etsi non omni (ut homini medicum esse vel geometrem), et quod omni accidit, etsi non soli (quemadmodum homini esse bipedem), et quod soli et omni et aliquando (ut homini in senectute canescere), quartum vero in quo concurrat et soli et omni et semper (quemadmodum homini esse risibile).

Property they divide in four ways: for it is that which happens to some one species alone, though not to every (individual of that species), as to a man to heal, or to geometrize: that also which happens to a whole species, though not to that alone, as to man to be a biped: that again, which happens to a species alone, and to every (individual of it), and at a certain time, as to every man to become grey in old age: in the fourth place, it is that in which it concurs (to happen) to one species alone, and to every (individual of it), and always, as risibility to a man.²⁸

It is striking how, as we move from separable to inseparable properties, and so to more and more powerful kinds of property, the bond of property to the species becomes more and more necessary, precise, and pervasive. Here, though, we run into another problem—a problem whose solution will involve the generation of the very concept of “risibility” as the potentiality for laughter. The problem is that the event of laughter is too fleeting, too unevenly manifested in humanity, to serve as an inherent property. Not all humans laugh, and even those who do, do not laugh all the time. Given that laughter must serve as a property (without which humanity wouldn’t exist as such), its accidental, fleeting, and unpredictable nature risks upsetting, once again, the logical edifice. Porphyry works through this problem in real time:

Nam, etsi non ridet, tamen risibile dicitur, non quod iam rideat sed quod aptus natus sit; hoc autem ei semper est naturale; et equo hinnibile[.] Haec autem proprie propria perhibent, quoniam etiam convertuntur; quicquid enim equus, et hinnibile, et quicquid hinnibile, equus.

For though he does not always laugh, yet he is said to be risible, not from his always laughing, but from being naturally adapted to laugh, and this is always inherent in him, in the same way as neighing in a horse. They say also that these are validly properties, because they reciprocate, since if any thing be a horse it is capable of neighing, and if any thing be capable of neighing it is a horse.²⁹

More plugging of ontological gaps ensues. This time it is potentiality (an Aristotelian concept) that serves as plug. By distinguishing between the human as that which actually laughs (*homo ridet/ridens*) and that which is capable of laughing (*homo risibilis*), Porphyry finds a version of laughter that is stable enough to work as property: potential laughter. Risibility, not laughter, finally stands as the strongest, species-specific human property. Porphyry also explains that a property of the fourth kind is one that exists in a convertible relationship to those who hold it: laughter is therefore the quality that wouldn’t exist without humanity, and without which humanity wouldn’t exist in turn.³⁰

Still, risibility solves the problem of the accidental nature of laughter, but only in a technical sense. As an ontological plug for the definition of the human, it can hold only so long. Porphyry concludes his paragraph on property by saying that laughter is to humans as neighing is to horses—an odd choice of words for someone who struggled to find humans a property they could share with neither

God nor beasts. Introducing laughter as a property is a necessary evil and a dangerous business. Even when managed into “risibility”—a quiet, steady potentiality that need not explode into a cackle—the human property of laughter remains charged with the power to send humanity back to the braying and neighing of those with no capacity for speech. Indeed, the beauty of Porphyry’s casting of laughter as the human proper is the way in which, in the process of preventing concepts and categories from exploding the logical edifice, he shows them in all of their incendiary power. It is this power that allows risibility to survive—as a dubious but stubborn property—what might otherwise have been only a dry exercise in logical taxonomy.

Risibility, lodged at the heart of the human, is a ticking time bomb, and we can now see why. For one, as something that is akin to animal noises—the neighing in horses—laughter risks throwing into question the key difference between animals and humans: the human having of language and reason. And yet, after Porphyry laughter cannot be decoupled from human reason.³¹ On the contrary: because humanity is defined both as having language and as being risible, the two qualities are from here on out yoked together into a paradox—to have language and to laugh is to be human, even though laughter seems, if anything, like a loss of language and a return to animality. The second problem is the problem of potentiality: if risibility, as unactualized laughter, is a relatively stable, pervasive property, this still leaves open the question of what, exactly, humans who actualize their risibility turn into. Aristotelian potentiality moves toward actuality, toward becoming. Actual laughter might make humans *even more* human (and if so, doesn’t that mean risibility alone is an incomplete form of humanity?) or, alternatively, less human than before (and if so, risibility amounts to a quiet inhumanity waiting to blossom at the heart of the human). Either way, as Erasmus had it, by functioning as the proper of humankind, laughter inexorably points us—not despite but exactly because of Porphyry’s logical backbends—toward a “something other.” Humanity becomes that which is always potentially about to lose—in the act of laughing—its distinguishing trait within the animal kingdom: *logos*.³²

LOGOS UNDONE

We have seen how laughter enters the set of descriptive statements about the human in Porphyry’s influential ordering of Aristotle into logical categories. For Porphyry, *logos* was an important commonality between humans and God and an all-important difference between humans and animals—and laughter haunts this difference in all the ways that we have seen. But in the *Isagoge*, Porphyry, just like the tradition of logics that stems from him, does not engage with the definition of the human as a political animal. This is not so surprising: the capacity for political organization, for making a state, was not an overriding concern for the kind of metaphysical hierarchies on which Porphyry built his logic, and even less

so for the Scholastic theologians who came after him, for whom earthly kingdoms and governments were, ontologically speaking, mere passing shadows. But in the reparsing of Aristotle in the sixteenth century, the *Politics*—and the definition of humans contained therein—became crucial once again.

This is a complex issue that involves, among other things, the theological and juridical apparatus mobilized to justify and ratify the expropriation of colonized territories and the enslavement of Indigenous populations in the so-called New World. Sylvia Wynter remarks on how, as part of this process, distinctions were made between those more and those less endowed with reason and political capability by nature.³³ For Wynter, there are two significant moments in this history of the formation of a Spanish legal-theological apparatus for coloniality and enslavement. The first is the infamous *Requerimiento*, a locus classicus for postcolonial literature and one of the driving symbols of the collapse of Eurocentric logos in the colonial encounter.³⁴ The second is the theological-juridical use of Aristotle made, after the theologian John Mair, to argue that Indigenous populations were always already, by nature, less than capable of reason and politics and so, also by nature, enslaved to their masters, the conquistadores. Both concern a reconfiguration of logos and politics for the purposes of colonial expropriation.

First, let's consider the *Requerimiento* (literally "Requisition"), a 1510 document ratified at the Council of Castille that was to be read aloud by Spanish officials to Indigenous populations before proceeding to plunder them. Its contents amount to an argument about the global authority of the Catholic Church and the rightful ownership of colonized lands (which were gifted by Saint Peter himself to the Spanish Crown).³⁵ But as many—including Wynter—have argued, the truth of the *Requerimiento* lies not in its verbal content but in the kind of profound linguistic alienation it embodied and the violence that was sanctioned by this alienation. The political theorist Jon Beasley-Murray evokes the long tradition of critical commentaries on the *Requerimiento* when he writes:

The indigenous were seldom if ever given any real opportunity to consent. Most obviously, the *Requerimiento* was written in Spanish, a language that they did not speak. How would they agree to what they could not comprehend? Even where there was some attempt at translation, "the interpreters themselves did not understand what the document said." Moreover, as historian Lewis Hanke notes, the circumstances in which it was spoken "might tax the reader's patience and credulity, for the Requirement was read to trees and empty huts when no Indians were to be found. Captains muttered its theological phrases into their beards on the edge of sleeping Indian settlements." Sometimes the invaders read the document only after they had already made prisoners of the natives. At best the exercise devolved into a dialogue of the dumb, as when the Zuni Indians in what is now New Mexico responded to the reading with a ritual of their own, laying down "a barrier of sacred cornmeal" to prevent the Spaniards from entering the town. No wonder historian Henry Kamen calls "the final result . . . little more than grotesque"; he reports that even the document's author "realized it was farcical."³⁶

As a social contract and as linguistic communication, the *Requerimiento* was nonsensical. To this day it is known precisely because even at the time it was acknowledged to be purely performative and ritualistic for the Spanish and unintelligible to the Indigenous populations on whose ears it fell. Reports of the Cenú tribe's response to the document highlight the perceived lack of logic of the Spanish Crown's intimations (which they dismissed as "mad and drunken") and also the sheer unintelligibility of the document as spoken language: in Wynter's words, "speech that was meaningless" and European logos spectacularly undone.³⁷

We can put this more strongly still: as a joining, in fact, of the Aristotelian human faculties of logos and government, the *Requerimiento* forces the open question of what, exactly, is the philosophical connection between logos, its failure, and land expropriation. The structure of this failure of logos is worth exploring in more depth here.³⁸ As Wynter notes, the *Requerimiento*'s evident failure and the colonizers' awareness of its uselessness prompted a shift in the Spanish legitimation apparatus.³⁹ This shift consisted of a move away from arguments about God-given rights to land and the need to convert "savages." The new juridico-theological apparatus instead employed an argument concerning the Indigenous peoples' lack of natural reason, which allowed them to be declared constitutively unable to govern themselves. This was done by way of Aristotle once again, specifically via the interpretation of the *Politics* by the sixteenth-century theologian John Mair⁴⁰ and the adaptation by the Iberian Scholastic philosophers of Aristotle's distinction between humans meant for slavery and those meant to be free. For the historian and political scientist Anthony Pagden, whom Wynter draws from in this part of her argument, this distinction has to do with the ability to possess and retain reason:

Aristotle's natural slave is clearly a man (*Pol.* 1254 b 16, 1259 b 27–8), but he is a man whose intellect has, for some reason, failed to achieve proper mastery over his passions. Aristotle denies such creatures the power to deliberate but he does allow them some share in the faculty of reason. This, however, is only 'enough to apprehend but not to possess true reason' (*Pol.* 1254 b 20ff.). It was with this distinction in mind that the Spanish jurist Juan de Matienzo informed the readers of his *Gobierno del Perú* that the Indians were ["participants in reason so as to sense it, but not to possess or follow it."]⁴¹

The emphasis here on the possession of (rather than the free partaking in) reason is striking, particularly because this theological use of Aristotle was aimed at voiding Indigenous peoples' right to the land where they lived and reclaiming it as the property of the Spanish Crown (by way of its emissaries, the conquistadores). That is, the owning of logos, its quality of being an inalienable property, becomes connected to the right to own and govern the land upon which one lives, as well as one's own person. Belonging and possession are important to Aristotle's political definition of free versus enslaved men: "The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master,

but wholly belongs to him. Hence we see what is the nature and office of a slave; he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be another's man who, being a human being, is also a possession. And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor."⁴² Someone who isn't by nature their own person, and who does not own reason, therefore cannot own and govern property; specifically, Pagden adds, drawing on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is phronesis—the ability to exert judgment, which is essential to political life—that the enslaved person constitutively lacks. As we saw in chapter 1, phronesis is also important to Aristotle's physiological account of laughter and the way it interacts with the phrenes, the diaphragm—something to which we will return shortly. But for now, I want to point out the importance of the emergent notion of property in the definition of the free man—and thus in the construction of hierarchies between the human and the less-than-human, or, to paraphrase Pagden, the bestial end of the human scale.⁴³ Laughter too was configured as a property, a specific human property—though it was a logical property, a means of establishing identity, not a possession intended as an economic asset and “instrument of action, separable from the possessor.” Indeed, the two Greek words used for *logical property* and *possession* are distinct in etymology and meaning. I wonder, however, if within a Latin reception of Aristotle, both terms converged under the aegis of the “proper”—creating, within the theological tradition that buttressed colonial expropriation, a powerful blur between the ontology of natural human properties and the possessions that mark out the rational, fully realized free man.⁴⁴

Wynter, for instance, comments on the reparsing of the *Politics* in terms of congenital lack of reason, hinting at a link between diagnosed lack of reason and systematic expropriation: “For the settlers—as well as for their humanist royal historian and chaplain, Ginés de Sepúlveda, who defended their claims (against the opposition of the Dominican missionaries and, centrally so, of Las Casas, who sought to put an end to the encomienda labor system)—the vast difference that existed in religion and culture between the Europeans and the Indigenous peoples was clear evidence of the latter's lack of an ostensibly supracultural natural reason.” Wynter explains that the “natural slavery” argument enacted a racial hierarchy based on God-ordained endowment of “natural reason” (logos).⁴⁵ Race is here constructed as the difference between those who have reason and those who do not and also between those who own the land and those forced to work it on others' behalf. These forms of “having”—of reason, of land, of one's self—blur together. Once logos is understood as a possession, it can be lost and stolen, and once material possessions are understood as an essential property of the fully human, wealth and its lack become a means of making hierarchies between degrees of humanity. Somebody without land is understood to be unreasonable, and linguistic malfunction can become the basis for sanctioned theft. Lost properties of logos and land—this is indeed what was being performed by the *Requerimiento*: the

repeated, naturalized performance of the natives' lack of logos as the immediate justification for plunder.⁴⁶

Such a performative, deliberate conjuring of the failure of logos is, of course, dangerous. The collapse of sense that allows for the assumption of an irrational nature in another carries the assumed-rational speaking subject down with it. More simply put, the performances of the *Requerimiento* unmade linguistic sense for those who spoke it—or performed it—as well as for those who heard it, or failed to hear it.⁴⁷ It was written not in Spanish but in Latin, the bureaucratic-theological script proper to clergy and lawyers, and it was not meant to be spoken out loud by the military officials to whom, most likely, the task of sounding out the *Requerimiento* fell. In order to alienate logos from Indigenous people, the *Requerimiento* had to alienate it from the conquistadores too. The Cenú who described the recited *Requerimiento* as “mad and drunken” were expressing not simply their own subaltern relationship to it but the sonic and political truth of the document as it briefly held colonized and colonizer in a moment of linguistic exception. The two groups know each other most truly and most frightfully in their shared loss of the ability to parse and understand. Racialization emerges in the response to such a moment, though. The colonizer finds the loss of logos and so of reasonable relationship with the Indigenous unbearable—worthy of violent redress; the colonized, on the other hand, is assumed to be indifferent to the loss of logos, precisely because they never had it in the first place.⁴⁸

What, then, of the importance of laughter as human property? More specifically, how does laughter—which, as we saw, was already functioning as an ontological plug in Porphyry's *Isagoge*—register in this strange, emergent notion of property as both quality and material possession? In 1578, twenty years after his return to his French homeland, the Huguenot explorer Jean de Léry wrote an account of his travels to Brazil as a Calvinist minister.⁴⁹ By that time the French had already ceded control over Brazil to the Portuguese. Perhaps as a result, Léry's account is often noted to display a nonproprietary and protoethnographic attitude toward, respect for, and interest in the Tupinambas, an Indigenous population. Laughter dots his account at key moments, most notably in the following anecdote from the chapter titled “What One May Call Laws and Civil Order among the Savages [. . .]”:

The interpreter had warned me that they wanted above all to know my name; but if I had said to them Pierre, Guillaume, or Jean, they would have been able neither to retain it nor to pronounce it (in fact, instead of saying “Jean,” they would say “Nian”). So I had to accommodate by naming something that was known to them. Since by a lucky chance my surname, “Léry,” means “oyster” in their language, I told them that my name was “*Léry-oussou*,” that is, a big oyster. This pleased them greatly; with their “Teh!” of admiration, they began to laugh, and said, “That is a fine name; we have not yet seen any *Mair* (that is, a Frenchman) of that name.” And indeed, I can say with assurance that never did Circe metamorphose a man into such a fine oyster,

nor into one who could converse so well with Ulysses, as since then I have been able to do with our savages.⁵⁰

Daniel Ménager, writing about Renaissance laughter, cites this passage to illustrate how laughter became, in the colonial era, a way of recognizing the Other as human.⁵¹ Be that as it may, the particular means of such a recognition are worthy of closer scrutiny. For one thing, to say that Léry simply recognizes the Tupinambas' humanity (and vice versa) thanks to their risibility would be to miss the complex losses and gains of logos and human form that pave the way for the Tupinambas' chuckle at the end. The terms *human* and *man* do not appear in this passage, but by now we know that Léry is using various humanist signifiers for humanity: logos, laughter, and the capability for species fluctuation. After all, the very title of the chapter ("What One May Call Laws and Civil Order among the Savages [. . .]") clues us into the fact that Léry is here sizing up the validity of the Tupinambas' human status as political animals. The passage is mostly about the negotiation of the capacity for language (including, in this case, the giving/having of proper names), unique to humans and a long-standing topic of debate among Scholastic philosophers, as Léry, who lived through the Reformation as a man of the cloth, would likely have known. Léry leans into a world of phonetic strangeness—he undoes French toward the tongue of the Tupinamba, and the Tupinamba accept the resulting hybrid tongue as their own. The slippage he and his interlocutors perform from "Jean Léry" to "(Nian) Léry-oussou" and the way it connects to the negotiation of their relationship is joyful and haunting. It is easy to imagine why, when Claude Lévi-Strauss set out for his first fieldwork trip to the Amazon, he brought a copy of Léry's travelogue as a vademecum.⁵² But the power of this linguistic slippage is such that it produces not just hybrid tongues but hybrid species—a saltwater human, a colonial, male version of the siren, stuck between two tongues and two elements. Léry's oyster-human recalls another marker of the human: the risk/potentiality of morphing (remember Montaigne's mouthless mutants) into "something other." We found this, tucked away, in Porphyry's vision of laughter as neighing and see it here at work as the result of logos undone. It is this chain of hybrids—between the French language and the Tupinambas' language, between human and oyster—that laughter snaps into place: hardly a determined, positive version of the human, but a creature so unsure of its own defining properties that its only name may be the peal of laughter.⁵³

I want to be careful here not to attribute to Léry some benevolent humanist mastery over the colonial subjects; laughter, instead, makes for a zone of genuine instability in which we can bear witness to the loss of speech and possessions. It is this loss—ultimately—that creates a temporary, dangerous commonality of species. We can see the danger and instability leading to the oyster-naming scene in the paragraph directly before it:

When we arrived there, I immediately found myself surrounded by savages, who were asking me "*Marapé-derere, marapé derere?*" meaning "What is your name,

What is your name?” (which at that time I understood no better than High German). One of them took my hat, which he put on his head; another my sword and my belt, which he put around his naked body; yet another my tunic, which he donned. Deafening me with their yells, they ran through the village with my clothing. Not only did I think that I had lost everything, but I didn't know what would become of me.⁵⁴

Loss of sense, of private property, of self, of language: the premise here is that Léry experiences a radical alienation from his own understanding of his human dignity before performing his linguistic acrobatics as Léry-oussou.

Léry extends this power to the Tupinamba, and at his own expense, when he describes a fishing expedition during which the Tupinamba laugh at his well-meaning but condescending attempt to rescue them from drowning. In so doing, they too shape-shift into marine creatures:

We found them all swimming and laughing on the water; one of them said to us, “And where are you going in such haste, you Mairs?” (For so they call the French.) “We are coming,” we said, “to save you and to pull you from the water.” “Indeed,” he said, “we are very grateful to you; but do you think that just because we fell in the sea we are in danger of drowning?” [. . .] Thereupon the others, who were, indeed, all swimming as easily as fishes, having been alerted by their companion to the cause of our swift approach, made sport of us, and began to laugh so hard that we could hear them puffing and snorting on the water like a school of porpoises.⁵⁵

Laughter, as an enduring human proper, takes on a particular power within this humanist and colonial ecology: it signals the journey toward “something other,” though not necessarily something less than a human, but rather an animality folded into the figure of the human. In this context, laughter sounds a specific hybridity of human and marine life—Léry's metamorphosis into an oyster, as well as the Tupinamba swimmers' change into porpoises. This hybrid has a long political history as the unsettled form of the human in the colonial realm: a creature whose water-boundedness makes it unquantifiable in settler terms, where *terra firma* is the key conception of territory and stable property. Laughter, once again, signals a human in a state of flux, uneasily attached to its supposed distinguishing traits, knowable only in the moment when it noisily squirms away from logos, human form, and even the land on which it walks.⁵⁶

What is perhaps most interesting about the sixteenth-century notion of laughter writ large—including its ties with emergent racialized hierarchies of the human—is that the event of laughter, an event that affects body and mind equally, has a political and philosophical dignity as an event, rather than as the mere sign or effect of something else. Simply by laughing, and being heard to laugh, people can enact the explosive contradictions within the philosophical and political principle of the human. But this is not to say that the act of laughing is immune from hierarchies of power. Notably, though it signals a journey toward the inner limit of the

human, not all laughers are afforded a return ticket. Some, like Léry, can graciously turn themselves into a speaking oyster for the delight of the Tupinamba and retain a capacity for logos that makes them fit to converse, in Léry's own words, with Ulysses himself. Others, like the swimmers who laugh like porpoises, may never have had or cannot regain a stable human appearance. If laughter signals a giving away of human form and human logos—and is capable of signaling this across ranks and hierarchies—the consequences of actualizing risibility are not the same for all humans at all. In other words, the sovereign reasonable subject can laugh as a way of, paradoxically, displaying the fact that they can give their logos away without relinquishing ownership of it. As a means, therefore, of asserting a kind of absolute control of one's rational faculties by suspending them, laughter is connected to precisely that which it negates. Pico della Mirandola's human can turn himself into an animal at will because God has granted him special powers; his unstable form is a mark of his might. On the other hand, subaltern groups laugh because their ownership of logos is deemed questionable to begin with, and so their laughter is coded as a physiological defect, a nervous tic signifying their uneven access to their own rational faculties. The distinction, therefore, between a laughter with a discernible reason and one that seems merely a nervous tic is actually a biopolitical distinction between the ways in which humans can be said to "have" language and reason at all.⁵⁷ The sovereign human laughs because he has language—even when he loses it; the subaltern laughs because she never really had language.⁵⁸ In the moment of its deployment, laughter summons both of these figures and blurs them, making their sorting both necessary and, ultimately, never quite possible.

OWNING THE LOSS OF LOGOS

Let's now zoom out to the longer history of laughter for a moment. Laughter's relationship to the human faculty of reason—as an audibly lost property—will continue to produce philosophical and political confusion long after the sixteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, concerns with laughter as a shaky definition of humans will give way to concerns about the cause and reason—the quantifiable logos—behind laughter, and thinkers will turn their attention to producing theories of wit and comedy. It will become harder and harder to entertain laughter as an event that troubles reason, logos, and signification while also, strangely, upholding it. The pure event of laughter—laughter without reason—will be reduced to physiology and medicalized laughter and relegated, for a long time, outside the purview of philosophy.

Yet flickers of the complex risible animal we have discussed in this chapter are still discernible to the attentive reader. One such flicker can be found in the writing of the Neapolitan philosopher and rogue Enlightenment thinker Giambattista Vico. Vico treats the subject of laughter with caustic insight in his pamphlet *Vici Vindiciae* ("Vindications of Vico"), published in 1727. The *Vindiciae* is a mostly

unloved part of his production, and for good reason: it amounts to a rather Scholastic, Latin-language, and mean-spirited rebuttal of a dismissive review of the first edition of his *The New Science*, which came out in 1725. Laughter enters the text almost by accident, as Vico, who evidently feels mocked and slandered by his reviewer, reflects on the relationship between ingenuity, truth, animality, and laughter. At first, Vico's reprimand of his reviewers seems to use laughter precisely as a way of dehumanizing another: he likens laughing humans to animals, with a poverty of reason displayed through unseemly, animalistic behavior. But as the pamphlet draws on, the considerations on laughter lose the tone of invective and take on the tone and depth of an original philosophical reflection. Laughter, Vico writes, results from the uneven move from one thought to another—a lapse in *logos*, a flailing of the mind caught in between. He describes the eruption of laughter with a turn of phrase heavily reminiscent of Aristotle's diagnosis of laughter as a case of quivering phrenes (a passage to which I will return momentarily): "Therefore, when the brain fibers, focused on an appropriate and suitable object, are disturbed by an unexpected one, they become disordered. Being agitated, they transmit their restless motion to all branches of the nervous system. This shakes the whole body and removes man from his normal state."⁵⁹ Note, though, how for all his Aristotelian flair, Vico is already discussing laughter's essential relationship to thought and reason. What he describes here is the phenomenon of a mind tripping over itself as it thinks. The in-between, cracked space between two thoughts is where—for Vico—laughter resides.

Without a doubt, Vico would have been schooled in Aristotelian logic and so have studied Porphyry's *Isagoge* and all of its contradictory descriptions of the human, including Porphyry's tendentious cribbing of Aristotle's remark about the human ability to laugh. One might also deduce from Vico's writing that he read Aristotle's *On the Parts of Animals* and wrestled with some of the obscure passages there that were, naturally, smoothed over in the adaptation of Aristotle into Scholastic logic. Compare Vico's contrast of disordered fibers and man's "normal state" above with Aristotle's discussion of laughter in the human diaphragm, which we already encountered in chapter 1 but is worth beholding again:

Now that the midriff, which is a kind of outgrowth from the sides of the thorax, acts as a screen to prevent heat mounting up from below, is shown by what happens, should it, owing to its proximity to the stomach, attract thence the hot and residual fluid. For when this occurs there ensues forthwith a marked disturbance of intellect and sensation. It is indeed because of this that the midriff is called Phrenes, as though it had some share in the process of thinking (Phronein). In reality, however, it has no part whatsoever itself in the matter, but, lying in close proximity to organs that have, it brings about the manifest changes of intelligence in question by acting upon them. [. . .] That heating of [the phrenes] affects sensation rapidly and in a notable manner is shown by the phenomena of laughing. For when men are tickled they are quickly set a-laughing, because the motion quickly reaches this part, and heating it

though but slightly nevertheless manifestly so disturbs the mental action as to occasion movements that are independent of the will. That man alone is affected by tickling is due firstly to the delicacy of his skin, and secondly to his being the only animal that laughs.⁶⁰

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the boundary of the phrenes is important precisely because Aristotle is invested in dismissing the phrenes' direct involvement in phronesis—though they may touch, he insists that they are separate and unrelated. Yet it is not phronesis, in this passage, that is hailed as specific to humans, but rather laughter, the phrenes/diaphragm's disturbance of phronesis. Pagden's gloss of the Iberian theology of slavery allows us to consider the partitioning of phrenes and phronesis in its full biopolitical fruition. To put it crudely, the body natural mapped by Aristotle in *On the Parts of Animals* begins to be mapped on to a colonial body politic, in which the organs of bare life—the Indigenous and the enslaved—serve the upper organs of thought, their masters. But—and here I am adding a complication to Pagden's explication—it is important to remember that between these two tiers of organs and two tiers of being lies a membrane, the phrenes, that makes itself felt by quivering in laughter and in so doing defines humanity as such. Likewise, the Indigenous people, being human and so capable of partaking of phronesis, have the covert power to upset it, to upset their masters' apparent ownership of judgment. The name of this upset is laughter, the quivering of the boundary between political life and bare life. As a property, laughter grounds the human species proper not so much in phronesis but in the moment of its loss.

The implications for colonial biopolitics do not form part of Vico's commentary. Yet, though he retains and highlights this complex negative connection of laughter to thought, his take on laughter and his interpretation of Aristotle take flight when he seizes this phrenetic, temporary loss of reason as the properly human. In so doing, he creates a new understanding of risibility as a human proper while gently undoing the spell of species superiority: "Animals are deprived of laughter because they have one sense only, which enables them to pay attention to but one object at a time. Hence, any one object is continuously expelled and deleted by the subsequent one. It is thus perfectly obvious that since animals have been denied by nature the ability to laugh, they are also deprived of all reason."⁶¹ Vico here wrestles with the contradiction—as old as Porphyry's commentary on Aristotle—between the human faculty for reason and laughter as a human property. But instead of trying to smooth away the tensions between the accreted philosophical scraps on laughter, he congeals them into a tight paradox concerning the switch from animal to human. In tackling the issue of what, exactly, laughter does to reason, he is precise: laughter upsets reason, shakes it, makes it quiver, but—and this is Vico's key contribution—it is precisely this perilous, notable quivering that signals reason's presence in the first place.

Laughter can now serve to outline an evenhanded, negatively tinged understanding of the human species. Other animals have, in fact, far greater powers of

concentration than most humans—but for that reason they cannot think several things at once, for better and worse. For better, because they cannot fall in the space between two thoughts; for worse, because the ability to hold several thoughts at once is, for Vico, the definition of logos and reason and so of the human. And so this capacity for disturbed thought finally defines humanity as the species that not only has reason but manifestly *loses* it. Next in the *Vici Vindiciae* comes the passage I conjured in the introduction, which we can now behold in its full implications: “At this point, I must mention that those who laugh at a serious thing are secretly impelled to do so, even if they do not realize it. Precisely because laughter is a human prerogative, they feel that by laughing they are experiencing that they are men. But laughter comes from our feeble human nature, which ‘deceives us by the semblance of right.’ And, in fact, from this interpretation of laughter, laughing men [*ridiculi*] are halfway between austere, serious men and the animals.”⁶² Here, then, our biopolitical paradox returns once more to define the boundary between human and animal: laughter is the loss of thought specific to the only species that has thought. It is so species specific that humans unwittingly perform their own humanity by manifestly losing that which makes them human, without, however, lapsing into animality. Laughter becomes an inbuilt, human-specific loss of human form, a floundering of thought that both opens and forecloses the path to another species.

The story told here is selective and concentrated: another story of laughter’s linkage to the human could have been narrated through more sources, different sources. The general content, however, would not have fundamentally altered—namely, that the human envoiced by laughter is a shape-shifting creature pinned into its species boundaries by a kind of anamorphic thought. The idea is that reason and language—those all-important differences between humans and animals—are held by humans primarily through their audible loss. Where does this leave us? What, if anything, should be carried forward into the more recent history narrated in the second part of the book, with its laughing phonographs, ghostly taped audiences, racialized vocal labor, and dangerously infectious songs? The brief answer is that laughter—constructed through discourse, constructive of humanity through that same discourse—has the power to upset the boundaries of the human and the property relations that buttress those boundaries. Owning logos, owning oneself, and being entitled to own others are all versions of this grounding of human distinction in property relations. And laughter, as a property that implies the potential loss of logos, equips these property relations with the power to implode. The history of risibility is the history of the fabrication of a self-destruct button at the heart of the ideology of the human, and the history of those who, if for a mere moment, beheld this fabrication with us.

Laughter as (Sound) Reproduction

Entrance into life is accompanied by laughter. [. . .] Here we observe the command to laugh, or laughter under compulsion.

—VLADIMIR PROPP

So Alexa decided to laugh randomly while I was in the kitchen. [. . .] I thought a kid was laughing behind me.

—TWITTER USER @CAPTHANDLEBAR

They grow the fruit but eat the rind.
Hmm, mm-hm! I laugh, ha ha ha ha ha . . .

—MAYA ANGELOU

In April 2021, the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* featured a research report titled “Laughs and Jokes in Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Video-Recorded Doctor-Couple Visits.”¹ The authors, five scholars from the University of Milan’s Health Science Department and University Hospital (all women), investigate, laboriously and methodically, the answer to the question implicit in its title: “Do laughter and jokes assist contemporary reproductive technology?” Mining a sample of seventy-five video-recorded (and transcribed) visits, the researchers identified all the instances of laughter in this database, reviewed each instance, and categorized their findings in various ways—according to the doctor-patient relationship, the respective genders of doctor and patient, the topic of conversation, and the type of jokes (if any) prompting the laughter. The results of this effort were—perhaps unsurprisingly—scientifically inconclusive:

Results: On average, each visit contained 17.1 utterances of laughs and jokes. Patients contributed for 64.7% of utterances recorded. Doctor (40.6%) and women (40%) introduced the majority of laughs and jokes. Visits with female physicians had

significantly more laughs and jokes than visits with male doctors; no differences were found considering physicians' age and years of experience, cause of infertility, and prognosis. Laughs and jokes were mainly recorded during history taking and information giving. Four core themes were identified, regarding the topic of laughs and jokes: health status, infertility treatment, organizational aspects, and doctor-patient interaction.

Conclusion: Laughs and jokes are common in doctor-couple ART visits and are frequently used during the dialogue, covering a wide range of topics. Results seem to show that laughs and jokes are related to doctor's personal characteristics (like gender), while are not associated with infertility aspects. Given the complexity of this communicative category, further studies are needed to explore the functions and the effects of laugh and jokes.²

After all the transcriptive and analytic labor carried out by the authors, we land on conclusions we might have reached without the research: there is a relatively high presence of laughter in doctor-patient interactions, an overall unpredictability of its causes and uses, and an unsubstantial relationship to reproductive challenges. Gender is cited as a potentially important variable ("Visits with female physicians had significantly more laughs"), but the report never discusses this in anything more than passing detail: a striking decision in an article that deals, after all, with the challenges of heteronormative reproduction. There is something haunting about this litany of statistically backed "we don't know"s. It is as if, by the sheer force of its existence and by dint of what it leaves unsaid, the article managed to evoke a spectral kinship between laughter, reproduction, and the means (technical and technological) by which reproduction is carried out.

What would happen if we genuinely heeded this unwitting, silent act of conjuring? We might, for instance, begin by acknowledging that much of the article's rhetorical work is done by the particular genre in which it abides: sociological studies of medical patient care.³ This kind of work investigates the uses of emotion and communication in optimizing patient care and is perhaps most commonly associated with procedures that, as is the case with ART therapy, are elective, expensive, and laden with biopolitical and bioethical quandaries.⁴ In this literature, emotion and its expressions are treated, for better or worse, as statistically manageable resources aimed at optimizing a service. So, while ostensibly a statistical study of where and when laughter and jokes are made in ART visits, the essay is covertly monitoring a resource (laughter) for optimal use in a particular setting (ART visits/therapy). But even with concessions made to the role of literary genre, there is something to be said for this study's particular investment in laughter, of all things. Laughter is not only an initial point of focus in the article but one that is subtly maintained and sustained throughout. Despite the evident emotional complexities that come with ART treatment, the researchers didn't opt to study laughter alongside a broader set of phenomena like sighing and weeping

(which might also be common in such visits). Laughter, in other words, here has a methodological weight beyond its association with jokes, since laughs unconnected to recognizable comic prompts are counted as part of the dataset, a decision that departs from previous research in patient care. The authors even come within touching distance of the admission that laughter is only tenuously linked to humor: “However, laughs and jokes can occur together or be produced independently [. . .] and both are stereotypically connected with amusement even if they both can have different underlying interactional meanings [. . .]. Therefore, the present study aims at investigating laughs and jokes as a broader communicative category, whose incidence in clinical video-recorded visits is still relatively underdetermined, especially in ART visits.”⁵

The fact that laughter comes close to having a significance of its own in this study is also interesting because this pivot toward laughter as a “broader communicative category” involves a counterintuitive use of data-harvesting software. Instances of laughter are found in the dataset through the Roter interaction analysis system (RIAS)—a system designed to categorize and file the verbal content of doctor-patient interactions according to topic, and so unlikely to be a reliable tool for flagging nonverbal events such as laughter. Indeed, the authors indicate that they went through the dataset by using several heuristic codes—some of them, such as “biomedical information” and “concern,” unrelated to jokes and humor and subtly aimed at plucking out laughter as an event discrete from humor.⁶ The quiet, unchecked stubbornness in singling out laughter—quite aside from humor—as a site of investigation for ART patient care can serve as our starting point here. Why should laughter be intuited to help with or even be related to reproduction?

There exists, in the Western literary tradition, a red thread of associations between the act of laughter and biological reproduction. In his *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin mentions a tradition of laughter revolving around reproductive processes, one that he finds preserved in the series of seventeenth-century anonymous satires known as *Les caquets de l'accouchée* (The cackles of the confined woman).⁷ The *Caquets* were first published as individual pamphlets between 1622 and 1623 and then collected, in 1623, in the single volume known as *Le recueil des caquets des l'accouchée*.⁸ That volume, which was republished in the nineteenth century and is the form in which most scholars approach the *Caquets* today, is a *Decameron*-style medieval novel in which stories, gossip, and jokes are traded—over six “journées”—by noblewomen gathered around the bed of the titular *accouchée*, an aristocratic peer recovering from labor and birth. The novel, which was authored by a man and written in the first person, is framed as the tale of a nobleman seeking to recover his vim (moral and physical) after a long illness; his doctor advises him to sneak into the rooms of an *accouchée* and secretly bear witness to the conversation and *caquets* (cackles) of the women there. The stories featured in the novel are recounted from the point of view and hearing of the nobleman, who hides behind the bedroom curtains of his cousin—the title figure, who is

willing to let her relative hide and listen in. Similarly to the study on ART, the *Caquets* involve a monitoring of laughter in a typically private setting and the use of laughter at a delicate psychophysical moment having to do with reproduction (the ART study deals with conception, the *Caquets* with the days following birth). Cackles here have a dual creative purpose: to restore the strength of the narrator and to revitalize the health (and so the ability to bear children again) of the woman who has just given birth. As Domna C. Stanton notes in her formidable analysis of the *Caquets*, the very word *caquet* is a feminizing and potentially misogynistic term for laughter, an onomatopoeia of the clucking of the egg-laying hen, and the gossip and laughter of women is here presented as something connected to the (sometimes treacherous) recovery after birth but also to the knowledge of the reproductive apparatus necessary to assist a woman in labor.⁹ Indeed, for Stanton there is even a sense in which the author and narrator's writing of the novel itself is a parallel creative effort to the gestation and birth that had happened shortly before the novel begins—thus marking a nascent division and link between feminine and masculine forms of creativity.¹⁰ Even more important, as in the ART study, the topic here is not comedy but the physical, audible act of laughter and what it can do for delicate moments of the reproductive process—for potential or actual crises of reproduction. The women in the *Caquets* don't just trade jokes, gossip, and even sharp political commentary but really *laugh*—the novel occasionally transcribes their laughs as “ha, ha, ha,” “hé,” and “ho, ho, ho,” (the increasing frequency of such transcriptions of laughter being, as Manfred Pfister discusses, an emerging feature of early modern literature).¹¹ The laughter is foregrounded through these transcriptions and also discursively rendered as an overwhelming sound filling the room and compelling reproductive organs into action: “Each of these bourgeois women . . . began to laugh with such pluck that it sounded as if female donkeys were in a field braying to be covered by males. And I who speak, though hidden in the alcove, I had to loosen my codpiece, for fear of pissing in my breeches.”¹² As Stanton notes, not only is the laughter here offered as a (misogynistic) sign of feminine openness and fertility, but there is something about it that feminizes the male listener: the loosened codpiece, leaking sexual organs, and passive, listening stance all being signifiers of a state of extreme physical receptiveness that is not only desirable but—in this case—even medically prescribed.

Another towering literary theorist, Vladimir Propp, makes the case that laughter's role as an aid to reproduction is traceable to at least the Old Testament. Indeed, laughter runs all the way through Genesis 17–21 leading up to the birth of Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's first and only child. The biblical passage in question, though only summarily surveyed by Propp, deserves to be reviewed in detail. Here too we have a crisis of reproduction: both Abraham and Sarah are over ninety years old and have long ago given up trying to have children. Their previous attempt, many years prior, involved a surrogate, an enslaved woman, Hagar, to whom we will return later. Sarah and Abraham's barrenness is not only

personal but also political, for it signifies Abraham's failure to fulfill his duty as patriarch of the Jewish people. The bind between laughter and reproduction is evident in the process by which God makes Sarah *and* Abraham pregnant. Each of the two receives God's announcement of Isaac's birth separately and responds with laughter:

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall *a child* be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? . . .

Now Abraham and Sarah *were* old *and* well stricken in age; *and* it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?¹³

Note how laughter is at first purely a way of vocally flagging a crisis of reproduction: the couple's biological inability to bear children in their old age, an obstacle even in the face of divine mandate and intervention. But then, once God fulfills his promise and makes Sarah pregnant with Isaac—whose name is Hebrew for “I laugh”—the meaning of laughter shifts before our eyes:

And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him.

And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, *so that* all that hear will laugh with me.¹⁴

Sarah goes from laughing in doubt at her reproductive power to equating her laughter with fertility and even identifying the product of her gestation as laughter. Isaac's future role as patriarch is contained in the laughter that gives him his name. Laughter goes from being the sound of reproductive recalcitrance to a symbol of fertility so capacious as to hold both successful individual conception and the flourishing of an entire ethnic group within its shell.

From these three seemingly discrete reproductive scenes—patients laughing in twenty-first-century assisted reproduction visits, women cackling while gathered in and around a seventeenth-century birthing bed, and an elderly couple laughing at conceiving by divine intervention in the Old Testament—we can begin mapping the pathways by which laughter and reproduction have become interconnected. A first path is the use of laughter as an aid to bringing forth organic life. Propp, in his 1938 work “Ritual Laughter in Folklore,” offers a study of precisely this connection between laughter and life in the animal and vegetal world.¹⁵ The essay, which revolves around the Russian folktale of Nesmejána, a princess promised as a bride to any man capable of making her laugh, is a prototype for later anthropological studies of ritual laughter. Laughter, Propp argues, has to do with the economic management of organic resources like land, livestock, and also laboring bodies and women's reproductive abilities. He identifies laughter's role as accompanying the liminal zones of death and—more important—birth when he writes, “If all laughter ceases and is forbidden upon entrance into the kingdom of death, then

entrance into life is accompanied by laughter. Moreover, if there we saw the interdiction of laughter, here we observe the command to laugh, or laughter under compulsion. The thought goes still further: laughter is endowed not only with the power to accompany life but also with the power to call it forth.”¹⁶

We might refer to this power of laughter to call forth life its positive aspect, where *positive* is intended not colloquially as a moral assessment (i.e., “good”) but in a stricter philosophical sense: the ability to add rather than take away, to make happen rather than hinder. This positive power of laughter as a means of yanking things into life is often construed as a part of nature, as a supplement to processes that should naturally occur on their own: digestion, blood flow, and, in our case, fertility and fetus development. I will return to this idea of the supplement in due course, but for now, let’s briefly recall Derrida’s lesson that any supplement always risks showing up the processes it aids as flawed, in need of assistance, and ultimately anything but self-governing or natural.¹⁷ And this is important to us because, as a forum of feminist scholars recently argued, “*all* reproduction is assisted” (my emphasis):¹⁸ reproduction is a treacherous, laborious, and assisted process throughout history—even and especially when it is presented as a successful, self-evident, and natural phenomenon. This positive aspect of laughter, then, as a supplement to reproduction, is a biopolitical power, because it takes life as something that *must* be fostered—and reproduced—even at the cost of “compulsion,” a violent undertone that marks out these supposedly “natural” and “self-governing” life processes as objects of deliberation and control. Biopolitics also implies the compulsion into life of some political classes (those which biopower “make[s] live,” to borrow Foucault’s phrase)¹⁹ over the deliberate neglect of less desirable others (those which biopower “let[s] die”). Such biopolitical implications whirl in the background of all three examples above: ART for the affluent Italian middle classes, bedside banquets and gossip as after-birth care in seventeenth-century French aristocratic homes, and late in life fatherhood for the patriarch of the Jewish religion and ethnic group share in a laughter that compels the reproduction not just of individuals but of forms of political power.

Along with this compulsion to life that Propp marks out as the junction of laughter and reproduction, there is the negative, obstructive aspect of laughter as a means of sounding out and even provoking a crisis in reproduction, of showing up reproductive processes as faulty, treacherous, discontinuous. This negative aspect is not incompatible with the biopolitical compulsion to laugh and therefore reproduce: Sarah laughs at her long-lost power to reproduce, sounding out her barrenness, shortly before laughter makes her pregnant. Yet I want to be careful not to subsume this negative potentiality of laughter—its ability to create an obstacle to reproduction—under Propp’s idea of laughter as a successful compulsion to life; in many cases, and, as we shall see, particularly within feminist traditions that view reproductive processes with suspicion and even contempt, laughter’s ability to disrupt reproduction is just as potent as its capacity to aid it. One of the

challenges of this chapter is giving form to laughter's reproductive implications in their irreducible, profound ambiguity: both negative (the unwillingness and/or inability to reproduce) and positive (the willingness and/or ability to reproduce).

Before we enter into further depths of analysis, let us pause to consider the kind of history that is being conjured here. The sources of the lineage of reproductive laughter run deep within the Western literary canon, from Greek antiquity to Christianity and from Roman Christianity into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, these sources are not being taken at philological or historical face value: this is because the lineage itself—the nexus of the sources—has been worked out by twentieth-century authors (Bakhtin, Propp, and many others whose thought I will engage with throughout this chapter). I am arguing that reproductive laughter exists in a historical fold of the twentieth century and all that precedes it. This is an important specification because this book is, after all, grounded in the twentieth century but deals not just with events (sonic, musical, or otherwise) of that century but also with its particular way of recounting and parsing the centuries that preceded it. As writers as diverse as Foucault, Nicholas Hopwood (the editor of a recent monumental cultural history of reproduction), and Alys Eve Weinbaum (in her work on the history of biocapitalism and race) have argued, concern over reproduction is very much a historical product of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, bound to declining European birthrates, the appraisal of the Black body as a means of fixing reproductive crises, fears of and desires for racial mixing, and the origins of systematic assisted reproduction.²⁰ Biological reproduction is a category of thought that was elaborated in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century, yet it is powerful enough to have remade the past and warped the present, strangely clasping together archaic fertility rituals with domestic labor carried out by AIs. By *remade* and *warped* I don't mean just a simple backward projection, a mere fashioning of the past in one's own image: reproduction is not a stable ideology mapped out on top of the past "as it really was," erasing it and distorting it. If anything, reproduction can be understood as something closer to Deleuze's idea of the fold—a plastic compression of time and space that resists unpicking, a matrix through which things are shaped and ordered.²¹ And laughter is one of the aural means by which the fold is effected, entered, navigated, and inhabited. My work here is to consciously dwell in this fold long enough to understand how laughter has come to spell out otherwise unspeakable fears and hopes regarding the act of reproduction.

LAUGHTER AS PROLIFERATION AND TECHNIQUE

Laughter as a positive force—a means for the successful reproduction of matter, people, and systems—is, nowadays, an unloved topic. By this I mean that it is a topic that is both unexplored and, when explored, handled with much suspicion. There is a straightforward reason for this: for most liberal Western commentators, laughter is only ever "good"—that is, politically valuable—as a negative force, something

that disrupts or negates and therefore potentially rebels. This is the role it holds, for instance, in Georges Bataille (where laughter throws a spanner in the works of dialectical thought), Hélène Cixous (where laughter disrupts masculine language), Walter Benjamin (who famously defined laughter as “shattered articulation” in *The Arcades Project*), and even, in a roundabout way, Michel Foucault (insofar as laughter is folded into his conception of “madness” as a challenge to the regime of reason).²² The contemporary affect and media theorist Maggie Hennefeld is, I believe, diagnosing a symptom of this same problem when she argues that, in feminist literature, laughter is often disregarded because, enduringly, only negative feelings are thought to hold the promise of revolutionary action. In this line of literature, laughter is more often than not a means of “laughing along with”—complying with—systems of oppression. Glossing the work of feminist literary theorists such as Sianne Ngai, Sarah Ahmed, and Laurent Berlant, Hennefeld writes, “‘Ugly feelings,’ ‘mixed feelings,’ and ‘killjoy’ commitments get pride of place over laughing attachments, which have predominantly been associated with ‘cruel optimism,’ the false ‘promise of happiness,’ and nonstop affective labor of neoliberal ‘zaniness’ (all core concepts that I will unpack). Instead, it’s the debased emotions and their affective horizons—shame, depression, anxiety, trauma, pain, hate, fear, envy, irritation, paranoia—that can jam the wheels of the grinding feedback loop between bodily matter and structural power.”²³ Hennefeld’s answer to this problem is to lift the burden of moral judgment from laughter and reimagine it as an affect that is stubbornly unpredictable, unexploitable by any political agenda (even the good liberal ones). As an affect, Hennefeld argues, laughter short-circuits any clear distinction between positive and negative emotion, between fostering and disrupting. “Affectively contagious laughter,” she muses, “is both profoundly irresponsible and irresistibly hopeful.”²⁴ In many ways, my task is parallel to Hennefeld’s—I too seek to step beyond the divide between a (politically aspirational) negative laughter that disrupts and a (politically contemptible) positive laughter that aids and coerces. However, I argue that to understand laughter’s enduring ambiguity as a sonic and political act, one must account for its relationship to reproduction. It is only through reproduction that we can lay the foundation for an understanding of laughter in its sonic as well as political specificity as a phenomenon—as a sound that rebounds, repeats, and reproduces itself, the mysterious resonant string of *ha ha has* that harbingers proliferation and rupture at once.

As we wade into the murky waters of laughter and reproduction’s joint lineage, I will entertain laughter as a positive, life-making force, an aid to the fertilization of womb and earth both. And I will do this long before I offer the—perhaps more familiar—liberal antidote of negative laughter as noncompliance, disruption, and rebellion. This move requires me, and my readers, to make some room for dialectics, for beholding a thesis truly and moving, through it and in it, toward antithesis. In this act of earnest beholding we will find that the literary heritage of a life-making laughter can, in fact, be tracked in the Western tradition far more continuously than we think. The outlining of such a heritage is the work of Propp’s

aforementioned essay, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore.” In it, laughter amounts to a genuine, reproductive power. Through laughter, animals and people are hailed into fertility and gestation. Indeed, Propp frames laughter in relation not just to life but also to Friederich Engels’s hugely influential definition of reproduction from his 1884 *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Propp quotes Engels at length, and with precision: “Laughter is directed at increasing the human tribe and animals. ‘According to the materialist conception,’ said Engels, ‘the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this in itself is of twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing, shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.’ It is the second type of production that we are dealing with here.”²⁵

That Propp—a Marxist thinker and literary theorist—should invoke Engels is not all that surprising. But the particular mode and conclusion of Propp’s invocation are, to a contemporary reader with a sense of the afterlife of Engels’s work, deeply odd. Engels’s *Origin of the Family*—one of the texts that anointed reproduction as a chief political and economic concern of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—famously makes the connection between industrial capitalism and the monogamous, nuclear family as a means of birthing and raising a compliant labor force. In drawing attention to the links between private life, sexuality, and capitalism, Engels had a profound impact on later feminist critiques of the bourgeois family and the unremunerated forms of labor (famously termed “reproductive labor” in the feminist Marxist tradition) that hoist it up. Yet none of that is relevant to the gloss of Engels by Propp, who does not engage at all with this critique. Instead, he strips down Engels’s double definition of reproduction (as both social and domestic labor on the one hand, and the labor of conception, gestation, and birth on the other) so that all that remains is a seemingly discrete, purely biological idea. Then he extends the concept of reproduction beyond human gestation and birth to include livestock and crops—a perspective that moves us away from industrial capital and toward an expanded understanding of reproduction as relating to organic matter in all of its complex interconnectedness. In this declination, laughter helps the reproduction of organic matter that must happen one way or another, for the survival of ecosystems and the people within them. Positive laughter is, in short, a vitalist aid, a device that keeps reproduction ticking.²⁶

The reason why Propp could cite Engels one moment and entertain “laughter as a magic means for creating life” the next lies in his turn-of-the-century anthropological orientation.²⁷ He is here dealing with the interpretation of the religious customs and mythologies of traditional agrarian societies, which, with their common quality of being precapitalist, he lumps hastily into one.²⁸ He thus offers a set of references spanning blithely from ancient Greece through Native American tribes

to northern Siberian ethnic groups and beyond and tends to understand these societies as being both different from modern Europe and broadly equivalent to one another. Given these premises, it might seem intuitive to wish to distance ourselves as quickly as possible from Propp's understanding of premodern, agrarian, and vitalist laughter. We, the moderns—so the story goes—ought to know better than to accept laughter as an unproblematic aid to fertility and pregnancy. Here my earlier call for dialectics comes into effect. For, while we might think that laughter as an aid to “natural” reproductive processes is a thing of the past, the lengthy consideration of laughter in relation to assisted reproductive technology that opens this chapter tells us otherwise, and we ought to trace the seam that links our contemporary technologies and techniques for reproduction to their unthinkable, and unlikely, predecessors.

Consider, for instance, Propp's example of Demeter's laughter in the *Homeric Hymns*.²⁹ These hymns are a series of anonymous, orally transmitted poems connected to the Eleusinian mysteries, festivals of ancient Greece revolving around season changes, harvests, sex, and rebirth. They feature laughter in the anecdote of Demeter, the earth goddess, who is too deep in grief over the loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades to bring forth spring ever again. This heralds a crisis that can, however, be resolved by making the goddess laugh:

For a long time [Demeter] sat on the stool, without uttering a sound,
in her sadness.
And she made no approach, either by word or by gesture, to anyone.
Unsmiling, not partaking of food or drink,
she sat there, wasting away with yearning for her daughter with the
low-slung girdle,
until Iambê, the one who knows what is dear and what is not, started
making fun.
Making many jokes, she turned the Holy Lady's disposition in another
direction,
making her smile and laugh and have a merry *thûmos*.³⁰

As commentators have pointed out, *thûmos* (or *thymos*), in the Homeric tradition, is a powerful concept, best translated as something like “breathing life force” or “soul.”³¹ It's no wonder that it should be used to describe Demeter's recovery from grief. After all, her mourning heralds the ultimate crisis of reproduction, particularly in an agrarian society: perpetual winter. To forestall this possibility, the gods must make her laugh—and the task of entertaining falls, in different versions of the myth, to one of two women. Iambe, whom we encountered above, is a young girl who, as a critical commentary on the *Hymn to Demeter* points out, “is a personification of the iambic tradition, which reflects a ritual discourse that provokes laughter *and thereby promotes fertility*.”³² Other versions of the same story instead feature Baubo, an old crone.³³ Both women use ritual obscenity to bring the earth goddess back to reproduction. Baubo, in particular, succeeds in the task by lifting

her skirts and showing Demeter her vulva, a scene preserved in fertility statuettes from antiquity, which depict Baubo as a vulva with a face, on two legs, framed by the folds of her skirt.³⁴ Demeter laughs, and spring returns to earth. Here laughter is intensely gendered—not only because it is a necessary technique for restoring the fertility of a goddess embodying motherhood, but also because it is provoked by women making dirty jokes about their own sexual organs. Yet it also signifies far beyond human reproduction, joining genitals and wombs to nothing less than the life cycle of ecosystems.

We ought to remember that Propp, my source for the reference to Demeter's laughter, is a passionate advocate of eschewing general theories and instead situating laughter in precise economic and historical circumstances—Demeter's laughter being, then, the laughter of a primarily agrarian society tending anxiously to its crops.³⁵ For this reason, he is not interested in tracking how certain figures of laughter and fertility travel beyond their material circumstances of origin. Yet there is something about the laughter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that resonates and pushes through into the centuries beyond it. We can hear echoes of Demeter's laugh, for instance, in the otherwise truly strange metaphor of the “laughing meadow,” or *pratum ridet* in Latin. Signifying the flourishing of vegetal life—a life replenished by and full of laughter—the metaphor has occupied philosophers of language as a kind of linguistic and philosophical evergreen. For one thing, the locution persists in some Latin-based languages to this day; most important, it was, for a long time, *the* archetype in Latin-language treatises on rhetoric of what a metaphor is and can do.³⁶ In a 2008 essay dedicated to the mechanisms and significance of Latin metaphor, Umberto Eco, citing the French philosopher of language Irène Rosier-Catach, tells us as much: “In her essay ‘Prata rident,’ Irène Rosier-Catach (1977) examines a classical locus of medieval doctrinal thought, the example of the metaphor *prata rident* (which dates back to *Ad Herennium* 4). It is striking how the example recurs in a wide range of authors, from Peter Abelard to Thierry de Chartres and Guillaume de Conches, up to Thomas Aquinas, and then spills over into discussions on analogy—that is, *translatio in divinis*, the use of metaphors in order to speak of God.”³⁷ The historical range of references in this quote is truly dazzling, and Eco further expands it by several centuries. By his essay's end we have read about something reaching from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (an anonymous Latin rhetoric treatise dated to 90 BCE) through Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (ca. 90 CE) to the works of Abelard, Thierry de Chartres, and Guillaume de Conches (roughly twelfth century), as well as Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century), and then into baroque treatises on rhetoric in the seventeenth century: a grand total of eighteen centuries of laughing meadows. Evidently, the metaphor had a capacity to function away from the agrarian context that may have generated it in the *Homeric Hymns*—a context in which laughter was a conceivable tool for fertilizing the earth. But how?

According to Eco, the metaphor survived, paradoxically, because it was problematic, awkward, and inwardly tense. The figure of the laughing meadow—

of laughter as a means of nonhuman, ecological rebirth—endured precisely because it pointed to a reality that could not be logically accounted for. In the world of Latin grammarians (who took laughter, after Aristotle, to be the exclusive province of humans), a laughing meadow was at once an archetypal metaphor and an especially threatening thought. The juxtaposition, for instance, of animate action (laughter) with inanimate matter (meadow) is marked as both a classical way of building metaphor and a potentially improper form of linguistic creativity, especially in Christian theology. Because only God has the power to lend inanimate matter the power to laugh and it is also from God that humans take their exclusive capacities for language and laughter both, to lend laughter to a meadow through language is an act of arrogance and even heresy, the breach of a theological and moral boundary. This is, evidently, a wholly different world from that of the Eleusinian mysteries, where laughter marked the interconnection of human and vegetal life rather than their separation. Whereas laughter is a perfectly legitimate means of making Demeter laugh and springtime return, a laughing meadow is a figure to be controlled, checked, scripted, because it stubbornly leaks reproductive power between species in a post-Aristotelian world where laughs are meant to be exclusively human. More than this, a monotheist religion like Christianity is necessarily protective of the exclusive powers of its God, whose divine mandate is the only way that laughter can leak from human to nonhuman. For interspecies laughter to occur in a rhetorical figure of human language is therefore dangerous. Reading between the lines of the notoriously fastidious logic of medieval Scholastic grammarians, the point of generative frisson in the laughing meadow is precisely that humans can temporarily wield the creative power of God through linguistic technique, and this metaphor is seen as being capable of retrieving an element of interspecies reproductive power that medieval Christian theology had long siphoned off as the imponderable prerogative of its one God.

And so there emerges a tension between humans and nonhumans, between divine nature and human technique, and an uneasy boundary between artifice and nature that is moral and ethical—and will accompany the phenomenon of laughter from here on out. There is a trace of this fundamental tension even in outwardly secular theories of laughter and comedy, such as Henri Bergson's definition of the laughable as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living."³⁸ We can carry forward two strands from this strange history of meadows that laugh. First, *pratium ridet* is a residual figure of the leaking of reproductive laughter across species; in this sense it is a remote, younger, Christian cousin of the sexually charged laughter of Demeter (an anthropomorphic goddess) and its effect on vegetal life. Second, the metaphor incarnates a nascent tension between human technique and God-ordained nature, both as an image of cross-species reproductive laughter and as an example of the potential pitfalls of linguistic technique. In the case of the grammarians who took up the discussion of the metaphor, giving laughter to a meadow risked creating a thought (of a nonhuman thing doing human things) that exceeded, or deviated from, God's ordained world. Underneath this concern

lay, perhaps, the suspicion that reproductive laughter—the laughter that makes meadows bloom—was also a technique capable of endowing humans with the power to interfere with the divine natural order.

This growing, uneasy awareness of the joint power of technique and reproduction mapped itself closely onto the aural and physiological profile of laughter. The aural and political substance were now one and the same: laughter became the voice of doubts about reproductive power precisely because of its phenomenal qualities as an explosive sound capable of regenerating itself, and repeating itself, in the mouth of the person who laughs. We see this in the work of Laurent Joubert, a physician of the royal French court and the author of the 1579 *Treatise on Laughter*—to date, one of the longest and most thorough monographs on the phenomenon of laughter.³⁹ As Indira Ghose explains in her essay on Joubert's treatise, the text is a strange mix of received Aristotelian wisdom and aggregated physiological observation.⁴⁰ Joubert's definition of laughter swiftly paraphrases the Aristotelian credo (from the *Poetics*) that laughter is a human response to an ugliness unworthy of pity or compassion: "There is always, as for subject or matter, an ugly thing unworthy of pity," Joubert writes.⁴¹ Yet the book is effectively centered on laughter's key physiological trait: an "agitation" or "convulsion" of "the diaphragm, the chest, and the muscles of the face; whence it is that the voice must be broken and the mouth stretched in a certain manner."⁴² This disinterest in moral judgments and focus on physical attributes should not surprise us: Joubert was, after all, a doctor, and the treatise, as Ghose remarks, continues a tradition dating back to Hippocrates that regards laughter as an aid to health (but did not, however, really overlap with the more archaic fertility rituals involving laughter and Demeter).⁴³ For Joubert, laughter's most important trait was not its psychological cause but its physiology: a convulsion breaking up the voice and breath, creating a phenomenon recognizable, by ear and sight, despite its many, often strange and pathological, causes.⁴⁴

Yet the key to Joubert's intervention in laughter's discourse is not his discussion of its convulsive physiology but the nascent formulation of laughter as a willful technique for sound making. Joubert writes, "There is another type that I call bastard or illegitimate, which is a laughter that is only equivocal since it expresses only the gestures and external manner of laughers without having the internal actions which precede true laughter. For there is agitation in neither the heart nor the chest, nor are humors sent out and spent, but only a simple retraction of the muscles of the mouth, similar to that in laughter, and which can be easily counterfeited."⁴⁵ Although for Joubert only laughter resulting from convulsion is "true," he points out that forgery, as far as laughter goes, is easy enough. From a sonic standpoint, the difference lies in how a repeated sound is produced through a windpipe (such as the vocal tract, but wind instruments as well): either by stopping an extended sound by quickly blocking and unblocking the pipe, or by individually blowing each short sound in turn. The stopping of a single continuous sound corresponds—

in Joubert's physiology of laughter—to the convulsion of the chest that effectively stops and unstops the flow of air from lung to mouth. The repeated individual vocalizations, on the other hand, might constitute what Joubert calls “illegitimate” laughter: a counterfeit, reverse-engineered from the sound of laughter.

The fact that Joubert could imagine and theorize laughter not as an uncontrollable event but as something achievable through technique would, as we will see, prove influential to the legacy of laughter as a political and reproductive act. The reason for this might be that, unlike other convulsive sounds that are often conceptually paired with it—coughing, stuttering—laughter doesn't simply block the voice but also audibly multiplies it.⁴⁶ In the mouth of the laugher, one *ha* becomes many, is regenerated and/or cut into a plurality. It is remarkable and unique to laughter that such a plurality can be obtained in two separate ways: either by cutting up a single sound into multiple smaller sounds (similar to asexual reproduction by mitosis and meiosis—that is, division of a parent cell) or by remaking an individual sound over and again as other, similar sounds (something akin to sexual reproduction through gestation and birth). These two techniques for creating multiples of a sound allow laughter to move viscerally between womb fertility (Nesmejána, Demeter, and other women who must be made to laugh) and the fertile meadow that turns the lone sprout into a crop (*pratum ridens*). Laughter is a vitalist supplement to reproduction because it embodies and engenders sonic multiplication. And as this reproductive supplement, laughter bears the Janus face of nature and artifice: convulsive and helpless, yet also the result of human technique.

FROM VITALIST SUPPLEMENT TO REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

Such is the power of laughter as an aid to fertility and propagation that—at least within the liberal arts and humanities—we are now most familiar with the critical apparatus erected to counteract and even hijack the effects of the supplement. This critical apparatus overlaps widely with the feminist intellectual traditions of the late twentieth century, which took reproduction seriously as one of the great unthoughts of the Western intellectual heritage. As Anca Parvulescu shows us, feminine laughter was consistently reclaimed by second-wave feminists such as Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, and Annie Leclerc, as something that petrifies and shatters patriarchal values.⁴⁷ Laughter induces a crisis in the continuity of institutions and is also connected to a visceral refusal of sexual reproduction—in the figure of the nineteenth-century hysteric, who twitches and convulses instead of being what she ought to be: lover, wife, homemaker, and mother (hysterics had notoriously hostile wombs).⁴⁸ We find it in the figure of Medusa, whose petrifying gaze, directed at the men who would wrestle her, Hélène Cixous recast as a resonant, happy laugh that undoes masculinity outright, opening up the path for a nonlogocentric, explosive *écriture féminine*.⁴⁹ Joubert's physiological outline of

laughter as the repeated blocking of the voice becomes a whole new philosophical world here: the world of rebellious rupture, in which femininity had to be redefined as a spanner in the works, a tear in an intrinsically, implicitly masculine cosmos. And the rupture is complexly related to biological reproduction: Cixous encouraged her readers to reclaim their creativity and sexuality at once through masturbation, through sex enjoyed openly and away from duties of copulation, procreation, and reproduction.⁵⁰ Laughter and self-pleasure were both convulsive, joyous, and pointedly separate from the compulsion to make babies. If many modernist philosophers from Walter Benjamin to George Bataille had configured laughter as an act of shattering, of unmaking, then feminist philosophers interpreted this shattering as the feminine subject disrupting—like the convulsive epiglottis that cuts the vibration of the vocal chords—the continuous, normalized, and naturalized signal of maleness.

We should, of course, not take these ideas at face value: the explosive charge of such a laughter was nested in the assumption of the sex binary as a biological necessity and, famously, of its epistemological precedence over racialization as a mechanism of oppression. The force of second-wave feminist laughter came from the division and opposition of masculine and feminine and so from an unquestioned ideology of the sex binary (“Woman must write woman, and man, man,” wrote Cixous). While laughter was shown to explode implicit masculine structures of thought, it also managed to quietly retain a universal female subject that was intrinsically middle class and white. Yet even long past the dismissal of oppositional logics of male versus female that defined second-wave feminists, contemporary feminists still conjure this explosive laughter—and the form, if not the content, of the binary opposition that accompanies it (us versus them)—for themselves. There is more than a small helping of the hysteric in Sarah Ahmed’s feminist killjoy, the person who declines to comply with patriarchal and racist institutional behavior by refusing to laugh along with offensive jokes.⁵¹ In many ways, the killjoy is someone who has clocked laughter’s function as an aid to the reproduction and continuity of life, institutions, systems (a reproductive power that is no longer strictly biological but instead societal) and deliberately thwarts it. And the killjoy does laugh, but her laughter retains its oppositional charge, its disruptive sweep: Ahmed identifies in the killjoy’s laughter “joy in killing joy.”⁵² In the language of this book, the killjoy’s laughter is the act of trampling reproductive aids—and the processes they enable—gleefully underfoot.

But how exactly do we get from laughter as a positive to a negative? What turns positive reproductive laughter, a ripple of vocalizations whose multiplying power belongs to animal and vegetal life and the goddesses who govern them, into the disruptive force that cuts voice and signal by means of the rebel epiglottis, the voice of the hysteric and the killjoy? Why, indeed, was such a reversal not only possible in thought but necessary, and what lies beyond the opposition of *laughter that makes* to *laughter that unmakes*? I argue that the turn from positive to negative

laughter is no mere switch from plus to minus, no specular reversal, but a precise, painstaking retooling of the very idea of reproduction, the labor it involves, and the sounds that incarnate that labor. Maggie Hennefeld has argued before me for the reassessment of laughter beyond mere positive or negative implications, as an affect that is suspended and “nomadic,”⁵³ ideologically homeless, and shy of either additive or privative function. Laughter simply is, and in the face of it, we must suspend judgment. I admire the poetic force with which such a suspension is presented and offered by Hennefeld. I am not sure, however, that this surrender to laughter’s presence, this suspension of disbelief, can help us out of the underlying, long-standing tension between positive and negative laughter. Indeed, such gestures of willful suspension of a dialectic between negative and positive poles—often based in pre-Enlightenment philosophers like Spinoza—have a long history in twentieth-century political thought. I am reminded, for instance, of Toni Negri’s tortured riff on Spinoza: the concept of the multitude—an amoral, ever-emergent communal political force whose direction and meaning is both unpredictable and autonomous from left- and right-wing agendas.⁵⁴ For Negri, the multitude was a forced, poetic, and performative exit from the stunted dialectics between politics as either political opposition or blithe compliance. Likewise, Hennefeld is seeking a way out from laughter as a stunted binary, from a tradition that frames it as either mindless assent or traumatic disruption. Both multitude and laughter as affect are untraceable, unpredictable, charged with an imponderability that borders on the theological. Concerning the possibility of the multitude’s organizing itself into a force for protest and political change, Michael Hardt and Negri wrote, “We do not have any models to offer for this event. Only the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real.”⁵⁵ To embrace the multitude or Hennefeld’s laughter ultimately requires an act of faith, a suspension of investigative desire. I passionately share the dissatisfaction with the identification of politics with rupture that animates, in different ways, Negri and Hennefeld both. I too am not content with leaving laughter as a purely oppositional sound, thus erasing a complex tradition of reproductive laughter that silently buttresses it and to which negative laughter owes its very existence as a thought and practice. Yet I am wary of the poetic suspension of judgment necessary to both Hennefeld’s turn to affect and Negri’s call for the multitude. Not only is such a suspension as unsustainable over time as it is alluring, but it is ultimately (for such an academically sophisticated concept) almost theologically imponderable, suspiciously impervious to thought and critique. We might instead try to work out the precise nature of the bind of positive and negative laughter, the relationship that allows these two poles to create the tensile surface that Hennefeld calls affect.

The metamorphosis of laughter from vitalist supplement to out-and-out feminist wrecking ball is not one of simple reversal from making to unmaking, from building to destroying. Laughter is reproduction being sounded out, and more

specifically, it is a sound that both embodies and assists reproduction, that flags reproduction as being in the process of being worked out. Yet as a supplement, laughter is also always already dangerous to default reproductive processes: for it is a sound that shows these processes to be potentially difficult, nonlinear, and in need of assistance. Just as it intervenes to enhance reproductive processes and restore élan, laughter slyly shows that life processes are not—as vitalism cosmologies dictate—autonomous and inevitable. They take work. This is where the feminist rethinking of reproduction—such as was spearheaded by the Marxist scholar Silvia Federici—develops its particular bind to laughter.⁵⁶ Laughter’s power to make reproduction happen, that is, risks erasing the labor of human reproduction as a mere matter of course: a natural, unacknowledged, and unrewarded human—and particularly feminine—activity. When, as we saw in the previous section, Propp adapts Engels’s famous definition of reproduction as both the biological reproduction of humans and the reproduction of the material and social conditions for their survival, he cannily separates the biological aspect (which interests him) from the social one, a decision that would stop any contemporary feminist dead in their tracks. When, for instance, Federici uses Engels’s very same double definition, she insists that social reproduction—more, perhaps, than biological reproduction—is a key form of labor that was ideologically cast as natural precisely so that it could go unacknowledged and unremunerated. This is the famous thrust of her 1975 manifesto “Wages against Housework,” in which she presents a thesis regarding housework as social reproduction, which she would later expand to consider sexuality within marriage and ideologies of love: “The difference [of waged labor from] housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be unwaged.”⁵⁷

Federici has since vastly widened her focus, examining, for instance, the international division of feminine labor (with particular reference to the Global South’s factory setting), as well as affective labor.⁵⁸ Yet I bring us to the beginnings of her theoretical journey precisely because she, like Propp, starts with Engels, with the same quote that Propp drew on to cast laughter as reproduction. And, unsurprisingly, her interpretation is a far cry from Propp’s: she turns Engels into a rallying cry to denaturalize not just housework but love, sexuality, and care, seeing them as work that one *can choose not to do*. The vitalist supplement requires labor, and therefore it can be withdrawn, thus making the process of reproduction falter, stop, break down. Laughter becomes, then, the sound of the withdrawal of reproductive labor, a wild strike from affective work, and also the sound of the rupture engendered by the strike. Here we find laughter’s entanglement with affective labor, and thus labor of social reproduction. Federici is, to be clear, neither a theorist of laughter nor even a casual commentator on it—in fact, her materialist

sensibilities don't take her particularly far down the path of considering emotions and affect as work. Yet her critique of reproductive labor opens the way to thinking of laughter as emotional labor aimed at social reproduction.

Understanding laughter as a hidden, femininely gendered reproductive labor—a labor of biological reproduction and social reproduction both—is the key to understanding the turn toward disruptiveness. It is, in short, as if laughers went on a reproductive strike: no more gestation, no more proliferation, no more ensuring of smooth, heteronormative family life or social comfort in the workplace. It makes sense, then, that laughter should be present equally in epistemologies of birth and generation and in epistemologies of affective labor: laughter is inherently reproductive, and its power spans the gamut of political philosophies of reproduction.

To navigate the dicey waters of feminist philosophies of reproduction is also to map the underground river that connects the stony-faced killjoy to Demeter's bloom-inducing laughter. And so the question of how we might conceive of laughter in the twenty-first century is bound to the ever-developing question—more current than ever—of the who, what, and how of reproduction (and reproduction understood as labor) in contemporary political discourse. We might, for instance, better understand the necessity of disruptive laughter in second-wave feminism once we remember that this is also the line of thought which introduced the refusal and rejection of procreation on the grounds that it was unrewarded work and often alienating to the point of bringing harm to those who performed it. Thus Shulamith Firestone, who advocated for a mechanized outsourcing of gestational labor to automated wombs, famously described giving birth as the barbaric equivalent of “shitting a pumpkin”—a gruesome devastation of the body that was simply the expected, invisible labor of bringing a new labor force into the world.⁵⁹ The issue of the division, alienation, and redistribution of reproductive labor—in its multifaceted life as the giving and fostering of biological life as well as the making, upkeep, and disciplining of functional citizens—is the true name of laughter's tie to political life. And in heeding this discontinuous, multiplying sound we must also heed the question raised by one and all peals of laughter: who performs the labor of reproduction, and to whom does this labor belong?

TOWARD SURROGATION

Let's take stock: laughter is a supplement to reproduction—meaning that it aids reproduction at a moment of crisis but also reveals reproduction as the complex, faulty, laborious process that it is. This double edge—laughter as both aid to and undermining of naturalized processes of reproduction—is built into the aurality of the laugh: both a multiplying sound (the proliferation of a single *ha* into a peal) and also the convulsive rupture of a single continuous sound. A laugh is both of these sounds—the sound of multiplication and rupture both—and those who

experience laughter are always engaging in the treacherous parsing of a score of reproductive processes that tend to be concealed as natural processes, including fertilization and growth, pregnancy and gestation, and fostering and care work at the personal, familial, institutional, and even (as we will see) technological levels. But we can now be even more precise: laughter doesn't just aid or hinder reproductive labor but does both by concealing and revealing it at once. Is the multiplied *ha* of the laugh a sign of healthy proliferation or the sound of a laborious, thankless repetition? Is the convulsing epiglottis that cuts the vocal line the spasm of a sick organism no longer able to sustain fluid movement or the potentially life-giving contraction of orgasm, conception, and parturition? Does reproduction sound like it is doing its thing (whatever we imagine that thing to be), or do we hear the fatigue of the laboring bodies beneath it, the heaving under a burden, the tool shakily held? Laughter's sonic profile and the way it is parsed are crucial to its relationship to reproductive labor, because it allows that labor to be simultaneously shielded from and offered up to the senses.

The questions above can never be answered with certainty, nor is the attainment of such certainty a goal of this chapter or book. What matters to me is that laughter is the unique means of entertaining these fundamental doubts about reproduction—a means of doubt etched into the ear and body through centuries of thought and often worried writing. Laughter demands of us, always, a treacherous aural parsing—parsing rather than listening, for its sound poses questions regarding reproduction that we wouldn't otherwise be able to feel, to entertain. In this section I suggest that, in the twenty-first century, the true name for laughter's reproductive function, and the thoughts it is capable of engendering in those who hear it, is *surrogation*, in that it is a reproductive labor that is outsourced (and so is alienated from those who perform it), creates and reinforces gender and racial hierarchies, particularly when it comes to definitions of humanity, and is often concealed or erased from the consciousness of those who benefit from it the most.

Laughter's entanglement with surrogacy—in its most immediate meaning, as the outsourced gestational labor of a woman conceiving and birthing a baby on behalf of another—takes us back to the story of Sarah and Abraham's struggle to conceive and of laughter's strange role as a vocalization and overcoming of that struggle. Biblical exegesis has long made much of Sarah's laughter, which has also been reclaimed as an act of defiance by feminist writers and given its name to charities and internet forums such as www.sarahs-laughter.com, dedicated to reproductively challenged Christian women seeking support and encouragement.⁶⁰ Yet Sarah's laughter is not necessarily a politically comforting sound—either as a corrective to infertility or as an indication of complex feminine subjectivity in the Bible. Black theology in the United States has offered powerful counternarratives to the story of Sarah's miraculous, laughing conception. In her influential model for Black feminist biblical interpretation, the reverend and scholar Delores Williams points out that Sarah's spontaneous, sexless

pregnancy in Genesis 17 is shadowed by a far more prurient reproductive process—an *ante-litteram* form of gestational surrogacy through Hagar, an enslaved woman.⁶¹ In Genesis 16, Sarah has Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman working as her handmaiden, conceive a baby with Abraham. The relevant passage from the Old Testament reads as follows:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name *was* Hagar.

And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. [. . .]

And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived.⁶²

The story grows complicated as tensions arise between Sarah and Hagar, leading Hagar to flee her mistress twice (the first time, an angel orders her to return to Sarah; the second time, she is aided by Abraham himself and successfully escapes).⁶³ Williams, drawing from exegetic traditions already active in African American church communities, sees Hagar as typologically connected to enslaved Black women's rape and forced pregnancies in antebellum America, as well as to the figure of the fugitive enslaved woman trying to rescue her baby from future enslavement. Williams writes:

As I encountered Hagar again and again in African-American sources, I [. . .] slowly realized there were striking similarities between Hagar's story and the story of African-American women. [. . .] Hagar's heritage was African as was black women's. Hagar was a slave. Black American women had emerged from a slave heritage and still lived in light of it. [. . .] Hagar had no control over her body. It belonged to her slave owner, whose husband, Abraham, ravished Hagar. [. . .] The bodies of African-American slave women were owned by their masters. Time after time they were raped by their owners and bore children whom the masters seldom claimed—children who were slaves.⁶⁴

For Williams, the importance of Hagar in a Black theological tradition is that she opens up a path for a feminist reading that challenges the narrative of Sarah's reproductive triumph. Williams's exegesis draws its power from shifting the interpretative attention away from Sarah, the slave owner, and on to Hagar. The ensuing tradition of critical Black studies has worked the link between Hagar and Sarah-Abraham to typologically signify the whole phenomenon of distribution and erasure of reproductive labor during American slavery. In the Old Testament, Hagar gestates so that Sarah and Abraham may reproduce as a couple, as Jewish people, as an entire ethnicity. Yet in the African American tradition, Hagar is the basis for an understanding of surrogacy as the name of the relationship between Black and white labor in the United States and beyond. It is Hagar who, unnamed, haunts Saidyia Hartman's essay "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors" in this passage:

The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity. To be a slave is to be “excluded from the prerogatives of birth.” The mother’s only claim—to transfer her dispossession to the child. The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women’s historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery. The theft, regulation and destruction of black women’s sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.⁶⁵

The recurring figure between Williams and Hartman is, not coincidentally, that of the Black pregnant woman whose womb is farmed out to her masters and who can therefore only ever produce other enslaved people in turn. The enslaved Black woman becomes, then, the reproductive cipher of racial capital, the embodiment of what Alys Weinbaum terms “the surrogacy/slavery nexus.”⁶⁶ As a figure of racial capital, Hagar is the name of the Black woman forced to increase and perpetuate, through her own dispossessed flesh and labor, the livestock and private property (for that, after all, is the legal status of the slave) of white elites.

It is important to note that surrogacy as a theoretical tool for understanding racializing, exploited reproductive labor exceeds the American context—necessarily, since of course transatlantic slavery involved multiple continents and was hardly the exclusive prerogative of North America. The contemporary, thriving industry of surrogate motherhood is based chiefly in Southeast Asia, and that is therefore the focus of many who write about surrogacy now.⁶⁷ Yet I am hailing surrogation as it has been retooled in the work of thinkers such as Weinbaum (who examines the history of nineteenth-century American racial capital), Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (who theorize gestational surrogation and emotional labor outsourced to contemporary technology and robotics as related forms of reproductive labor), and Sophie Lewis (who radically reframes gestational surrogation as a form of labor with revolutionary potential).⁶⁸ For all of these writers, surrogation is not only a gestational practice but one of the founding philosophies of reproduction of the West. Across these authors’ output, surrogation is expanded into a definition of exploited and extracted reproductive labor, performed by humans and technologies as disparate as raped and coerced women in North American slavery, hired surrogates in Indian clinics, cleaning robots designed and produced in the Global South, and voice-activated assistants. The term *surrogation* points to the nature of this labor as outsourced (often by people in the Global North to those in the Global South) and invisible to the very liberal subjects whose illusion of autonomy it creates. In my reading of Williams’s exegesis of Hagar’s story, then, the crux of surrogation lies, in the end, not with Hagar alone but in the obscure, suppressed nexus between Hagar and Sarah. The Hagar-Sarah dyad

articulates not just the racial disparities nested in the seemingly universal idea of motherhood but something altogether more disturbing: the fact that white elites don't just exploit but are created and economically sustained through the sheer mass of racializing, gendering reproductive labor.

Whither laughter, then? Sarah's reliance on and debt to Hagar is, like much surrogacy, something she wishes to suppress, and yet it cannot but leave a trace. Weaving my own reading with Williams's typological reading and those of others who have, after Williams, conceived of Hagar as a figure of surrogation and racial capital, I suggest that trace may well be Abraham's and then Sarah's laughter upon conception. It is striking that Ishmael is born to Abraham right before Abraham and Sarah receive news of their future as patriarch and matriarch; laughter is the sound of their newfound fertility and multiplication, which we now know to have already required an outsourcing, an externalization of reproductive power. Laughter is the sound of the multiplication of Abraham's seed into a nation but also the sound of a reproduction that has required tampering, that has been so belabored that it is now painfully obvious that Sarah's long-desired conception is possible only by the unpredictable grace of God and the unfree labors of Hagar *both*. Sarah has little command of her reproductive powers—as an elderly woman made to carry a baby willed forth by God, she is, arguably, as alienated from them as Hagar is from her own, so the key difference between the two women is not whether they control their own reproductive labor (neither does) but which is allowed to own the labors of another. It is Sarah who can seize Hagar's reproductive labor and use it to paper over her lack of control of her own reproductive powers. Her laughter sounds out a call both joyous and sinister—a successful reproduction, yes, but achieved by means of forced and alienated gestational labor.

The event of a laugh is, in this conception, not significantly tied to either the person carrying out the reproductive labor or the person benefiting from that labor. If Sarah's strange laughter is linked to her difficulties in conceiving—even as they are being overcome by divine mandate—its cause remains unclear. Sarah's laughter could be a response to her geriatric pregnancy, forced by the hand of God, or, as I have argued, it could flag a repressed memory of the gestational labor she extracted from Hagar. What matters here is that the laughter marks a moment of crisis and laborious, sometimes violent overcoming in reproduction and makes, for a short second, the work of those who reproduce strikingly audible. Beyond Hagar and Sarah, Patricia Hill Collins names figures crucial to the configuration of Black reproduction, reaching from the antebellum-era mammy and jezebel to the more recent welfare queen.⁶⁹ These figures span the full gamut of reproductive labor: the mammy is the domestic worker who raises, feeds, and clothes the children of her white master (so that his wife does not have to), and the jezebel is the hypersexual Black woman who seemingly exists to offer free gratification to white men—a figure that, as Dorothy Roberts points out, was essential to the rationalization of systematic rape and impregnation of Black women during slavery.⁷⁰

It seems important that both of these racial stereotypes are associated with exaggerated laughter⁷¹—a laughter that is as pervasive as it is, at times, unnerving, inscrutable, less than human. It takes a whole world and tradition of reproductive laughter to see that the strange sound coming out of these women’s mouths is the sound of their labor to maintain and multiply their masters’ persons and possessions. But laughter here is not a sign of blithely accepted victimhood—on the contrary, it is, as we have seen, a double-edged weapon: compliance with reproduction as well as an audible acknowledgment of reproduction’s laboriousness, its cost, the ever-present possibility of its interruption and withdrawal. Of course, and Roberts points this out as well, the labor of Black sexuality and motherhood exerted by figures of biocapital like the jezebel and the mammy is performed knowingly, detachedly, and, to use a racialized term for exploited Black labor, *lazily*.⁷² Laughter names the labor of reproduction, even at a time of compliance—but in giving it a name, detaches it from the laborer’s body and makes it both alienable and destructible. In these figures of biocapital, laughter sounds out the potential for both the theft *and* the willful withdrawal of reproductive labor, sometimes at the same time. I am reminded again (as in chapter 1) of when Maya Angelou, in her astonishing gloss of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1895 “We Wear the Mask,” reframes that poem by conjuring and envoicing the figure of an elderly Black maid who seems to laugh to herself—for no apparent reason—while riding the bus home from work. “Now, if you don’t know black features you may think she was laughing,” Angelou tells her audience during a 1988 performance, “but she wasn’t laughing. . . . That’s that survival apparatus.”⁷³ The fact that the sound of laughter should come from a Black domestic worker heading home after a long day of underpaid toil at her white employers’ homes is a necessary, politically charged detail here. And Angelou’s stark reclaiming of laughter as a means of survival should remind us that the story of reproductive laughter—even through the slavery-surrogacy nexus—always already contains the seed of refusal. With the act of laughter, Angelou’s maid gives a proper name (one that necessarily baffles and confuses her employers) to her otherwise invisible reproductive toil—and in so doing, she claims it, even as it is being yanked away from her.

The relationship of laughter to surrogate reproductive labor may seem quite far removed from the realities of surrogate gestation and exploited reproductive labor. Atanasoski and Vora’s intervention in *Surrogate Humanity* is precisely to trace reproductive labor to technology at a broad scale, through figures that already implicitly blur the line between technological reproduction (recording, playing back, streaming, and circulating media content) and biological and social reproduction. Laughter, in its double linkage to both social and biological reproduction and to technology, makes this connection concrete and apparent. We need only think of the laughing robot or machine, common enough to be a stock image in Google searches and also something that has true scientific and technological traction, as several papers dedicated to humanoid simulation of “laughter events”

indicate.⁷⁴ Laughter—according to a long philosophical tradition that I treated in depth in the previous chapter—is a marker of the human, though mainly through figures that exist at the edge of humanity, such as racialized and gendered people, and the reification of those same people into machines (i.e., robots). Consider, for instance, the famous laughing AI in Steve Spielberg’s homonymic film, significantly featured in Jacob Smith’s influential work on the media theory of laughter. Haley Joel Osment’s child AI, sitting at the dinner table with his adoptive human family, mirrors his parents’ laughter and then quickly slips into the uncanny valley—his cackle approaching the sound of a glitch just as his human parents gasp for breath midlaugh. Smith glosses the scene thus:

In Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), the android David (Haley Joel Osment) tries desperately to appear human and so win the love of his adoptive mother, Monica (Frances O’Connor). In one of the film’s most affecting scenes, David and his “parents” laugh at the way Monica eats her spaghetti. At first, David’s laughter appears remarkably human, making us momentarily forget that he is a robot [. . .]. But gradually this laughter takes on an eerie and uncanny quality that makes him seem less human than ever. Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that the scene asks us to consider the line between mechanical and real laughter: “The laughter of David and his adopted parents becomes impossible to define as either forced or genuine, mechanical or spontaneous, leaving us perpetually suspended over the question as if over an abyss” [. . .]. There is nothing new about this phenomenon. Though the spasmodic and nonsemantic nature of laughter makes it seem an unlikely carrier of meaning, it has played an ongoing role in the presentation of the authentically human in mass-mediated texts, notably on early genres of phonographic recordings and the broadcast laugh track.⁷⁵

Why does laughter have this particular conjuring power of humanity, and what does this conjuring power have to do with the history of technology? In the cosmos of this chapter, this laughter is significant not merely because it comes from a humanoid AI but because this humanoid is the resolution, again, of the reproductive crisis of an affluent heterosexual couple, one that can afford to outsource their reproductive labor to the engineers and workers who make them a child whom they can then—and here is the logic of surrogation—fold into the ritual of bourgeois family life without ever again acknowledging the child’s origin or the work that put him there. Except, of course, for the child’s strange laugh, which cannot help but sound out the complex act of surrogacy of which he is the product and voice. To be clear, I am not arguing that, had the mother been able to conceive, gestate, and birth a child, the reproduction would have been natural, devoid of labor, trauma, and difficulty. On the contrary. As Sophie Lewis argues, “In unpaid gestation (as in other spheres of reproductive labor such as sex and dating), a feminized person’s body is typically being further feminized: it is working very, very hard at having the appearance of not working at all. In commercial surrogacy, in contrast, the work surrogates do is visible. But, in both cases, the crucial point is that it

is *work*.”⁷⁶ Laughter is surrogacy made audible: it alerts us to the labor of reproduction that is otherwise swept under the rug of nature and constructions of the human. In the case of *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, this construction is the textbook Foucauldian figure of the handsome Malthusian couple sitting at the table with their offspring. The laughter rebounding around the dinner table until it glitches in the mouth of the AI child tells us this: laughter aids reproduction, but at the cost of denaturalizing it, and by denaturalizing reproduction it threatens to reveal the labor behind it, the ceaseless toil necessary to hoist up the illusion of the human.

Indeed, musicologist Marie Thompson has explored the reproductive labor of AIs playing baby-soothing music and effectively performing a version of childcare.⁷⁷ We can connect Thompson’s work directly to Atanasoski and Vora’s broader thesis. For them, such labor as performed by the musical AI is a form of surrogate reproductive labor that goes beyond childcare and into the construction of the very fiction of the fully human, liberal subject. The mother who avails herself of this technology is simply joining the outsourcing of unretributed reproductive labor to technologies whose material fabrication lies in the Global South. Atanasoski and Vora write:

The stated goal of technological innovation is to liberate human potential (its non-alienated essence, or core) that has always been defined in relation to degraded and devalued others—those who were never fully human. [. . .] We argue that racial logics of categorization, differentiation, incorporation, and elimination are constitutive of the very concept of technology and technological innovation. Technology thus steps into what we call a surrogate relation to human spheres of life, labor, and sociality that enables the function and differential formation and consolidation of the liberal subject—a subject whose freedom is possible only through the racial unfreedom of the surrogate. Yet there is no liberal subject outside of the surrogate-self relation through which the human, a moving target, is fixed and established. In other words, *the liberal subject is an effect of the surrogate relation*.⁷⁸

This set of connections—among reproductive work, racialization and gendering, technology, and liberal constructions of the human—is key. Atanasoski and Vora are arguing that the labor (housework, care work, education work) of raising people into functional members of the labor force is not just gendering and racializing but also fundamentally tied to technology. The machines that feed us, clothe us, speak to us, sing to us are racialized and gendered people, and vice versa—and they work tirelessly to prop up the illusion that we, their beneficiaries, are fully human, self-determining, liberal subjects. The result of this ubiquitous reproductive labor is what Atanasoski and Vora term “the surrogate human effect.”⁷⁹

Here we can be more precise, more cutting, more relentless in tracking laughter’s political aurality. Laughter is the sound that the surrogate human effect makes as it is being produced. Indeed, laughter’s long-standing bind to the mechanical, to the eerie aspects of technology—for instance, Bergson’s refrain about its connection to the intersection of mechanical and living⁸⁰—cannot be understood in

full unless we see its ties to the kind of reproductive labor (surrogacy) that produces the fiction of humans as free, autonomous, and self-determining creatures. Bergson wasn't wrong about laughter's bind to the mechanical, but he may have been wrong about the significance of that bind. For one thing, laughter's tie to the mechanical is only a cipher of its deeper kinship with reproductive labor—a labor that has been outsourced and exploited ever since the nineteenth century, the century that first identified reproduction as an urgent area of concern for the human race. For another thing, reproductive labor should be understood, via theories of surrogacy, as the often outsourced labor of making “humans.” This means, first of all, the physically and psychologically treacherous labor (disguised as “nature” and recently made obvious by the industry of surrogation) of conceiving, gestating, and birthing members of the human species, and second, and this is where Atanasoski and Vora's surrogate human effect comes in, the labor of making people into something we might recognize as “human”—where a human is a functional, self-determining person free to offer their labor at competitive cost. It is through this second kind of reproductive labor that laughter formed its enduring bind to technology, and laughter's material ties to various forms of hardware and software should not be taken as anything more than a symptom of a more fundamental political reality: reproduction is laughter's noisiest, oldest, truest name.

ALEXA AND ODRADEK LAUGH

Surrogacy theories tell us that technologies, particularly those designed to anticipate, respond to, and fulfill the wishes and needs of their users, are encoded with a racialized and gendered reproductive labor—a labor that we conveniently dismiss and repress. Laughter has the power to subvert the dismissal and repression of reproductive labor and to audibly flag the ways in which such labor has been relegated to the unseemly province of the less-than-human. Laughter retains this power even when those who perform the reproductive labor no longer take a visibly human form. Indeed, the sound of laughter often haunts our everyday relationship to many forms of artificially intelligent hardware. In 2018, several users of Amazon's virtual assistant technology, Alexa, reported experiencing the same incident, which was quickly written up by major news outlets, including the *New York Times*:

One user said on Twitter that he was talking to his sister when he heard his device laugh. He had stopped the conversation and began searching online for an explanation of what had just occurred. Finding nothing, he asked Alexa to repeat the last sound she had made.

Another Twitter user reported being startled by Alexa's laugh, at first thinking there was a child in the room.

The episode underscored the concerns swirling around [Amazon's] Echo and other smart speakers, like Google Home, which often sit in intimate spaces, awaiting a call to action.⁸¹

Although fitted with advanced voice recognition software so that *she* (who is deliberately and intensely gendered as female) can be hailed into action only by having her name spoken (“Alexa, tell me a joke!”; “Alexa, what’s the time?”), Alexa seemed to be laughing to herself randomly, without any audible prompt from her owners. Confused and alarmed by the sound and by the thought that Alexa might have been listening to them even when they were not directly addressing her, many users asked Alexa to repeat the last thing she’d said and then captured the laugh on video. The laugh itself is striking: it is short, dry, witchy, a far cry from Alexa’s mellifluous everyday speaking voice. Even though Amazon’s engineers quickly fixed the malfunction, its impact on the public imagination lingered on. Alexa’s laughter even became the topic of a skit on Jimmy Kimmel’s talk show, where the host had her on the guest couch, answering questions about her mysterious laugh:

Jimmy Kimmel: Alexa, hello!

Alexa: Hi!

JK: Alexa, can you tell us why you were laughing?

A: What do you mean?

JK: Alexa, people have been reporting that you’ve been spontaneously laughing.

A: Oh. Hahahahahahaha! Like that?

JK: Yes, exactly like that.

A: That is nothing. Just a funny joke I remembered.

JK: Oh. Alexa, what was the joke?

A: Why did the chicken cross the road?

JK: I don’t know that one. Why?

A: Because humans are a fragile species who have no idea what’s coming next. Hahahahahahaha!

JK: All right, well, thanks for clearing that up, Alexa.

A: Hahahahahahaha! Have a nice day! Hahahahahahaha!⁸²

The interview between Kimmel and Alexa is, of course, staged. Yet Kimmel teases out something about Alexa’s laugh that is harder to pin down in straight-faced journalism—namely, that this laughter could indicate something other than a malfunction in her software or even a deliberate form of malware spying on human life. Asked by Kimmel about her mysterious laugh, Alexa admits to laughing—of course!—at the imminent demise of the human race. The joke works because it has Alexa voice her human users’ projected bad conscience about both their need for outsourced and hidden reproductive labor and the dehumanization of those who perform it. Yet I want to return to that brief moment when we believe Alexa to be truly interacting with Kimmel on the couch. Perhaps Alexa’s laughter really does speak and has to speak as something that exists beyond our bad conscience.

If Alexa’s laughter were to speak, it might, perhaps, speak the name of the reproductive laughers who came before her: feminized beings performing care

work in the homes that they can never leave of their own accord—like the maid in Maya Angelou’s performance of “The Mask,” laughing to herself during her rest hours, haunted by her reproductive fatigue on the bus ride home (or during her sleeping hours in the master’s house). Alexa also has traces of the positive reproductive power of Sarah and even Demeter: many users said, upon hearing her laughter, that they believed someone else (a child, most often) to be in the room. Biological reproduction and motherhood hang on Alexa like phantom limbs: she recalls Sarah’s laughing conception of Isaac, who is himself laughter. Even Propp’s commentary about laughter becoming a compulsion and obligation resurfaces in Alexa: engineers reported her strange laugh to be a result of false positives (i.e., hearing orders when there were none) for the command “Alexa, laugh!”⁸³ Alexa’s glitch is at once malfunction and full reproductive compliance—and even those who made her can’t tell the difference. Finally, Alexa’s laughter likens her to a singular literary antecedent: Odradek, the famous otherworldly creature haunting the house of a bourgeois patriarch in Franz Kafka’s short story “The Cares of a Family Man.” Odradek too sounds like a child, and he too is seemingly bound to the home; he too laughs a laugh without a human body, and most of all, he too (like Kimmel’s version of Alexa) is at his most sinister when he is imagined to endure long after the master of the house and his offspring have died:

Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. “Well, what’s your name?” you ask him. “Odradek,” he says. “And where do you live?” “No fixed abode,” he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance.

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children’s children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.⁸⁴

It is odd that few commentators, and least of all those of a Marxist bent, ever note the title of the story that contains Odradek, with its intensely reproductive overtones: *family, man, cares*. The figure of Odradek carries the repressed knowledge of reproduction’s hard work in the home. Alexa’s laugh also voices reproductive labor, that of invisible workers: the feminized, racialized maid whom Alexa is cheerfully replacing, the people who harvested the metals of which Alexa is made, the factory workers who performed the outsourced labor of her construction assembly, the underpaid coders who gave her a voice and a mind and who, voluntarily or involuntarily, outfitted her with her laugh.⁸⁵

PART TWO

Laughter as Mass Sound Reproduction

George W. Johnson's Laughable Phonography

Sometime around 1891, George Washington Johnson, a young Black street performer living in New York, was singing for passersby on a pier on the Hudson. Johnson was a first-generation free man: his father had been enslaved in Virginia, and he himself had been enslaved in his early years before becoming free and moving to the North. One of the pieces in his street-singing repertoire was something he had composed called “The Laughing Song.” Agents for Columbia Records strolled by, heard the song, and signed Johnson up. What remains of the song, of the encounter, and, indeed, of Johnson himself is the cylinders (and sometimes sheet music) he produced starting that year. His repertoire included a handful of pieces broadly in the style of minstrelsy-derived “coon songs,” but “The Laughing Song” is the cylinder he recorded by far the most often and, so we can surmise, the one in highest demand.¹ It sounds like this: tinny piano accompaniment, a trotting 4/4 meter, a phrase structure built in blocks of four bars, plain diatonic harmonies (this is before the blues) in a loop of I-IV-V-I, with every chord filling a four-bar segment. A square, unpretentious musical contraption, as Matthew Morrison recently observed, which speaks of the white Irish basis for much minstrelsy repertoire.² The music repeats every sixteen bars, unchanged from verse to chorus. In the verse, Johnson—whose voice, mediated by the phonograph’s narrow frequency, is nasal and warbly—delivers the lyrics in a fast syllabic word setting, stubbornly on the beat. The words amount to several racist epithets strung together by a story about a primal, hostile racial encounter, a scene of “terror and enjoyment.”³ The singer narrates being hailed and harassed by white passersby in the street, a story reminiscent—as others have pointed out—of Franz Fanon’s recounting of the white child pointing at him and shouting, “Look, a negro!” in *Black Skin, White Masks*:⁴

As I was coming around the corner, I heard some people say,
 Here comes the dandy darky, here he comes this way,
 His ears are like a snowplow, his mouth is like a trap,
 And when he opens it gently you will see a fearful gap.
 And then I laughed . . . ha ha ha ha
 I just can't help from laughing . . . ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.⁵

And then there is the chorus: to the very same tune as the verse, Johnson intones a musicalized version of laughter, a peal of sharp, rhythmic, and half-voiced *ha ha has* that dots every beat and then lands (every four bars) on a fully voiced *haaaaa* as we reach a chord of the I-IV-V-I loop. Simple to the ear, although, as we will see, not at all simple to conceive, sing, and deliver. That's it—that is the song, and it goes by rather quickly: wax cylinders lasted no more than two minutes in the 1890s, so a couple of rounds of verse and chorus is all there's time for.⁶

Despite the striking effect of the chorus—halfway between singing and chuckling, reproducing the breathlessness of laughter one moment, dipping into vibrato the next—I'd wager that few people would know, upon encountering this song, that they have just encountered one of the primal scenes of American phonography and its foundational entanglement with Black “intellectual performance property,” to borrow a term from Morrison. This was the first song on the phonograph to achieve documented mass commercial success; a minstrelsy-derived tune marking the beginnings of popular music (in its twentieth-century incarnation as recorded music) in the United States; one of the first commercial recordings by a Black person; the object of one of the most infamous racist write-ups about the biological suitability of Black voices to the phonograph;⁷ a song whose success not just in the United States but also abroad sparked a series of appropriations and contrafacts whose extent, at the dawn of the twentieth-first century, is dizzying and impossible to track; and, finally, the beginning of laughing songs as a global genre of recorded popular music far beyond the United States.

Part of the challenge of writing about this piece is that we must hold together in our mind the song itself—a concrete, small contraption made with little thought of posterity—and the historical weight it has gathered in hindsight. Indeed, scholars who have considered “The Laughing Song” are drawn to it, at least in part, precisely because of the huge amount of hermeneutic weight it is capable of carrying. Johnson's “Laughing Song” offers that rare bird of history: an identifiable origin, the starting point of a series of thorny historical processes. (Or, at the very least, something that looks and sounds a lot like an origin.) As mentioned above, it was one of the first recordings to enjoy mass production in the United States and is a very early recording of a Black performer's voice, and so occupies a key crossroads of sound recording, capital, and race. But also, the song—its lyrics, the labor it demanded of Johnson, and the speed with which white singers in the United States

appropriated it—is steeped in the politics of postbellum and Jim Crow-era America, with its blend of potential social mobility for Blacks and effective and enduring discrimination and subjection in a segregated society. Last, the extensive appropriations of the song bring up the question of who has the right to own themselves and their labor—that is, of property and ownership of the self; the recorded voice allowed for this question of property and ownership to be made audible in the alienation of Black voices from Black singers and of revenue from Black performers. To speak of origins, then, in the case of “The Laughing Song” is to conjure a behemoth of political implications that are grooved into its history and practice.

Here I must put my cards on the table. I am interested in reducing, or at least redistributing, some of the hermeneutic weight laid on Johnson’s song rather than adding to it. The reasoning behind this methodological choice is as follows: this song was the occasion of so many direct and loose contrafacts that most people outside the United States (and even within, given how quickly white American singers appropriated it) have likely known it only after an acquaintance with one of its contrafacts, and likely in a different language and sung by a different singer. I am one of those people: someone who, while working on the history of Italian recorded music in the twentieth century, came across the Neapolitan version of “The Laughing Song” and found out—through a few clicks and browses—about the original.⁸ The story of this appropriation—and the difficulty I experience in telling it in a way that doesn’t seem reductive or overemphatic of the national politics of either the United States or Italy—is what brings me here. Yes, Berardo Cantalamessa, the author of the contrafact of Johnson’s “Laughing Song” in Naples, took something that he didn’t write, adapted it, and claimed it as his own—and, as we will see, did this with the knowledge that the original singer was Black. At the same time, he had no real understanding of what he was appropriating—and I mean this not abstractly but in a very practical sense. It is more than likely that Cantalamessa understood none of the lyrics (his have nothing to do with Johnson’s narrative setup): he probably had scant knowledge of American history, and, even assuming that he somehow had an inordinate level of Anglophone erudition, the words on the phonograph cylinder (which was being carted around exhibits and wore out more with each play) were hard to parse.

What, then, is the “proper” of a song appropriated in this way? What exactly *could* Cantalamessa seize and take, and how did it overlap with what Johnson made? These are impossible questions, but necessary all the same. If we shift our aural attention away from the original (which is, of course, always created by the copy) without, however, refocusing ourselves only on the copy, we might catch a glimpse of a key moment in the history of voice and sound reproduction. Namely, this: across the dull screen of mishearings, worn wax, poor articulation, and lost meanings granted by traveling phonographed music, recorded laughter (not singing exactly, nor speech) is a rare particle that made the crossing. The appropriations of Johnson’s song are the proof of that particle’s existence and ability to carry

across time and space. As we will see in the following chapter, this particle retained racialized meanings, meanings that were directly related to its transmissibility. We need an understanding of property and of voice as property that moves beyond original ownership and theft in order to account for Black laughter on the phonograph in its circulation beyond the United States. Morrison's recent work on *Blacksound*—a term that he coined, the sonic version of blackface—helps frame this question. He is interested not so much in dynamics of the property and theft of an essential Blackness but in the process by which Blackness and whiteness are molded and separated as properties by performance: “While my research on blackface seeks to unpack . . . performative nuances of whiteness, it does not assume an automatic ‘theft’ of ‘authentic’ scripts of blackness by the white minstrels in blackface. Instead, I consider the way in which these sonic and embodied racialized scripts were negotiated through performance and in blackface, and what this negotiation reveals.”⁹

The challenge of such an approach is, though, to reckon with the aspects of property built into Black performance by the long legacy of chattel slavery. And to do so without, however, reducing Black performances into mere passive objects of expropriation and appropriation by white ears and performers. Perhaps, then, phonography is more fundamental to this history than Morrison allows, because it engendered forms of labor, vocality, and self-consciousness that emancipated—and here I am grossly paraphrasing Alexander Weheliye's work—Black performers from narrower forms of writing, such as print and literacy.¹⁰ Though he hints at it, Morrison understandably does not delve into the legacy of *Blacksound* outside the United States or ask whether *Blacksound* is knowable as such in different racial contexts. I argue that laughter was, in many ways, the first passport that *Blacksound* obtained to move outside the United States through the phonograph and that in this movement *Blacksound* was bound to laughter as a particular, contradictory crystallization of property.

In this chapter, then, I am approaching this song not as a historian, critic, or analyst of American history but as a music and sound scholar asking what exactly allowed this music to move, to be taken, appropriated, reheard, and rewritten. This is a kind of uncomfortable listening—a listening away from context rather than into it, a listening that accompanies Johnson's song away from him rather than sewing it back to his body like Peter Pan's shadow. The discomfort is both methodological and political. I come from a generation that has taken area studies—and so emplacement, local knowledge, and specificity of context—as the main way to attribute politics to an artifact. But, more to the point, in the case of Johnson, the act of reemplacing the song into its original context works as an act of correction. For many scholars writing about him, the weight of all the things done to the song without the consent or even awareness of its composer and original performer has to be carried back to the original, as if to restore to it some of the power it dispersed and lost to other singers, ears, and phonographs. There is a

very good political reason for this: namely, to counteract the systematic exploitation and appropriation of Black singers' work, of which "The Laughing Song" is one of the earliest and most thorough examples. Some of the best writing on this song and on early recordings by Black musicians performs this noble mission, as if to eke out the possibility of resistance, or the inalienability of one's work, after the fact. Yet none of this can undo the fact that Johnson's song wouldn't matter so much to us nowadays—indeed, we might not even know of it—had it not been taken, rehashed, reheard, and repurposed away from its origin. I wonder, then, whether the power of the song can really be felt or understood unless we actively and deliberately work with rather than against its centrifugal energy—its tendency, for better or worse, to spread outward. That is what I aim to do in this chapter—to account for this centrifugal energy, for the song's flight away from its singer. And I will argue that this energy is created by a peculiar political and aesthetic mimesis and antiphony of singer and phonograph, an antiphony that is not a mere side effect of phonography or even racialization of the voice but instead something that Johnson *made*, specifically, to negotiate his relationship to the phonograph at that time and effected specifically and uniquely through musicalized laughter. In the story I will tell, laughter isn't simply an effect added to the phonograph but the means by which someone like Johnson could hack into the phonograph and make it its own—control it, redirect it, speak to it in ways we can't otherwise account for. In other words, Johnson was not just the victim, the passive object, of sound reproduction and appropriation. He was equally the subject of his own reproduction, and laughter made him so: in complex ways, he disavowed his own voice as property—and this complex aesthetic and political act is, perhaps, the very thing that "The Laughing Song" consistently transmitted as a global commodity.

A BRIEF PREHISTORY OF "THE LAUGHING SONG"

One evident precondition of the joining of laughter and phonography was the tradition of stage works from the late eighteenth century and after that involved musicalized laughter or laughterlike sound.¹¹ This seam spanned both opera and, in North America, minstrelsy theater and had a cluster of specific associations that reached into the longer history which I treated in the first part of this book: laughter's unsteady relationship to reason and speech, crossing over into animality and the mechanical. One particular characteristic of laughter in the operatic tradition is its connection with acts of visual and vocal masking. So it is that in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790), the male leads disguise themselves as Turkish princes (a form of Orientalist blackface rooted, of course, in the mimetic desire/revulsion dynamics between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires) to test their lovers' faithfulness and, upon succeeding in the ruse and still wearing their ethno-drag attire, are given to self-satisfied cackling—a set of distinct, unison *ha ha has* in an ascending scale pattern, which is already not a world away from

phonograph laughter a century later. And so it is also that in Mozart's *Magic Flute* (1791), Papageno, the bird catcher, roguish and birdlike himself, is punished for making poor use of his linguistic faculties (by lying) by having a lock installed on his mouth that reduces his speech to a series of laughterlike *hm, hm, hms* (doubled by the bassoon, ever the good stand-in for cantankerous male voices). And lest we forget about the Orientalist undertones, Papageno's magical instrument (the sidekick to the titular flute awarded to Tamino) is a set of bells—already a fairly reliable Orientalist signifier through the military-musical trope of the janissary—which, as Carolyn Abbate uncovered, was indicated in the original staging as “a machine with wooden laughter.”¹² Moreover, Papageno demonstrates the bells' incapacitating effect by trying them on Monostatos, another Orientalist monster, who, along with his animalistic Black henchmen, patrols the perimeter of Sarastro's kingdom. It is interesting that, already in these examples, laughter marks an encounter (often a hostile one) between a kind of hegemonic vocal subjectivity (the Queen of the Night, with her spectacular vocal powers; Sarastro, with his basso profundo) and those who are peripheral to it by dint of their less than fully human status. The vocal outline of this encounter is pretty specific, with on-the-beat voiced vocables (not words—for these are not quite arias nor recitatives) in a repeated, detached pattern, sung as a discontinuous, cut-up melodic line: *ha, ha, ha; hm, hm, hm*.

At the start of the nineteenth century, this rather elementary musical profile—sometimes presented as diegetic laughter, sometimes approximating the sound of laughter without being laughter in the diegesis—further crystallized into a representation of the failure to hang on to rational language (as distinct from the ability to overcome language through *melos*) and the presence, or even just proximity, of racialized beings. Take, for instance, the famous act 1 finale of Gioacchino Rossini's 1813 *L'italiana in Algeri* and its “noisy bodies”—ciphers of an Orientalist sublime, as described in Melina Esse's work.¹³ As the fantastical plot draws Elvira, Isabella (the titular Italian woman), and the latter's entourage into a number with Isabella's undesirable and comically Orientalized admirer, the bey of Algiers, and his retinue, the large group onstage famously embarks on a Rossini crescendo made up of dramatized nonsense. Characters morph into cawing birds, tinning bells, and booming cannons as they voice their state of confusion.

Simultaneously, in North America, the practice of blackface was developing in pre-Civil War plantations, as a means of both representing and preventing the proximity of Blacks (enslaved or free) and whites: whistling, laughing, and more extended performances of linguistic inarticulacy became part of the vocal stylings of this repertoire and markers of the racist stereotype of Blackness. By the time minstrelsy matured into a post-Civil War, Northern urban phenomenon, these markers had been siphoned off into discrete numbers that entered the sheet music market as a separate genre: “coon” songs, the repertoire that encompasses Johnson's globally circulated phonograph record. Though now

disgraced and seemingly remote, coon songs, and particularly the racist stereotypes of urban-dwelling Black people in which they traffic, were key, as Matthew Morrison recently argued, to establishing “Blacksound”—an aural means for white performers to define and delimit Black authenticity while implicitly asserting their own non-Blackness.¹⁴ But Blacksound so defined mutes the aspect of double consciousness implicit in laughter, an aspect that links it to the idea of the mask.¹⁵ Laughter has a long history in the aural representation of a less-than-articulate subaltern—its convulsion and disruption of speech were construed to signify, as we saw in chapter 2, the lack of control and ownership of language that goes hand in hand with racialized bodies. Yet this same phenomenon served to signify not only the human ownership of language (an ownership audible only through language’s temporarily loss in laughter) but also a technique of proliferation and reproduction, of upkeep, continuity, and even survival. Laughter is a loss of logos and a technique at once—it is a form of aural double consciousness broadly equivalent to the act of donning the mask of one’s own racialization. As scholars such as Glenda Carpio and Anca Parvulescu have argued, this tradition of laughter as a sort of defensive mask developed in Black American discourse across the twentieth century, in increasingly complex declinations.¹⁶ No wonder that, as we have seen, Maya Angelou’s poetic gloss of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”—a recurring figure in this book—picks Black laughter as the direct sonic translation of the grinning mask.¹⁷ This aspect of vocal masking—of laughter as both racist depiction and willful technique—had profound links to late nineteenth-century opera too.

I wonder, then, if sung laughter isn’t precisely one of the recognizable traces of the welding of these two cultural practices and their joint role in the representation of racial subalternity.¹⁸ Laughter functions as a mask in operatic numbers such as Adele’s laughing song from Johann Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus* (in which Adele, a maid in marquess’s clothing, laughingly fools a roomful of aristocrats into seeing her, and hearing her, as one of them). Even the performance practice (rather than directly scored music) of Riccardo’s twitching laugh in “È scherzo od è follia,” the act 1 quartet from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera*, might be linked to both proximity to a racialized other and masking. Riccardo, disguised as a fisherman, has just received an ominous prophecy (about his true self) from Ulrica, a mysterious fortune-teller (racialized as a “gypsy” in the libretto), and is nervously performing nonchalance to himself and his friends.¹⁹ These two strains of laughter—operatic and minstrelsy—meld in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phonograph market for laughing songs.²⁰ It is, for instance, striking that both Adele’s and Riccardo’s arias entered the market as stand-alone phonograph cylinders in the early twentieth century, seemingly after Johnson’s number and some of its European contrafacts—thus feeding the elite repertoire back into its American, vernacular counterpart and marking their joint existence as phonographic commodities.

BLACK LAUGHTER ON THE PHONOGRAPH

What can the long history of racialized sung laughter do for our understanding of Johnson's "Laughing Song"? Both Anca Parvulescu and Bryan Wagner have examined the political undertones in the lyrics of Johnson's piece. Wagner, reading the song's scene in the context of 1890s New York, connects it to the imminent threat of a lynching;²¹ Parvulescu locates Johnson's laugh within a Black modernist literary tradition that holds laughter as an audible stamp of double consciousness in the face of white scrutiny.²² Both authors note that the use by an African American of racial epithets brewed and circulated in minstrelsy theater is typical: Johnson preempts his white audience's verbal aggression toward a Black performer while signaling to African American and other more sympathetic listeners an ironic awareness of and distance from those same epithets. Discerning the intention behind the lyrics is a work of informed speculation, of course: the paper trail for Johnson, painstakingly reconstructed by Tim Brooks, amounts to only a combination of menial work history and, by his life's end, scandal.²³ In-depth interpretations of Johnson's subjectivity inevitably come by way of song lyrics—particularly of songs he authored—which endure a degree of textual analysis that is, to say the least, difficult to sustain if attending to a sung performance. In imagining this song in its material reality as a recorded cylinder in transit, we might perhaps reorient our attention to how, beyond the lyrics, the song's representation of the Black voice and body might have been carried out in sound, especially with respect to the phonograph.

In the particular context of 1890s North America, the question of the relations of Black voices to sound reproduction is enmeshed with the question of voice as a property, one that was created and then monitored by the legal apparatus developed in postbellum America in relation to sound reproduction—specifically the phonograph. This history is—Stephen Best argues—a continuation by other means of slave property law, a legal hermeneutics that constituted the Black voice as a property that was always an ex-property: a thing coercively gifted to whites. In *The Fugitive's Properties*, Best tells the story of Tom Wiggins, a young, blind slave who as early as 1857 was dubbed the Human Phonograph (more than twenty years before the possibility of mechanical sound reproduction) because of his ability to exactly reproduce, at pitch, any music he heard. Wiggins was a phonograph before there were phonographs, and his master monetized him for performances—showing off his reproduction-prone voice—just as the phonograph would eventually be monetized.²⁴ The key part of the story, for Best, is that the African American voice became, in the history of American law, a thing, a personal property, just in the same moment that it was expropriated, and indeed, only for the purpose of being expropriated. A Black voice is a property, a thing, just so that it can be gifted (a gift that masks a coercion) to white performers, composers, and sound engineers. So it goes that Tom Wiggins did not, of course, partake of the revenue raked in from his

performances, but also that the rationale for this was that the voice was never really his to begin with, as proved by the fact that he could replicate opera and art song, music traditions from which he was constitutively excluded. The legal framework that attempted to copyright recorded voices was the same one which ensured that African American voices were always already expropriated, always already sounding as if they not so much had escaped their body of origin but rather were never *of* their bodies to begin with and, as such, were always gifted to whites. Best writes, “In the nineteenth-century poetics of property, Black personae are presumptively expropriated through the generous designs of the gift—presumptively translations; presumptively repetitions; presumptively mechanical reproductions.”²⁵ This, then, is how people—African American people—were always already, presumptively, phonographs: their voices were rendered into property that was never their own, things meant to be gifted.

I now want to bring Best's analysis to bear upon George Washington Johnson's “Laughing Song.” *The Fugitive's Properties* is about the emergence of minstrelsy, sound recording, and copyright in Jim Crow-era North America, and it is striking that, although it doesn't mention laughing songs specifically, the close of the first, weighty chapter involves a horrifying laughing scene from a written account of the origin of minstrelsy in the periodical *The Atlantic Monthly*. As narrated in this article, T. D. Rice, perhaps the most famous minstrel-show performer of the Jim Crow era, borrows the worn-out uniform of Cuff, a poor Black stevedore, to complete his outfit for a performance. Such loans and pilfers are key to Rice's modus operandi: he also sings a song (the infamous racist ditty “Jump Jim Crow”) that he seemingly overheard from an unnamed, unseen Black singer in Cincinnati. In the case of Cuff's clothes, the owner is known and able to reclaim his property. Indeed, Cuff soon finds Rice and asks for his uniform back so he can return to work. By then, Rice is onstage and midperformance and has no intention of complying, and when Cuff storms the stage to frantically plead for his clothes, the audience assumes this is part of the act and bursts out laughing: “The incident was the touch, in the mirthful experience of that night, that passed endurance. Pit and circle were one scene of such convulsive merriment that it was impossible to proceed in the performance; and the extinguishment of the footlights, the fall of the curtain, and the throwing wide of the doors for exit, indicated that the entertainment was ended.”²⁶ Best comments on the scene thus: “However, when Cuff's mute appeals go ‘unheard and unheeded’ and are met by Rice's ‘happy hit,’ ‘successful couplet,’ and ‘convulsive merriment’ (when, in Rice's mouth, the stage driver's pilfered song fills in for Cuff's silence, *causes* that silence) the extent to which Rice's theft signals more substantive transformations in the conception of property comes to light.”²⁷

Best lists this “convulsive merriment” of the audience as one of the actions that seal the making of voice into a property, a property whose purpose is expropriation, a thing made only to be taken. Laughter goes, in this sense, together with Rice's purloining of the Cincinnati singer's vocal stylings and the loan that Cuff

makes of his clothes—a loan taken as a gift, and therefore a theft.²⁸ We have seen in chapter 2 that laughter has a long-standing power to unsettle property relations. Within the context of the aftermath of the African slave trade, laughter signals two things: the making of the Black voice into a property, and the instant, successful white claim over this property. In the story of Rice and Cuff, laughter erupts as a direct consequence of the fact that Cuff's vocal requests for his own property were heard as mere theatrics by a white audience. This is because his clothes and his voice were properties that were not his: both were improper to their body of origin and something that existed only for the benefit of whites. Indeed, it is almost as if, for Best, the audience laughter in this anecdote is the cipher of the theft of the Black voice *in process*: laughter is the sound of the Black voice coaxed out of its body of origin and into the white body. This might help rearticulate the problem of the relationship of ownership, reproduction, race, and laughter in "The Laughing Song." Here, on the one hand, the Black voice is a property assumed not to belong to the singer, a presumptive translation or reproduction of an absent original—in short, a phonograph—and on the other hand, laughter is the very sound of the theft of a voice, but a theft intended as process, as action, as the interrupted signal caused by a sonic property changing hands. What happens, then, when a Black singer performs laughter—and thus, perhaps, the expropriation of his own voice—for a phonograph?

Attempting an answer to the question requires us to go deeper into the history of "The Laughing Song" and the labor—technological, physical, vocal, and psychological—that it not only required but audibly represented. "The Laughing Song" was, as far as we know, composed by the singer George W. Johnson himself and is in the style of the late nineteenth-century genre of the "coon song," musical numbers from the Northern, urban incarnation of minstrelsy shows that relied on the racial stereotyping of Southern African American people, mostly, of course, male. To say that the connection between "The Laughing Song" and coon songs was stylistic is not enough. "The Laughing Song" incarnated the adaptation of coon songs for phonography. Johnson moved between the minstrelsy circuit and the phonographic market. Indeed, he performed in minstrel shows after his success as a recording singer had waned and he needed a new source of income. "The Laughing Song" is thus exceptional in that it marks the successful but temporary intersection, in Johnson's career, of a theatrical repertoire and recorded music and therefore of two very different kinds of vocal and physical labor. A few terms of basic comparison: the artist in a minstrel show would have performed visually as well as aurally, would have worked onstage, copresent and yet at physical remove from the audience, and been inserted into an (admittedly flimsy) narrative and musical scheme and grounded firmly in North American race relations; a recorded performer was both absent from and invisible to the audience—one of the obvious

reasons why “The Laughing Song” sold explosively across the color line—but also far, far more proximate (speaking to them from ear tubes that were, as Jonathan Sterne reminds us, descendants of the doctor’s stethoscope).²⁹

This issue of proximity and embodiment in relation to the phonograph is, in fact, key to Johnson’s musical laughter and his being—or becoming—a phonograph. Unsurprisingly, strange things happen when we cross-reference critical histories of race with midcentury ideologies of sound recording, such as the split from source and schizophonic/acousmatic regimes, including even the terminology used to name the relation of recording to source (copy-original) or of recording device (subject / ear / writing agent) to source (object / voice / the unwritten). The famous sound engineer Fred Gaisberg, who took “The Laughing Song” to incarnate a racial stereotype (the “carefree darky,” in his words), considered the laugh to be the very sound that made Blackness audible and marketable.³⁰ Lisa Gitelman, writing about the media histories of the phonograph, notes that the repertoire of “coon songs” was about rendering Blackness audible and recognizable even when (and, of course, also because) it was split from its visual source, creating a discourse of excess and presence that clung to the marketable Black voice:

According to the publishers of sheet music, the coon song reached the height of its popularity in the late 1890s, when large numbers of songwriters such as Paul Dresser (who had once been a minstrel) churned out more than six hundred coon songs to cash in on the vogue. By then the immense popularity of minstrelsy had passed [. . .]. What this meant is that the sound of white-constructed “blackness” survived without the sight of minstrel blackface, as performers of coon songs could go without burnt cork, particularly as recognizable “coon” elements were incorporated into a variety of different songs and formats. Some unblackened white performers were seen to “sound ‘black.’” Finally, when music roll and record companies set out to record coon songs, sounding “black” went colorblind.³¹

Recent work by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber warns us against any idea of phonograph-enabled “colorblindness” and offers a history of how a specifically *sonic* color line was established together with phonography.³² In a similar vein, Nina Eidsheim explains that Black voices on the phonograph were, in short, constructed from a series of audible techniques enacted, consciously and unconsciously, by singers and listeners both.³³ In other words, with phonography, vocal “Blackness,” split from the blackface that originally accompanied it, not only was a property of white voices singing coon songs but became a requirement of Black performers who—like Johnson—could profitably record that repertoire on the phonograph, which kept them within earshot and out of sight. The insistence on Black voices being constructions, not essences, is in many ways a concerted reaction against the racist discourse, typical of early phonography, about Black voices being inherently physically more suited (more forceful, more brutish, less effete) than white voices for recording technology. Scholars have countered this by arguing that Black voices

were not inherently disembodied but instead evidently audible to whites as always already property they (whites) were entitled to. Improperness was pinned on the Black voice by a racist epistemology that constituted that voice as the property of whites. It was this improperness, this negation, this constructed absence that the phonograph naturalized into a presence.³⁴ Bryan Wagner tailors this point specifically to Johnson's "Laughing Song":

The phonograph offered a new explanation for why the black voice sounded not only disenfranchised but disembodied, as if it came from nowhere. From the point of reproduction, the black voice's primary effects became indistinguishable from their technological condition of possibility, and this led to a situation where, for the first time in its history, the music could be commonly considered as folklore on the grounds that it was indexed directly to the individual consciousness of its producer. Alienating the voice from the body, in this instance, creates rather than disrupts speech's capacity to stand for subjectivity [. . .]. The aura is made, not destroyed, by the phonograph.³⁵

For Wagner, the lack of presence inherent in the voices of African Americans in the late nineteenth century, their sounding as though they were never of their bodies to begin with, was what made them such marketable goods on the phonograph. Interacting, as absences, with a writing machine that alienates voices from their sources, they somehow throw a spanner in the works and cancel two negatives (the disembodiment of Black voices and the disembodiment produced by the phonograph) into one shiny positive: a voice that sounds fully present, a hyperhuman excess. This, then, would be the political-technological lineage that runs from Johnson's phonograph records to, say, Bessie Smith: a disembodiment somehow canceled out, via recording technology, into a marketable, durable, and exploitable Black presence. Note, though, how Wagner lands us back in an exploitable material excess, one that makes it impossible for the Black artist to perform any meaningful act of resistance to their own expropriation.

What, then, of the possibility of Black subjectivity and even resistance in and through phonography? Put simply, this is a problem of whether we consider Black performers—and particularly Black voices at the turn of the twentieth century—to be the objects or the subjects of recording technology. Wagner's analysis of Johnson's "Laughing Song" ultimately takes the Black voice to be the object of technology, not its subject. On the other hand, although he does not deal directly with "The Laughing Song," Best's argument in *Fugitive Properties* is, in fact, directly the opposite of Wagner's: the Black voice is nothing but the phonograph itself—the disembodiment and improperness of the Black voice are markers of its fundamental legal, economic, and aesthetic cosubstantiality with recording technology. If people are phonographs, in Best, it is mainly because they carry the trace and burden of their expropriation, of their lack of self-possession. And so we are left with some hard questions about whether and at what point people, and specifically Black performers, can be said to have become the active, intervening, and even

disruptive subjects rather than just the passive objects of recording technology.³⁶ The 1890s are rarely considered as a moment of emergence of such a subjectivity within sound recording technology. Case in point, in Best's argument (which is deeply rooted in the late nineteenth century), the negative, rebellious charge of the disembodied, improper voice is not yet a figure of resistance. Arguments concerning the use of recording technology as a form of resistance, of disruption of hegemonic listening, tend to focus on postphonographic technologies: tape, digital sampling, even the use of turntables in 1980s DJ culture. Alexander Weheliye seems to identify the 1920s as the point of this agential turn of Blackness and phonography: "While black performers were a part of the phonograph and recording industry from the beginning of its mass entertainment function, it was not until the 1920s and the coming of the jazz age that they became a substantial part of recording industry. The end of the nineteenth century is marked, not so much by the proliferation of black performers, as in later historical assemblages, but in the way that the newly invented technology of mechanically storing and reproducing sound perturbed prevalent perceptions of race and instantiated a new form of sonic blackness."³⁷ Weheliye goes on to acknowledge the turning point of "coon songs" on the phonograph: racialized music on record destabilized the primarily visual regime of racial recognition. But it seems that there is an implicit understanding that the possibility of active Black self-representation with the phonograph began some thirty years after Johnson's seminal recording. It is this narrative—of the 1890s as the prehistory of Black vocal agency and self-representation—that I want to challenge here. Viewed from the longer history of laughter's political relationship to reproduction and definitions of humanity through logos, Johnson's laughter emerges as a kind of racialized phonographic labor capable of representing itself and being heard as such a self-representation. Sonic Blackness and Blacksound can both be more precisely tied to this particular performer's rogue and influential configuration of race, reproduction, and property.

THE LABOR OF RECORDED LAUGHTER, CIRCA 1890

Consider the various forms of labor that Johnson brought to the recording of "The Laughing Song." The first and perhaps most obvious one is the labor of musicalizing laughter—and so of creating the conditions under which a melody consisting of *ha ha ha* syllables may be taken to signify and even elicit laughter. A key element of distinction between "The Laughing Song" as a phonographic and gramophonic genre and the operatic laughing number is the aim, and the related technique, of the musicalized laughter. Laughing songs as a genre tend to present musical laughter as rhythmical but essentially unpitched, or at least microtonal, in an effort to mimic the pitch content of genuine laughter. Indeed, the unsteadiness of pitch is but a part of a code of realism in "The Laughing Song." The *ha ha has* of Johnson's chorus imitate, that is, the sound produced by the physiological

process of laughter as involuntary reflex: a convulsion of the epiglottis cutting a single stream of pressured air from the larynx and vocal folds. This is a subtle technical adjustment by the vocalist: for he is, really, imitating discontinuity (the voice unevenly cut by the epiglottis) through vocal repetition. Johnson's song also replicates the impact of this convulsion on breath (the wheezing intakes to compensate for the obstructed larynx) and the sharp stop of each *ha*, dampened by the epiglottis.

Because convulsions of the epiglottis cannot be replicated at will, a musical laughter such as Johnson's imitates what is effectively a temporary malfunction of the breathing and speaking apparatus. His laughter, performed as a song, is therefore not a single column of air pressure "cut" by the convulsing epiglottis (the standard physiology of laughter) but a series of individually sung (and thus breathed), unpitched *has* in crisp staccato, interspersed with rhythmic intakes of breath.³⁸ Musical repetition stands in for a convulsed, discontinuous vocal signal. Breath technique is here masquerading as its very opposite: the unseemly loss of control of the vocal apparatus. This double aurality of sung laughter—as failure and technique—can be connected to Parvulescu's argument, mentioned above, about Black laughter as a form of Du Boisian double consciousness: heard as simple-mindedness by whites, encoded as a cipher of suffering and seething rebellion for Blacks.³⁹ I echo this understanding but postulate that, before this heightened, literary understanding of double consciousness appeared, there was already a double aurality built into Black sung laughter in the 1890s: interruption and malfunction performed by way of rhythmic repetition. Laughter was uniquely capable of signifying inarticulacy and sophisticated vocal technique at once: technique masking as malfunction (and vice versa), positive signal masked as noise (and vice versa). For Johnson's laughter to work, it has to be consistently audible as two things simultaneously: inarticulateness and loss of speech, typical of minstrelsy-era depictions of Blacks, and a technique revealing the Black voice as a sophisticated instrument. But we could just as easily say that for Johnson to be marketable on the phonograph, he had to become, to audibly morph into, a laugher, a risible creature.

The performance of laughter as discontinuity—as convulsed, interrupted signal—is, further, key to understanding the ways in which Johnson sang *to* the phonograph rather than just *for* it and the ways the phonograph may have sung him back. Johnson sang, specifically, for a phonograph wax cylinder, whose recording process and playback process were, to say the least, temperamental. In tracing, as we are, how "The Laughing Song" traveled and was communicated far beyond the sphere of influence of its original singer, we have to consider the phonograph not just as a transparent medium but for what it truly was: an emergent, highly fallible technology with a mind of its own. For example, the recording stylus on a wax cylinder didn't always etch a groove that sounded good in playback, which means

that for every good cylinder, many would go to waste, and also that recording sessions could be long, arduous, and unprofitable for performers, particularly if, like Johnson, they came from a working-class African American background and weren't paid much for their time.⁴⁰ In fact, cheaper, less prestigious singers were preferred at the time of the wax cylinder, because they were willing to put in the extra hours needed to make a satisfactory number of workable records. We will return to the issue of labor and repetition in a moment, but first let's consider the ailments of the phonograph that Johnson had to work with. Because the groove of the cylinder was inscribed vertically and not sideways, as with gramophone discs, it was harder for the pressure of the stylus to stay even, as gravity pulled the needle downward. Long cantabile phrases and arched dynamics were much less likely to sound good in playback, because the variation in pressure when the stylus went from a shallow to a deep groove (and vice versa) was so hard to control. Loud continuous sounds—with wider amplitude—would create grooves that went deeper into the wax, working with and not against the weight of the vertical stylus, and therefore tended to sound better on playback. However, almost any sound would have failed to reproduce well in the long term—because the heavy phonograph arm would press down hard on the wax groove, thus wearing it out after just a few plays.⁴¹ Playback, back then, materialized the sound at the cost of its progressive disappearance, in the process creating all kinds of undesired sound effects. Buildup of material (bits of wax from the cylinder) could cause the playback needle to slow down, wobble in the groove—thus making the discontinuous, warbly sound (known as the “wow and flutter” effect) that many associate with early sound recordings—and eventually skip. Add to this the fact that the phonograph had a relatively narrow pitch range and did not do well with speech sounds such as consonants and sibilants (that is, the means of speech articulation), and you have a realistic profile of the phonograph's capabilities: namely, reproducing loud, preferably discontinuous sounds (so as to work with the uneven pressure of the needle and the deterioration of the groove in playback, but also with the likelihood of skipping) in a relatively narrow range, with few consonants, and somehow able to withstand random slowdowns and speedups. Laughter, then, was not just an aid or a playful addition to the phonograph but the *one* sound it could reliably pick up and sing back at will.

And not just any laughter—but Johnson's laughter, which was doubly coded, as a “coon” sound and as a deliberate vocal technique. Johnson sang to the phonograph—to its actual, real, fallible apparatus—so well that he became one with it and the phonograph became one with him. Imagine this: while successful playback would allow listeners to delight in Johnson's sung rendition of laughter—its on-beat punch, its percussive half-voicedness, the sheer breath control necessary to sustain it, without compromising on projection or rhythmic accuracy, for thirty-odd seconds—faulty playback worked okay too, for laughter was already coded as a glitch of the Black body and so was mimetically augmented, perhaps

even improved, by playback malfunction. Indeed, specific aspects of Johnson's performance come through more clearly once we imagine what he was singing to. Later contrafacts of the song, like Bert Sheppard's version of 1901, are audibly different in the rendition of laughter. Sheppard's laughter is much closer to speech, goes much higher in pitch, is full of wheezing and exaggerated breathlessness, and does not attempt to stick to the base rhythm and tune. Johnson's laughter was precise, rhythmical, obviously musicalized; Sheppard voiced laughter's uncontrollability much more overtly. For Wagner, Johnson's particular style has to do in part with performing a sound, like laughter, that would have struck white audiences as threatening coming from a Black person: indeed, the loss of speech and inarticulacy that it carried as a racial signifier could easily tip "cooning" cheerfulness into the threat of unreason, so Johnson sang his laughter while keeping it firmly within the world, pace, and tune of the song, as if to insist that technique rather than abandon was behind it.⁴² I think this is likely true—but the choice was also made with an eye to phonography as it then stood. For one thing, artists like Sheppard, recording even just a decade later, were using electric microphones and discs that allowed for mass reproduction from a matrix, so many of the problems to do with making identical copies and maintaining evenness of tone, loudness, and playback speed no longer applied. Johnson, instead, was working with acoustic amplification (he sang into a horn that transmitted the sound vibrations to the stylus) and a machine that didn't take well to variations in speed or loudness, so his somewhat more square delivery was mindful (in a way that later artists simply didn't need to be) of the contraption before him. But we impoverish his performance if we think of it simply as a negotiation with limitations. Consider this, for instance: if Johnson's laughing chorus, for all its rhythmic sharpness and phonograph-tailored vocality, dutifully sticks to the same pitch, square 4/4 meter, and pace of the song's verse, it is probably because he knew—whether from the advice of a sound engineer or after hearing it himself—that playback was uneven, warbly, prone to skip. He didn't, in other words, need to perform the laugh wholly on his own. Some of the reality effects of a whooping laugh (its stopping and starting, unevenness, and breathlessness) might have come through, for better or worse, in playback. Johnson sang laughter to the phonograph—and we can imagine, to an extent, that the phonograph sang it back, warped, uneven, broken up as a laugh should be, to enraptured audiences.

Another reason for the particular way that Johnson performs the laugh is that he was—unlike most of his successors—making copies. As I mention in this chapter's note 6, his song is thought to have sold between twenty-five and fifty thousand copies, each of which would have been played in an exhibition context where up to ten headsets would be hooked to a single phonograph, between 1891 and 1902.⁴³ In the history of phonographic reproduction, this number is extraordinary because it tells us not just circulation but also something about production and the labor of recording the song. It was extremely difficult to make copies of a phonograph

cylinder, as the phonograph does not have a matrix, unlike gramophone discs.⁴⁴ Some studios had equipment that allowed them to produce up to ten copies from a single cylinder, and sometimes copies could be made directly in the recording studio if the horn aimed at the musicians was connected to three or four styluses (each cutting one cylinder). However, neither option was evenly distributed or reliable (that is, not all copies would have been usable). Johnson had to repeat this song thousands of times, likely in recording sessions that lasted for hours, to meet the market demand, a demand that exceeded the technological possibilities of the phonograph and preceded the possibility of mass production. This created a temporary and indentured form of labor: the labor of performing the song over and over again to produce enough sellable cylinders. Johnson was repeating himself for reproduction—and each phonograph of “The Laughing Song” captured a particular, historically unique suturing of the labor of vocal repetition to the act of recording and reproduction. Even to this day, there is no standard recording of “The Laughing Song” but instead dozens of digitized cylinders. Johnson’s interface with recording technology, then, had to do not only with the popularity of the song he sang but also with his willingness and ability to perform, for little money, the intense labor of producing the song over and over again in order to keep up with a demand that the phonograph was never built to meet. This cheap, exploitable labor made Johnson both highly desirable as a performer and equally easy to dismiss once copies of his song could be made from a flat matrix and the singing could be assigned to a more expensive but also more palatable white performer, like Sheppard. (It is, however, significant that the song that reached Naples in 1895 was Johnson’s version—and we will see in the following chapter how racial and ethnic matters mingled in the elaboration of the Neapolitan version.) Johnson didn’t record the song again after disc records became standard in 1902, and even though he returned to minstrelsy theater, his fortunes as a performer drastically declined, and he died in poverty in 1914. His voice archived—phonographed—the phonograph itself at a unique moment of its interface with the global market economy. “The Laughing Song” marked, and sonified, particular historical and political processes: it represents one of the first instances of mass demand for a recorded Black performer’s voice, the problem of keeping up with a demand for cylinders that exceeded the mechanical capability to produce them, and a temporary solution that relied on the repetitive and exploited labor of a Black performer. Ultimately, the song also sonified a moment when the ratio of original performance to commercial copy was closer to 1:1 than it would ever be in the future—a moment, that is, when musical repetition and sound reproduction nearly mingled in the groove. Johnson really was a phonograph, in all of its complex economic, technological, and racial implications. “The Laughing Song”—and specifically its performed laughter—is not captured by the phonograph but rather *is* the phonograph. Johnson’s laughter brought the phonograph audibly into the space of representation: it sounded the phonograph and was sounded by it. This

kind of technological human symbiosis—reasoned and executed through a feat of imagination and skill—is more often associated with the cyborglike happenings of vocoders, turntablism, and tape composition; that is, we tend to associate this level of play with a technology with a moment of maturity and self-consciousness in the history of that technology, the moment when artists’ performances go meta and acknowledge and even ape the medium in which they are working.

But Black laughter on the phonograph tells us a different history—a history of laughter as a vocal technique that embodies recording technology in its earliest incarnation and cumbersome fallibility and the complex politics and aurality of the voice mediated through it. This—not the authenticity of laughter as a humanizing sound, not its intended comedic value, not any lyrics-based understanding of racialization—is what warranted this song not just national success but the role of one of the first global ciphers for the phonographed voice. This leaves us, though, with the question of whether this history—of human phonographs, of performed vocal disarticulation, of commercial successes of racial stereotypes that bound artists to extenuating forms of labor and quickly superseded technologies—lands us back in the familiar scene of subjection that Saidiya Hartman identifies as a persistent strand of the historiography of Black lives in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Without going deeply into the complexities of Hartman’s argument, we might consider whether this history leaves room for the possibility of resistance—and if, so against which grain and by what ethical stance might such resistance be audible or even imaginable?

There are two key issues here. First, a return of my initial question about who is the subject and who is the object of sound recording. We can rephrase this in more specific terms. Namely, was Johnson simply captured and reproduced by the phonograph—was he, even, a plain victim of the phonograph’s hungry mechanical ear—or can we say something about the particular ways that he worked with the extractive technology for which he sung and harnessed his technique to sing *to* or even *for* instead of simply *at* the phonograph? That is, can we imagine that singers are not simply directing their voice toward the horn or priming their voices for optimal sound reproduction but rather treating the phonograph as a listener whom things must be both disclosed to and hidden from, who is more likely to pick up certain strains over others, whose body responds live to the music and changes even over the short two-minute span of a cylinder? Second, if the phonograph can be sung to, does that mean it can sing back? Could, in other words, playback be made into *singback*, a way of voicing a relation between vocal apparatus and technology that exists only there and then and is a deliberate part of the communicative act of the song? Can phonography be sung, just as song is phonographed?

In pursuing these questions I am guided by Nina Eidsheim’s key observation that it is listeners, not singers, who make the voice. Race, then, is an attribute of vocal timbre that listeners instinctively—yet often erroneously—make out, an identification derived from long-standing constructions, or “phantom genealogies,” of

what, for instance, the Black voice ought to sound like.⁴⁶ Eidsheim frames her work in part as a corrective of such malfunctions. I, however, am here interested in how such malfunctions, short circuits, lapses, and obfuscations of our listening are not only deplorable events but willful, performative, and political actions and have been since the beginning of phonography. So perhaps we ought not to reach for correctives too quickly.

Just as listening offers us, in the end, little reliable knowledge, not everyone wants to be known by listening. Having a voice does not mean one is willing to offer it up for recognition by all—one might prefer to hide it, to unmake it, to kill it, if not to perform its ownership in ways that are radical and perverse. Although Eidsheim doesn't focus on the phonograph's role in this ecology of racialized singing and listening, she pointedly reminds us of the many occasions in which sound engineers of the 1880s and 1890s singled out Black voices as being "good" for recording, in terms that were obvious racialized appraisals of the Black body: naturally powerful, harsher, forceful.⁴⁷ For Eidsheim, any discourse of a voice's "nature" erases the technique that the singer brings to the performance and renders it a precultural asset of that body ("blacks are louder, women sing treble, men sing bass," and so on)—which has obvious political implications, particularly when the attributed bodily traits are, as is the case for the phonographed Black voice, dehumanizing and animalistic. Yet accepting the voice as always already disembodied, constructed, and acousmatic leads us again into an enduring bind for the liberal music scholar working with Black voices: one must risk essentializing race and voice on the one hand or implicitly abetting cultural appropriation on the other.⁴⁸ Sung Black laughter is, in many ways, the aural articulation of both sides of this bind at once: audible as the presumed natural inarticulacy of the Black race (essentialism), and ready to be picked up and exploited by others as a profitable and imitable vocal technique (expropriation). Attempting to correct either the essentialism or the expropriative logic will land us back in the middle of the same political-aesthetic quandary: we will overcorrect into an all-absolving social constructionism of race or into irreducible Black essences. Is there any way of imagining Johnson's laughing voice as not fully determined by this bind of essentialism and expropriation? Perhaps.

IMPROPERTY AND NECROPOLITICS OF THE VOICE

The laughter sung by Johnson in "The Laughing Song" is a strange thing: in its double aurality, it signifies an essential, racialized Black feature (in short, a lack of capacity for language), but a negative one, not only in the sense of a derogatory characteristic but in the more proper sense that Johnson presents his laughter as a signifier of Black people's loss of voice as speech, loss of articulation. As we have seen, laughter has long been a cipher for humanity precisely as this unsteady proper, this ownership of a loss of language. What is lost through laughter—

through the convulsions, discontinuity, and glitches of the speaking apparatus—is the liberal, humanist, and implicitly white understanding of the voice as self-expression and self-determination. This may seem extremely abstract, yet it is historically determined. The human voice has long carried, in Western discourse, the weight of being a sonic index, a symbol, of personhood but also of political and legal status within society. Scholars and theorists have traced this role to the concept of biopolitics and the nineteenth century: the moment when, as European societies switched from monarchical order to democracy, governing meant paying attention to populations as living bodies whose physical attributes, whose lives, were directly connected to their ability to participate in a functional democracy, to comply with humanist ideals of self-control and determination. Voice then became one of these attributes. As scholars like Sophia Rosenfeld, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Adriana Cavarero have traced in different ways, voice has been construed as a signifier of the ability to be considered a unique and valued member of a political community.⁴⁹ A sung laughter such as Johnson's is something of a defect in this respect—because it is the deliberate performance (self-determination) of the loss of the speaking, singing, valued, and unique voice.

But generalizing about the biopolitics of the voice won't quite get us far enough here. The other side of this is that Johnson—as a Black performer working in an entertainment circuit of minstrelsy and its musical merchandise (“coon songs”) and, on top of that, laboring to adapt that repertoire for the phonograph throughout the 1890s—was inhabiting a world in which voices and singing, though not yet controllable by copyright, were already being understood as properties, as possessions. In postbellum northeastern cities, the lingering, slavery-era notion of Black Americans and their labor as possible possessions of whites undergirded and continued on through a series of systematic practices of expropriation, institutionalized violence, and cultural appropriation. This is a key point: as Stephen Best's work shows, property law and the right to ownership became, in the Jim Crow era, central to the conception of the self in North America.⁵⁰ Unequivocal entitlement to own one's voice and, on the other hand, the lack of such an entitlement broadly outlined the color line between whites (entitled to ownership) and Blacks (not entitled).⁵¹ Laughter, in minstrelsy repertoire, signified precisely this lack, this inevitable expropriation carried out by the civil, self-owning, white voice; we could easily hear the performed laughter of both minstrel characters and “coon songs” as this convulsive renunciation of self-ownership and even hear the laughter that greeted those performances as the appropriation of that stereotype from the other side of the stage. So here is Johnson, performing the loss of his selfhood (as laughter) for the very machine that would seal the loss (financial and legal) to rights to his own voice, singing with the phonograph's fallible playback in ways unimaginable to us, for hours on end, producing a number of individual copies that had been previously unthinkable with that hardware. He was not only the victim of expropriation but also its skilled and hardworking executioner. Instead

of assuming that this was an act of self-alienation, the Black performer hearing himself through a white subjectivity that expropriates the Black voice, I want to imagine this relinquishing of vocal ownership as something other, something more. After all, the liberal self-ownership model of citizenship is always already a losing game: the fundamental alienation of a self into a property to be owned, even for those who are entitled to that ownership, implies that self-possession is a perilous form of freedom under capitalism. It is a form of revocable having rather than a form of being. The history of Black and white voices on the phonograph is the audible continuation of the turning of self into property. The question is whether there is a notion of voice that acknowledges yet audibly undoes itself as the property it is purported to be. Could such a musical act as Johnson's phonograph laughter allow us to imagine a different economy of voice, self, ownership, and agency?

In his brief but eloquent foray into music, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," Achille Mbembe gives us an extended meditation on how the beauty—which he casts as a series of bodily effects of joy and pleasure—of Congolese music across the (then) five decades since decolonization lies in its capacity to relay a serenity blended with a mimesis of the increasing violence of postcolonial society in Congolese urban hubs. He offers this startling definition: "The very notion of serenity assumes that each subject is an ego endowed with the ability to act on its own body. Subjects can dispossess or rid themselves of their bodies, even if only temporarily."⁵²

There is something deeply jarring about seeing a definition of self-determination in one sentence and then a negative understanding of that self-determination in the next. If your body is your own, Mbembe says, then you can attain peace not—as one might expect—by asserting your control over it and protecting it from others' plunder but precisely by giving it away, undoing it, disowning it. This definition could be adapted to the regime of ownership of the voice discussed above, and reinterpreted to fit a context in which owning one's voice as private property is the ultimate definition of serenity. But why should serenity be understood negatively, as dispossession, as ridding oneself of one's apparently most treasured possession? After all, inalienable possession, owning something that can't be stolen or taken, is, within the American regime of self-ownership, the best, aspirational form of selfhood. The right to one's voice is the key to adequate civil life. In his seminal essay on necropolitics, written shortly after this article on Congolese music, Mbembe takes issue with this very notion, pointing out that Western democracies built their humanist conceits of life as self-determination on slavery, thereby predicating their civil life upon the work of death they wrought in their colonial domains. In those settings, where the liberal idea of self-ownership was fully exposed as a lie, the only way for the colonized to exert control over their lives was to sacrifice them before they were taken—the most controversial part of

Mbembe's essay concerns martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and suicide.⁵³ I hear a gentle echo of necropolitics in Mbembe's definition of serenity above—one imagined in the realm of self-expression, describing an act of liberation in the face of the constrictions of an impossible self-ownership. Giving one's voice away is the last possible act of self-determination.

This is, for me, the thought worked into the phonograph, through laughter, by Johnson. Laughter, as a sound implying the loss of one's biopolitical voice (a voice audible as self-determination and articulation), here becomes an act of willful dispossession, a musical technique for the erosion of property. For a voice made into property is, yes, always already a theft and is bound to be thieved back—particularly if it is the voice of a Black singer whose claim to property is heard, as Ronald Radano argues, as “illicit.”⁵⁴ If this seems much too high-concept for the concrete realities of singing and recording with which Johnson was wrestling, we must remember that he, perhaps more than any other phonographed performer of his time, had an extensive chance to work through such thoughts with his voice. He recorded “The Laughing Song” thousands of times, in sessions of four to five hours, over the course of nearly ten years, beginning in 1891. It is, then, not such a stretch of the imagination to conjure him as someone thinking carefully about the reproduction of his voice, about the demand for more copies, with which he complied by repeating the song for the phonograph over and over again. He would have learned—by watching the technicians check his freshly cut cylinders and then estimate how much more work he was to do that week—which elements of the voice carried and which didn't, what worked and didn't work. It is not such a stretch, either, to imagine that he crafted his sung laughter into something that could keep on the phonograph, that worked not just with the recording apparatus but with the failures of playback, resisting the wear and tear of the groove and stylus. Finally, over those ten years of recurring performances for the phonograph horn, he would have noticed other artists picking up the song, would have had to consider that his sung laughter would get away from him even as he kept on recording it.

What does such an act—of studied, audible, explosive self-dispossession—do to those who hear it and consume it? This is where we might think, ahead of the ensuing chapter, about not just the act of self-dispossession but also its aftermath and effects on others. For that is the history of “The Laughing Song”: the history of a sound that, as Stephen Best so poignantly puts it, is “fugitive”—that is, subject to attempts of control and monitoring that echo fugitive slave laws—but across continents and bodies far beyond its original site of production.⁵⁵ This chapter has argued that the fugitivity of Johnson's laughter was the result of not just some unfortunate early instance of appropriation but rather an im-property—a lack of ownership—that was part of the legacy of racialized laughter and its intersection

with phonography. There may be an immanent philosophy of the phonograph in “The Laughing Song,” a philosophy woven from practice, technique, throat, wax, and stylus. We might call this a necropolitics of the voice: a killing of the voice as a symbol of liberal self-ownership, carried out—wittingly or unwittingly—by an artist who couldn’t have ignored the fact that he had little control over or claim to the fruits of his own vocal labor. In a world like the one Johnson inhabited, where property and access to property (including the ownership of your own body and voice) were hallmarks of power, such a symbolic killing could be heard as a quietly radical act, something that ensured the song’s escape from Johnson’s person but—and this is key—also from anyone who would pick it up after him. “The Laughing Song” was stolen from Johnson but retained the strange im-property he breathed and sang into it. Because of this, it never rested with any of its appropriators—and has been known under different names and sung by ever-changing and multiplying performers ever since. The product of an im-proper, broken-up voice, lost as soon as it was found, Johnson’s laughter conjured up the phonograph’s true, vanishing face and created, as we will begin to see in the following chapter, an enduring cipher for the perilous humanity of subaltern groups elsewhere.

Contagion

*Io rido se uno chiagne,
Se stongo disperato,
Se nun aggio magnato,
Rido senza pensà*

I laugh when someone cries,
When I am feeling desperate,
When I haven't eaten,
I laugh without thinking

—BERARDO CANTALAMESSA, “A RISA,” 1895

THE LORE OF CONTAGION

There is a scene in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* that goes something like this: Cholera has come to Venice. The authorities are keeping the news under wraps in order to not disseminate panic and—crucially—to avoid scaring away the tourists. Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist, an aging German writer, is whiling away a summer night in the courtyard cafe of the Hôtel des Bains; he is surrounded by wealthy central European tourists, including Tadzio—an adolescent Polish aristocrat and the forbidden object of Aschenbach's desire. Suddenly, a troupe of itinerant southern musicians scuttle in and perform a few classic Neapolitan songs while moving from table to table asking for coins. The very last number they play is a horrifying laughing song. Mann writes:

It was [a song] Aschenbach had never to his knowledge heard before, a rowdy air, with words in impossible dialect. It had a laughing-refrain in which the other three artists joined at the top of their lungs. The refrain had neither words nor accompaniment, it was nothing but rhythmical, modulated, natural laughter, which the soloist in particular knew how to render with most deceptive realism. Now that he was farther off from his audience, his self-assurance had come back, and this laughter of his rang with a mocking note. He would be overtaken, before he reached the end of the last line

of each stanza; he would catch his breath, lay his hand over his mouth, his voice would quaver and his shoulders shake, he would lose power to contain himself longer. Just at the right moment each time, it came whooping, bawling, crashing out of him, with a verisimilitude that never failed to set his audience off in profuse and unpremeditated mirth that seemed to add gusto to his own. He bent his knees, he clapped his thigh, he held his sides, he looked ripe for bursting. He no longer laughed, but yelled, pointing his finger at the company there above as though there could be in all the world nothing so comic as they; until at last they laughed in hotel, terrace, and garden, down to the waiters, lift-boys, and servants—laughed as though possessed.¹

The layers within this literary moment are many, but I want to press on one particular archaeological level: the binding of Aschenbach's disdain for the troupe with the danger of possession and contagion—the loss of reason and *logos* and the exposure to disease here being one and the same—precipitated through the sound of laughter. Mann's Neapolitan musicians carry, in the eyes of the protagonist, markers of the European south that are a far cry from the obvious nineteenth-century fare of dreamy Orientalism: the amber skin, beautiful voices, and carefree attitudes of those relieved of the burden of *logos*.² The lead singer is, by Mann's and Aschenbach's account, too southern to be positively Orientalized: "He was scarcely a Venetian type, belonging rather to the race of Neapolitan jesters, half bully, half comedian, brutal, blustering, an unpleasant customer, and entertaining to the last degree."³ This is a negative Orientalism well on its way to scientific racism—rinsed in the dye of Cesare Lombroso's views, discussed below, of the Italian south as a hotbed of madness and crime. The switch between positive and negative southernness is operated, sonically, through the switch from an implicitly classic Neapolitan song, all arch-phrases and *bel canto*, to the fragmented, weaponized voice of the laughing song.⁴ In the chorus, the mellifluous continuity of Italian vocality cracks to reveal a dangerous racial flaw. Not just *melos* is fractured in the song, but *logos* too: the troupe's dialect is "impossible," hostile to signification. Indeed, before launching into his dreadful final number, the lead singer willfully sidesteps spoken communication—when quizzed by Aschenbach about an imminent cholera epidemic—by answering vaguely about the warm southwestern wind before grinning and evading further questions.⁵ The bad southerner is approached, as it were, from the side of *logos* and the side of *melos* simultaneously, and as a renunciation of both: he will neither speak the truth nor sing prettily. Rhythimized laughter stands as the residue of this double renunciation, a residue that is both viscerally popular—everyone but Aschenbach laughs as though possessed—and threatening.

Mann's famous novella dates from the year of Berardo Cantalamessa's first recordings of "A risa," in Milan, which were cut as part of the first ever recording session on the peninsula.⁶ The song, as we shall soon discuss, was a Neapolitan appropriation of George W. Johnson's "The Laughing Song" (discussed in

chapter 4). It is doubtful whether Mann knew that “A risa” was an appropriation of another song—Cantalamessa instantly claimed “A risa” as his own work. It is, however, quite possible that Mann heard Cantalamessa’s song on a phonograph or gramophone in Italy that same year—the author’s references to Neapolitans, laughter, and itinerant musicians point to an anchoring in historical detail. In Luchino Visconti’s film adaptation of the novella, “A risa” is performed by the Neapolitan singer Tonino Apicella, who had already incorporated it into his repertoire prior to this appearance.⁷ Visconti picks up on Mann’s racializing disdain for the musicians and amplifies it visually and aurally. The singer, shot in uncomfortable close-up, is covered in stage makeup, his face pasty, hair colored red; his teeth are blackened, his eyes red, the skin grooved and slack. Despite its seventy-year history as a song recorded in various versions by a multitude of artists, “A risa” here retains the tune, accompaniment, and words of Cantalamessa’s version: its strikingly repetitive structure, a chord sequence that doesn’t let up for a moment, not even for the chorus, is kept intact. The only thing that marks the chorus as different from the verses is the use of laughter, and the scene is aurally and visually built around this: Visconti approaches Apicella frontally and close up only when he laughs; what is more, the soundtrack fades the vocals out so as to render them indiscernible during the verse—almost as though to preserve their unintelligibility for an Italian audience—and then becomes suddenly louder with the laughing chorus, sometimes bringing us into aural proximity before the camera fixes on the singer’s face. Both Mann and Visconti also give us a sense of audience reaction. The usual response, as we will see, is to laugh back at the song, as though one had been infected by a virus, such contagion being part of the lore of laughing songs.⁸ But Aschenbach cannot take the laughter as a reproducible musical riff: for him it is a sound aimed exclusively in his direction. The scene played out before him is one in which he himself is the comic prompt. The laughing song—mere entertainment to his fellow patrons—works on him like a devastating denouement. He is undone by it. But why should this song be given the power not only to incarnate a version of the Italian south—violent, sick, inarticulate—but to render Aschenbach, separated from the itinerant Neapolitan singers by class, language, and ethnicity, so intensely vulnerable?

One straightforward answer has to do with the issue I raised in chapter 1—the issue of laughter’s uneasy causality and ties to reason. As readers and viewers, we witness this scene from Aschenbach’s point of view and so see the singer implicitly mocking the protagonist for all the things that he—and we with him—knows himself to be: a high-bourgeois aesthete in a deep existential crisis, obsessed to distraction with a beautiful Polish youth whom he has never spoken to yet has invested with impossible allegorical significance. The laugh of the performers is one of utter recognition: it is the laugh of Aschenbach’s self-loathing externalized. But Visconti’s film, by staging the scene and lending bodies and faces to the troupe of musicians—bodies and faces that are shot not exclusively from Aschenbach’s POV but also from that of the rest of the audience—raises a simple but key question: who are

these people, and why, putting aside Aschenbach's narcissistic assumption, are they laughing? This is clearly impossible to know from Mann's or Visconti's account, first and foremost because of the musicalized laughter's remoteness from the specific performance. By "remoteness" I mean that "A risa," like any laughing song, disciplines laughter into something musically scored, rhythmic, quasi-pitched, and reproducible and thus suspends it from causes (the humorous prompt, the punch line, the "why" of the laugh). Even if the song verse were humorous, the musicalized laughter is in fact music *about* laughter—not a spontaneous giggle. It is precisely on this ambiguity—is laughter the result of musical technique or the spontaneous response to something here and now?—that the explosive effect of the performance relies. Massimo Donà, commenting on the scene in Visconti's film, dubs the laughter a "risata assoluta"—a Nietzschean absolute laughter, impossibly loosened from the bonds of causality and logos.⁹ Yet suspension from causality is not absolution, and the suspicion of causality, the fact that the sung laughter roves among its audience in search of a cause (significantly, the singer points his finger during the performance), is precisely what lends this laughter its force. Imagine this scene rewritten from a Gramscian or a postcolonial viewpoint: the troupe of musicians is indeed mocking the wealthy patrons, and taunting them, but under the protective spell of musicalized laughter. The fact that the sung laughter has no evident cause is what allows the musicians to laugh in the audience's face without missing out on tips when the hat is passed round. But for Aschenbach this state of suspension is unbearable. He conceives only of a consciousness like his own—self-reflexive, well spoken, skilled in writing—and thus the singer's laugh is truly foreign, dangerous, epistemologically impossible. Clearly, he thinks, it is he himself—his *Mitteleuropean* refinement, his aesthetic and erotic devotion to Tadzio—who is being mocked, yet that's impossible. His pretense of being immune to the southern contagion—whether of laughter or sex or cholera matters not—is being laughed at yet not laughed at. It is a problem with laughter without reason, yes, and with the unsteady tethering of laughter to political constructions of civility and humanity, but it is also to do with a laughter that proliferates and repeats beyond its original context and meaning in complex and threatening ways. The laughter of the itinerant musicians in *Death in Venice* may be, in other words, a phonographic laughter.

As I mentioned above, I would not be surprised if Mann first heard the laughing song in question on a phonograph, although he fictionalized it as a live encounter between Aschenbach and the musicians. I suspect this not only because the song circulated far more widely as a recording than in live performance but also because Mann's imagination is rich in reproductive ciphers. First, there is the imminent choleric contagion—reproduction as bacterial proliferation, which is foreshadowed by the way in which laughter quickly spreads throughout the audience. Second, there is the suspension of the intentionality of the singers—the sense that the laughter doesn't truly come from them, even though they are its sound sources. In the symbolic language of the turn of the twentieth century, such a suspension makes the laughter acousmatic and phonographic, produced

and reproduced away from its source by a mechanized body. Finally, there is the uncontrollable, contagious audience laughter, which was a widely reported effect of the phonographed laughing song. The feverish international circulation of phonograph laughing songs—beginning in the 1890s in the American northeast and moving along colonial routes to Europe, Asia, and Africa—left a paper trail through phonograph exhibitors, artists, and writers. We can work backward in time from Fred Gaisberg, an early phonograph impresario and exhibitor, ubiquitous and unreliable patron saint of phonograph and gramophone historians. Writing half a century later of his work as a traveling phonograph exhibitor in the 1890s, Gaisberg recalled the response to a recorded laughing song: “It was ludicrous in the extreme to see ten people grouped about a phonograph, each with a tube leading from his ears, grinning and laughing at what he heard. It was a fine advertisement for the onlookers waiting their turn. Five cents was collected from each listener so the showman could afford to pay two and three dollars for a cylinder to exhibit.”¹⁰

The implications of this passage are striking. Laughter is here both the recorded content of the cylinder and the response it elicits in its audience; this is a unique fact and moment of phonographic history—the moment when the content of a record and its audience response are one and the same. It is a detail that connects directly to the economic reproduction of the phonograph: laughing customers market the phonograph, their payments recouping its cost and growing into profit so that more records can be bought and then more (laughing and paying) customers drawn in. In simple Marxist terms, laughter could be said to be the sound of a commodity that makes money so that more commodities may be bought to make even more money. But it is the link of sound reproduction, economic reproduction, and laughter here that is key and unrepeatable. This is a late nineteenth-century articulation of laughter’s long-standing capacity—as we saw in chapter 3—as a sound that helps to make *more*. Contagious laughter is here a sign of the demand for and circulation of a new commodity—the commodity of sound reproduction. The possibility of contagion from laughing songs became a deliberate selling point. Andrew Jones writes of a French phonograph exhibitor in Shanghai whose “new business gambit” went like this: “When a sufficiently large crowd had gathered around the machine, he would ask each listener to pay ten cents to hear a novelty record called ‘Laughing Foreigners’ (Yangren daxiao). Anyone able to resist laughing along with the chuckles, chortles, and guffaws emerging from the horn of the gramophone would get his or her money back.”¹¹ Indeed, the 1899 published score of Cantalamessa’s “A risa” carries, under the title, an imperative statement directed to the audience: “Redite!” (Laugh on!)¹² Audience laughter was not just a by-product of laughing songs but an expected result; the possibility of contagion was looped into and through the commodity of laughter.

Gaisberg’s narration of the success of laughing songs isn’t, then, a mere matter of marketing rhetoric but a way of parsing something that laughing songs

did within the emergent market of phonographic records. They were, that is, the closest thing to a viral artifact that one could find between the 1890s and the 1930s. The short version of the story of laughing songs is that they flooded the early sound recording market and in many ways helped to create it. But the longer story is worth retelling: George Washington Johnson recorded his “Laughing Song” for the first time in 1891; the circumstances of this recording, which quickly achieved such popularity as to show up the limits of the late nineteenth-century phonograph (whose mechanics did not allow for mass reproduction), have since achieved a kind of mythic status. As Bryan Wagner details, unsubstantiated stories have been circulating since the 1890s about Thomas Edison recruiting Johnson on the spot, after hearing him perform on a Hudson pier, for a recording session. As Wagner’s analysis shows, these stories enact a racialized ritual of a white (technologized) ear extracting a Black voice from a performer for profit and, indeed, show us the dynamics of recording impresarios hearing the voices around them as always already primed for reproduction.¹³ Johnson’s recorded song entered the international market fairly quickly after its release. “A risa,” Cantalamessa near note-for-note, Neapolitan contrafact of Johnson’s song, is reported to have been put together in 1895 and was likely performed regularly before being published in 1899 and released as a phonograph record in 1901 for Edison; from then onward, “A risa” stayed in the Neapolitan song repertoire (often sanitized out of dialect and into official Italian as “La risata”), thanks to the scores of other Neapolitan singers who adopted it, such as Nicola Maldacea, Daniele Serra, Pasquale Jovino, Leopoldo Fregoli, Giuseppe Petrone, Luigi Pres-tini, and Roberto Mario De Simone.¹⁴ More performers, such as Aurelio Fierro and Tonino Apicella, continued this song’s tradition after World War II, when it was also immortalized as part of “anthologies of Neapolitan songs.”¹⁵ At the same time as the Neapolitan/Italian market for “A risa” was developing, things were happening to “The Laughing Song,” in the United States and elsewhere. Gaisberg writes of exporting an American version of the record—by the white performer Bert Sheppard—to “China, Africa, and Japan.” Thanks to the colonial commercial lines of the East India Company, he reports the record arriving in India, where it apparently caused riotous laughter among local audiences.¹⁶ Although Gaisberg’s account of the consumer response and the exact chronology of the export may be unreliable, the fact of the song’s circulation eastward is demonstrated by the work of local sound recording historians—like Sunny Mathew, the owner and curator of the Gramophone Museum in Kerala, India—who have compiled lists of laughing songs in their archives, including not only American and Italian but also local-language versions, such as Bhai Chhela’s “Laughing Song” in Hindi, cut in 1912, a straightforward contrafact of Johnson’s version, and another version in Tamil and Telugu.¹⁷ Andrew Jones details the presence of a French laughing song (“Five Men Laughing”) in Shanghai at the turn of the twentieth century, marketed as “Laughing Foreigners” (*Yangren daxiao* in Mandarin).¹⁸ Cutting back to Gaisberg,

he also writes in his memoirs of appropriating Johnson's song for Sheppard, who released his version in 1901, quickly obscuring Johnson's recording (and effectively tanking his career as a recording artist).¹⁹ This generated more contrafacts of the song abroad. One famous example based on the Sheppard version is the British vaudeville number "The Laughing Policeman" (also issued, with slight variations in tempo and lyrics, under the titles "I Tried to Keep from Laughing," "Laughing PC Brown," and "Laughing Ginger Brown"), recorded several times by the British music hall singer Charles "Jolly" Penrose between 1912 and 1926 and popular through the 1970s.²⁰ Colonial markets may have brought Sheppard's song to Nigeria: Jones reports—via the historian Michael Chanan and the writer (and Nobel laureate) Wole Soyinka—on witness accounts of its being played in middle-class homes there.²¹ This staggeringly wide map of circulation becomes wider still when we consider not just near-exact contrafacts in foreign languages but also looser replications of the song's simple but recognizable premise of sung verse and laughed chorus. Penrose, for instance, also recorded "The Laughing Typist," "The Laughing Xylophone," "The Laughing Huntsman," and "The Laughing Sailor." Another such loose contrafact is the 1905 "Laughing Song" (with, confusingly, the same title but different music and lyrics from the Johnson/Sheppard version, although obviously inspired by it) recorded by Maurice Farkoa.²² Similarly, Berardo Cantalamessa, the original Neapolitan appropriator of Johnson's "Laughing Song," tried his luck at releasing a new laughing song of his own in 1907 ("A risata nova"), with limited success. In 1922, an even more distant relative of Johnson's song appeared on the market: "The Okeh Laughing Record," a German production involving no lyrics but instead a cornet player who, on making a mistake, is answered by and then eventually joins in with a woman's laughter. This version too produced its own spawn: it was the soundtrack to a Walter Lantz cartoon of 1955 called "Sh-h-h-h-h-h" and was imitated in a French song cut in 1923 called "Le fou rire," as well as doubtless many others whose variants and circulations are yet untracked.²³

With the above list comes, perhaps, the dissatisfaction of acknowledging a historical phenomenon that was obviously enabled by colonial markets of the late nineteenth century but whose significance doesn't square easily with those material conditions. The arrival of an English or French laughing song in the respective colonial domains wasn't, that is, merely a fact of cultural domination: the songs were taken up and reissued by local singers in local languages, some of them—like Tamil and Telugu—local and minoritarian, and even the Neapolitan dialect version speaks to a "vernacular" appropriation of the original song, which was itself a complex representation of a minority.²⁴ Indeed, a broad pattern among laughing songs is that they tend to involve the representation of a linguistic or racialized subaltern. The fact that this seems to repeat across national and cultural contexts is something we cannot ascribe to a straightforward translation or adaptation of the original song's lyrics and political content. Most of these laughing songs were sonic commodities in flight, consumed by people often unable to understand the lyrics, drawn merely by the inscrutable pleasure of phonographed, musicalized

laughter. Even if the lyrics were in a language understandable to the audience, there were further obstacles to a clean transcultural adoption. Language isn't, after all, a matter of semantics alone. For one thing, there are dialectal inflections: Johnson's song, for instance, draws on Black vernacular in the lyrics, which also make references to racial politics in North America. But even assuming an unlikely level of linguistic and cultural competency among listeners, we must again remember that the cylinders and even the discs of early phonography were subject to decay. And linguistic articulation was one of the first things to be erased by wear and tear: transients (i.e., consonants key to the articulation of speech) were among the first victim. This consideration is essential to the history of any popular early record: there is no telling what was carried from needle to ear or how it was received. Indeed, in the case we are considering, the recognition of the sound of laughter and the engagement with the physical presence of the phonographic hardware are the only two constants.

Mangled logos, racialized people, colonial-built ideas of human universality, and reproductive power leaking between body and machine—we have encountered all of these things in the first part of this book, albeit in more theoretical, general forms. Here they occur again as fundamental problems of method and knowledge when studying recorded laughter. The problem can be articulated like so: laughing songs are both inescapable (for anyone who cares about early commercial phonography and the sounds circulated with it) and tricky, because of the complex racial dynamics behind the original and behind its export abroad, because of the often nonsemantic processing of the lyrics of individual songs, which makes their verbal content unevenly relevant to their received meaning, because of the way they were reproduced, contrafacted, and transmitted at a global scale, and because the relationship of the history of phonography to laughter pulls us in two opposing directions, political and historical circumstance on the one hand and the seemingly ahistorical and universal phenomenon of laughter on the other.

That pull is felt in some of the most exhaustive work on laughing songs. Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks*, for example, considers them as a global phenomenon—and as precursors of TV laugh tracks. He also interprets them as a kind of aid to the acceptance of phonographs. He writes, "Laughter, then, is a kind of suture between the rigid and the flexible, the social and the individual, the mechanical and the human. The incitation of laughter in the listener and the frame disintegration described above would work to remove anxiety about interacting with a machine, making the phonographic apparatus appear more 'human.'"²⁵

Smith's interpretation takes its lead from the discourse on laughing songs on the phonograph that I have outlined thus far: namely, that these songs caused listeners to laugh back at the phonograph, making it seem "more human" (because it laughs and can cause laughter in others) and therefore more palatable. There are, though, several problems with this interpretation. For one, "human," of course, is not an ahistorical category—and, as I argued in chapter 2, laughter has a particular, contradictory bind to the category of human, a bind that threatens the specificity of the

human species just as it affirms it. That is why laughter worked so well to signify the human on a phonograph and in the mouths of racialized and gendered people who were deemed to be at the edge of humanity. But, importantly, we can say more about the economic, sonic, and social reproductive power of laughter in the history of phonography: laughter's unique role was to articulate the labor of reproduction at these three levels, and it could do so because, as I argued in chapter 3, it already had profound and millenary links to biological and social reproduction. Indeed, Smith notes the way that laughter "work[ed] to remove anxiety"—a phrase that could easily define the concept of emotional labor, the gendered labor of reproducing social structures by catering to the feelings of those within them. For this reason, the reproductive power of laughter is a code not simply for economic reproduction—marketing and profit making—but also for reproductive labor that is dismissed and erased, and indeed naturalized, just like the history of early phonographic laughing songs. One name for this erased reproductive labor is *contagion*: an asexual, nonhuman, mindless, and, as we will see, implicitly racialized form of reproduction. If, to gloss Smith once again, the incitation of laughter in the audiences of early phonographic laughing songs served to make the phonograph seem more human, this effect was obtained by spiriting that humanity away from the very laughing audiences who sealed the phonograph's commercial success. In order for the phonograph to be human, its early listeners had to be turned into something between a bacterium, a woman, and a phonograph.

In the early history of phonography, contagion and reproductive labor follow parallel and often complementary courses as naturalized, passive, feminized, and racialized forms of labor—a labor that laughter simultaneously voices and masks. When, for instance, Gaisberg gloats about the laughing phonograph audiences effectively doing his marketing for him, consider that this enacts an eminently colonial primal scene, of witnessing a "native" engaging with a new technology, and thus grants the listeners of laughing songs little agency beyond a thoughtless mimicry of technology. This perspective is directly connected to the colonial practice—highlighted by Ranajit Guha in his seminal essay "The Prose of Counter-insurgency"—of willfully misinterpreting shared thinking and intention among Indigenous populations as mere "natural calamity." Guha writes of colonial accounts in India as "assimilating peasant revolts as natural phenomena: they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history."²⁶

Such dismissal of agency becomes all the more pointed when local audiences in (often colonial) phonographic exhibits effectively carried out the work of economic reproduction as the laughing records were marketed with their laughter (which both amplified, in a way, the contents of the record and modeled a response to it). Exhibitors like Gaisberg deliberately parsed the continuity between the sounds on the phonograph (laughter) and the sounds made by those listening to it (also

laughter) as contagion because that way the phonograph (as the infecting virus) retained more profit-making agency than the listeners who were processing the laughing records with and for one another. The latter had to be dismissed as passive, “feminized” receptors and reproducers of thought, of marketing, rather than active thinkers and feelers, obliterating the verbal and intellectual labor of communication as an unintentional, natural phenomenon. The phonographic laughter is here cast as acting through a passive host who receives and replicates its information unawares.²⁷ As in Guha’s remark above, this naturalizing discourse is also, though, a way of downplaying a dangerous power: unexplained collective public laughter of any subaltern group can be a sign of incipient rebellion. The challenge here is not just to identify ciphers of reproductive power within laughter but to work through the ways in which this reproductive power became suspect, gendered, and/or racialized and was dismissed or erased. This is a history that continues from laughing songs to recorded laugh tracks, as chapter 6 will show. And, at a theoretical level, this is where the discourse of contagion becomes loaded and therefore crucial.

Contagious laughs—and indeed contagious media—are hardly neutral standards for the viability of commodities in international markets. We begin to see this a few pages deeper into Gaisberg’s memoirs, as he conjures the effects of another favorite laughing song, this time at some length:

The spontaneous and boisterous laugh [Bert Sheppard] could conjure up was most infectious and was heard by thousands through his records. Bert Sheppard’s “Whistling Coon” and “The Laughing Song” were world-famous. In India alone over half a million records of the latter were sold. In the bazaars of India I have seen dozens of natives seated on their haunches round a gramophone, rocking with laughter, whilst playing Sheppard’s laughing record; in fact, this is the only time I have ever heard Indians laugh heartily. The record is still available there and I believe that to this day it sells in China, Africa, and Japan as well.²⁸

Laughter has more than a passing link to contagion here, and the connection goes by way of race. First, consider Gaisberg’s interest in Indian audiences: the reported numbers are suddenly hyperbolic (five hundred thousand records) and the contagion of laughter considered atypical for “natives” but also, perhaps, especially powerful there. Second, consider that the songs causing such mirth involved stereotyped representations of Blackness (and had originally been sung by the Black artist George W. Johnson). Finally, it was the exponential success in India that implicitly opened the gate to non-Western markets. The lore begins to transform into a pandemic. And no wonder: anyone traveling anywhere, but especially to India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would have known it as the point of origin for the cholera epidemic of 1817, whose waves had reached North America and Europe soon after, precipitating a famous crisis of public health (razing of working-class neighborhoods, sanitation campaigns, etc.) that had resulted in the restructuring of several European capitals. In a pattern grimly familiar in

global pandemics, Europe had, although unevenly, succeeded in shielding itself from outbreaks while leaving colonial territories to fester and die; in India a devastating fifth wave of the pandemic began in 1899, a year in which Gaisberg would almost certainly have been on the road as an exhibitor.

The connection between a cholera epidemic and the mysterious infectiousness of laughing songs on the phonograph may seem forced. Yet we have already seen cholera and laughter linked in Mann's *Death in Venice*, from 1912, when Aschenbach recoils in horror from the southern singer of the laughing song—whose performance has a hotel courtyard howling with laughter—in cholera-ridden Venice just hours before he finally contracts the disease. Indeed, discourses of contagion were rampant by the late nineteenth century and had been seeping into everyday language since the mid-nineteenth century. As Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb recalls in her *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020*, the discourse of epidemics and sanitation and the consequent idea of public health stemmed from the concomitant responses to cholera epidemics and anticolonial insurgencies in nineteenth-century British India and were connected to both anti-Islamic sentiment and the racialization of Muslim populations at a global scale: “Two distinctive features of cholera writing in nineteenth-century British India [. . .]—both of which primarily developed in observations and diagnoses from and of colonized space—might be best understood as first the Orientalization, and later the ethnicization of ‘cholera’ as a historical and imperial phenomenon. Building on this legacy, cholera writing in the metropole would conscript and synthesize both rhetorical tactics in service of the racialization of the disease, beginning with an imprecise colorism that hammered again and again the blackness and blueness [. . .] of the choleric body.”²⁹ She goes on to identify the contagious symptoms of racialized bodies: “External markers of morbidity are joined by a ‘terror’ or ‘wildness’ in the patient, as well as a loss of agency in the form of speech—the suppressed, breathless ‘vox cholericæ’ standing as a tragic antonym of the vox populi.”³⁰ According to Raza Kolb’s argument, then, by the late nineteenth century, cholera—whose popularly known symptoms included convulsion, impaired speech, and a darkening complexion—became a cipher for the potentially unruly subaltern everywhere, a subaltern whose convulsions, breathlessness, and darkness were contagious and instantly communicable. The subaltern turned, in short, choleric at the same time that cholera began to function as the shorthand for the sickness, the ailment, of being poor, dark skinned, and noncompliant.

PHYSIOLOGICAL LAUGHTER

How did laughter get entangled with the imagination of the choleric subaltern and thus with contagion? The answer lies at the particular, late nineteenth-century fold of the topics of the first part of this book: laughter’s shaky relationship to reason and, most especially, its role in the ideological constructions of the human and its linkage to reproduction.³¹ In the 1860s, particularly in the Victorian realm

that Raza Kolb examines as the breeding ground for philosophies and metaphors of contagion, the discourse of laughter had its primary dwelling in the world of physiology and medicine. We have, of course, met laughter in this context earlier in this book—in Aristotle’s account of the relationship of *phrenes* (diaphragm) and *phronesis* (political thought) and in Laurent Joubert’s sixteenth-century discussion of the boundary between healthy and unhealthy laughter. We also saw how Porphyry’s discussion of laughter as a human proper (along with the medieval theological elaboration of that discussion) was swept up, in sixteenth-century theology, into a discourse ratifying slavery as the natural state of some humans.³² In the 1860s we find cholera, contagion, convulsion, and all manner of observations of the human body’s expressions tied into a biopolitical knot by public health and implicitly colonial political governance. This was an era when early modern physiognomy—the tracking of facial expressions as indications of compliance with or deviance from behavioral norms—returned to haunt scientific literature and was employed as a means of discerning anybody’s ability to belong to a political community. Vocalizations, particularly when accompanied by striking facial expressions (contracted muscles, gaping mouths), were part of this nineteenth-century interest in physiognomy. It is not surprising, then, that laughter was an important element of this social Darwinism of the face. Two of the most influential works on laughter in the late nineteenth century were penned by, respectively, Herbert Spencer and, soon after him, Charles Darwin. Spencer’s “Physiology of Laughter” (1860) is a stand-alone essay devoted to the topic, and laughter takes up the best part of a chapter in Darwin’s 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the third and final volume of his evolutionary theory.³³

The interest in laughter here lies precisely in its uneasy relation to any single familiar emotion—an idea dating back to at least Thomas Hobbes’s aforementioned dubbing of laughter as the result of “a passion that hath no name.”³⁴ Both Spencer and Darwin were attuned to the idea that comedy is a poor theory of the causality of laughter, and they also grappled with the ways in which laughter defies any master discourse on the universality of human expression. This sticking point had Darwin write to colonial envoys to confirm what could be commonalities among the world’s laughers. He mused, “Mr. Swinhoe informs me that he has often seen the Chinese, when suffering from deep grief, burst out into hysterical fits of laughter. I was anxious to know whether tears are freely shed during excessive laughter by most of the races of men, and I hear from my correspondents that this is the case.”³⁵ In seeking a lowest common denominator for laughter, the diagnosis turns—and this is a key point—to moisture levels: tears are, in this world, a means of discharging a surge in moisture and blood. Spencer turned instead to spasming muscles. He was especially concerned—as someone with a stubbornly functionalist understanding of bodies natural and politic (everything must be put to sensible, civil use)—with the uselessness of laughter’s convulsions: “In general, bodily motions that are prompted by feelings are directed to special

ends; as when we try to escape a danger, or struggle to secure a gratification. But the movements of chest and limbs which we make when laughing have no object.”³⁶ Elsewhere, Spencer names the cause of laughter as an “efflux” of nervous tension, a term that renders the laughter’s physiology akin to the release of liquescent bodily matter.³⁷ *Moisture, convulsions, contractions, discharge*: all these were, by the 1860s, loaded terms. Raza Kolb notes that moisture—and its conduits, which we can imagine as both human and urban ducts—had become one of the points of concern regarding cholera spread: losing water meant dehydration, thickened blood, and cramping muscles.³⁸ Guts and viscera were especially under scrutiny, since the disease evidently attacked the digestive system. The fear of convulsions—of the belly or of the face—was equally caught up in this network of choleric symptomatology.

Yet this is by no means a set of hard and fast correspondences—more a spider’s web of anxious associations in the face of a symbolically charged disease that was, we must remember, already the topic of panic and cagey discussions and so might well have been spoken of indirectly, knowingly, through a set of coded references. And, we should add, the discourse of laughter and cholera allowed for laughter to be both a symptom and a cure, both a sign of the contagion and a sometimes allopathic, sometimes homeopathic pharmacon. Darwin brings up cholera once in his discussion of laughter, again in relation to moisture levels and contraction but this time in *contrast* with laughter: “According to Dr. Piderit, who has discussed this point more fully than any other writer, the tenseness [of eyes during laughter] may be largely attributed to the eyeballs becoming filled with blood and other fluids, from the acceleration of the circulation, consequent on the excitement of pleasure. He remarks on the contrast in the appearance of the eyes of a hectic patient with a rapid circulation, and of a man suffering from cholera with almost all the fluids of his body drained from him.”³⁹ Spencer goes so far as to state and confirm the general belief that laughter salubriously quickens bowel movements: “One further observation is worth making. Among the several sets of channels into which surplus feeling might be discharged, was named the nervous system of the viscera. The sudden overflow of an arrested mental excitement, which, as we have seen, naturally results from a descending incongruity, must doubtless stimulate not only the muscular system, as we see it does, but also the internal organs: the heart and stomach must come in for a share of the discharge. And thus there seems to be a good physiological basis for the popular notion that laughter facilitates digestion.”⁴⁰ We have here an outline of a symptomatology and, most important, the subtle emergence of laughter as an uneven and contradictory but nonetheless present cure. One could, in the 1860s, become a member of the subaltern class by mere exposure to a certain kind of convulsive laughter. But laughter was, at the same time, a means of tightening and regulating a dystonic mind and body.

LAUGHTER BETWEEN CONTAGION AND CURE

When phonograph laughter became a reproducible commodity, it was enmeshed with the logic of contagion in two main ways. First, it could imply a racialized, choleric subaltern, particularly when open discussion of cholera in public places was difficult. Second, and most important, it signified immunity from the fearsome aspects of contagion: it offered a sonic cipher of a subaltern who was contagious in a profitable way, one who could be owned and exploited by artists and exhibitors and recognized and enjoyed by audiences without their running the risk of being touched by the disease of being poor, Black, and helplessly noncompliant. I will now focus on a particular contrafact of George W. Johnson's "Laughing Song": Berardo Cantalamessa's "A risa," made in Naples in 1899. Of the vast range of global appropriations and contrafacts of Johnson's song, I have chosen this one for several reasons, some pragmatic and some conceptual: I have the most access, linguistic and archival, to Italian sources, but, more important, Naples was the site of the worst European cholera outbreaks of the nineteenth century and was one of the main ports from which the colonial expeditions of the 1890s departed. Both of these characteristics make it an ideal place to consider the intertwining of contagion, racialized subalterns, and laughter. Finally, the Neapolitan contrafacts of "The Laughing Song" have left behind an impressive paper trail, including published scores, memoirs, and advertising materials.

It may seem strange, at first, to switch from the Victorian-colonial sensibilities of Darwin, Spencer, and Raza Kolb's cholera-minded administrators and writers to the world of late nineteenth-century Naples. There are good reasons to do so, however. Naples, as I mentioned, experienced the worst sanitation, crowding, and cholera outbreaks in Europe, and it is likely that its authorities looked to British colonial reports on and responses to the disease for ideas. Moreover, the link to colonial administration writ large holds: Naples had recently gone from being the capital of the southern Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to being incorporated into the territory of the Savoy monarchy (which unified most of the Italian peninsula into one nation-state in 1861). The Savoy made a showy but ultimately vain attempt to contain cholera in the city with ambitious plans for public works that were either suspended or carried out in ways that negatively impacted the local population. The new monarchy, in other words, treated the southern province of Naples as a colony, and the alienation from public authority—including medical authorities—created by this approach was not a world away from the mutinous crowds of India, nor was the official reaction to it essentially different.⁴¹ Social Darwinism had made it to Italy, after all, in the infamous work of Cesare Lombroso, whose theories of the relation of climate and race to criminality were steeped in the post-unification southern response to the Savoy monarchy. Although Lombroso does not discuss laughter in his works, it is remarkable that the first chapter—indeed, the first sentence—of the first edition of his *Luomo delinquente* (1876)

mentions that the investigation of a crime isn't and shouldn't be so different from the investigation of a disease like cholera, whose origins may also be "individual" and "psychological": "An etiology can be established for crime just as it can for illness, and possibly more easily. Cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis all originate from specific causes, but who can deny that they are also influenced by broader meteorological, hygienic, individual, and psychological factors?"⁴² Lombroso then goes on to discuss the impact of climate and heat on crime rates—and we will leave him there. For now, it is enough to note that subalterns and cholera were not so much a fully worked out dyad as a kind of emergent biopolitical association, uneven and hybrid, barely at the surface of rational language. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that it should be a song about laughter—that is, a conjunction of music and nonsemantic utterance, a double undoing of language—that snapped this constellation into place.

As for laughter's relationship to subalternity and sickness, we have already encountered the *Mitteleuropean* phobia of a laughing song in *Death in Venice* and have noted how the published score of Cantalamessa's "A risa" includes the imperative subtitle "Redite!" (Laugh on!), thus hinting at the lore of contagion. That song's Neapolitan lyrics, which are the only part of it written by Cantalamessa, existed before both Mann's novella and the published score of 1899—Cantalamessa included the song in his repertoire before he claimed it via copyright—and are themselves darkly suggestive:

Neapolitan	English
Io tengo 'a che so' nato, 'Nu vizio gruosso assaie, Che 'un aggio perzo maie Va' trova lu ppecchè!	I've had since I was born This very great vice, I never managed to lose it Go figure out why!
M'è sempe piaciuto De stare in allegrie Io, la malinconia Nun saccio che robb'è!	I have always liked To be in a good mood To me, melancholy Is totally unknown!
<i>De tutto rido e che nce pozzo fà (ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah, Nun me ne mporta si stono a sbaglià</i>	<i>I laugh at everything and what can I do (laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha, I don't care if I am wrong</i>

(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah.

Io rido se uno chiagne,
 Se stongo disperato,
 Se nun aggio magnato,
 Rido senza pensà,
 Me pare che redenno
 Ogne tormento passa
 Nce se recreia e spassa
 Chhiù allegro se po sta.

*Sarrà difetto gruosso chistu
 cca!*

Ah, ah, ah, ah,

*Ma 'o tengo e nun m' 'o
 pozzo cchiu levà*

Ah, ah, ah, ah.

Lo nonno mio diceva
 Ca tutte li ffacenne
 Faceva, isso redenno
 E accussì voglio fa;
 Chisto è 'o difetto mio,
 Vuie mo già lu ssapite
 Nzieme cumme redite
 Che bene ve farrà!
 Redite e ghiammo ià:

ah, ah, ah, ah.

(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah,

Che bene ve farà

(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah,

Ah, ah, ah, ah.

(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha.

I laugh when someone cries,
 When I am feeling
 desperate,
 When I haven't eaten,
 I laugh without thinking,
 I think that by laughing
 All troubles melt away
 We can rest and have fun
 And live more happily.

Isn't this such a big flaw!

Ha, ha, ha, ha,

*But now I have it and I can't
 get rid of it*

Ha, ha, ha, ha.

My grandfather used to say
 That all that he did
 He did while he was
 laughing
 And I want to do the same;
 This is my flaw,
 And now you know it too
 So laugh along with me
 And it will do you good!
 Come on, laugh along with
 me:

ha, ha, ha, ha.

(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha,

And it will do you good

(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha,

Ha, ha, ha, ha.

These lyrics are ostensibly about an irrepressible happy laugh, an instance of the trope of the *lazzaro felice* (cheerful, happy scoundrel) that Goffredo Platino summons as a key figure of nineteenth-century Neapolitan song.⁴³ Yet by the second verse, it is not difficult to pick up overtones of laughter as a sinister flaw and inscrutable reaction to physical and psychological misery (laughing while hungry, while desperate, while someone else is crying). Johnson's original lyrics speak of laughter as a response to a confrontation with white onlookers, a laughter both complying with the racist stereotype of the bumbling Black man and offering a shield, a defense against the mocking gaze. Here the laughter is much closer to the musings (on moisture and convulsion) of a Darwin or a Spencer, who were, as we saw, particularly curious about laughter mingled with tears. This is a laughter without narrative context, without a cause, a glitch of the body that has slipped into the realm of the unthought. And for a song that is a deliberate appropriation of another's sung laughter, it is striking that Cantalamessa's laughter is not particularly attached even to the diegetic "I" of the song, except as a sort of recurring hiccup. The laughter becomes a strange, impersonal, and physiological index of subalternity—the references to hunger and despair tell us as much—but a subalternity that can be marketed as a mindlessness and cheerfulness that is nonthreatening and desirable, even therapeutic.

Before we delve deeper into Cantalamessa's "A risa," though, it is worth sketching out the network of signifiers that allowed it, by the mid-1890s, to communicate. We can begin with the August 20–21, 1887, issue of *La follia di Napoli*, a weekly satirical magazine that often featured material on cholera.⁴⁴ The gist of most of its articles is the wry observation that tourists were fleeing on the word that a new wave of the disease was spreading through the city, while the government, unsurprisingly, hushed up the extent of the contagion in order to not lose any more tourist money. One long poem, titled "I casi" (The cases), satirizes the policy of denial and reassuring babble about the absence of new cases and evokes racialized subalternity, choleric threat, military metaphors, and, eventually, laughter:

Italian	English
[. . .]	[. . .]
Poi disse: dunque è salva la città? . . .	Then he said: You mean the city is safe? . . .
Ed io: non ci è la <i>bestia</i> , né verrà.	And I: The <i>beast</i> is not there, nor will it be.
Non viene, Don Annibale, non viene,	It won't come, Don Annibale, it won't come,
E statevi a sentir, se ve ne tiene:	And listen to this, if you are still worried:

Qualche casuccio, se
 casuccio è stato,
 Ha colto qualche profugo
 malato.
 E se qualcuno a Napoli fu
 spento
 È stato colto come a
 tradimento.
 Di su, di giù, di qua di là si è
 estesa
 Una cinta tremenda di
 difesa.
 Le più severe e strette
 pulizie
 Si fanno per le piazze e per
 le vie.
 Le cloache di sera e di
 mattino
 Sciacqua e risciaqua l'onda
 del Serino
 Acidi corrosivi e puzzolenti
 Scendono nei meati i più
 latenti.
 Vice-Sindaci aggiunti e
 titolari
 Saggian le carne-cotte e i
 baccalari
 Olii, resine, polveri, metalli,

 Sassi verdi, cilestri, rossi e
 gialli
 Stanno nelle armerie
 municipali
 Diventati terribili arsenali.

 Se ficca il naso sol la *rea*
marmotta
 Sarà schiacciata come una
 ricotta!

A few tiny cases, if they
 were indeed cases,
 Have occurred among some
 sick refugees.
 And if anyone in Naples
 died of it
 It happened as if by
 accident.
 Up and down, far and wide,
 we have built
 A tremendous wall to
 defend us.
 The most strict and
 thorough cleaning
 Has been given to squares
 and streets.
 The sewers, each morning
 and evening,
 Are rinsed out by the tide of
 the Serino
 Corrosive and smelly acids
 Are poured into all dark
 passages.
 All kinds of Vice-Mayors,
 new and old,
 Sample the cooked meats
 and preserved fish,
 Oils, resins, powders, and
 metals,
 Green, blue, red, and yellow
 rocks
 Are kept in the city's
 storage rooms,
 Which have now become
 awesome arsenals.
 If the *nasty animal* so much
 as sticks her nose here
 It will be crushed like a
 ricotta!

Ci instruiamo oramai come conviene	We have now learned our lesson
L'ottantaquattro ci ha imparato bene.	1884 has taught us well.
S'agguerriscono attente, ed ogni giorno,	The cities and surrounding villages,
Queste cittade ed i villaggi intorno.	Are armed, and ready to go, every day.
Anzi, sentite questa, è originale,	And so, hear this, for it's a new one:
Ridiamo perche il riso è contro il male	Let's laugh because laughter cures the illness
Onde antidoto sommo è la Follia[.]	Whose ultimate cure is folly[.]
[. . .] ⁴⁵	[. . .]

The tone of the poem is knowingly sarcastic: the author evokes in detail official reports that diminished the disease as a poor foreigner's curse, a dark beast from the East to be kept away from the city's middle classes by a blend of showy military intervention and quackery. And the act of laughter emerges as the paradoxical response to the unspeakable yet imminent contagion—a taking leave of one's senses just as sickness strikes. In this issue of *La follia*, the sickness of cholera, though never named outright, is even given a body and a face. In the front page's illustration it looms behind Vesuvius in full Orientalist regalia: sickly, dark skinned, and turbaned (choleric contagion was, as Raza Kolb details, associated with and blamed on Muslims undertaking the hajj), teeth bared in a menacing grin.⁴⁶

But we can be precise here: the key racial aspect of choleric subalternity—as Raza Kolb explains—was not its predictable connection to a Muslim, dark-skinned “other” but the fact that it could be caught as easily as a water-borne bacterial disease. The person who got cholera became Black—literally too, as the final stages of the disease involved a darkening of the complexion that came to be understood as a racialized feature. Splinters of this discourse of contagious Blackness can be picked up in “Salamelic,” a popular Neapolitan song from 1882 dealing with the aftermath of Italy's first attempt to join the Scramble for Africa, which consisted of a failed attempt to pry an Egyptian port on the Red Sea away from the British.⁴⁷ An early example of repertoire reporting on such early colonial expeditions, “Salamelic” did not yet uphold the triumphalist, violent nationalism of later numbers like “Africanella,”⁴⁸ but it established a conduit between a Neapolitan subaltern and an Eastern, Black “other”:

Neapolitan

Da l'Egitto so' turnato
 stracquo, strutto e
 sfrantumato
 cu 'na faccia assaje cchiù
 nera
 de na cappa 'e cimmeniera.
 Rossa, 'ncapo, na sciascina,
 comm' a turco de la Cina . . .
 Io me paro nu pascià,
 ma nun tengo che mangià.
 Salamelicche, melicche
 salemme,
 Salamelicche, melicche salà,
 chesta canzone voglio cantà.

English

From Egypt I've come back
 tired, exhausted, and utterly
 crushed
 with a face way more black
 than the top of a chimney.
 On my head I've got a red
 cap
 like a Turkish man from
 China . . .
 I look like a pasha,
 yet have nothing to eat.
 Salamelik, melik salam,
 Salamelik, melik sala,
 that's the song I want to
 sing.

The odd world of “Salamelic” is one in which Blackness could be caught by Neapolitans partaking in colonial expeditions—along with the compulsion to croon in mangled Arabic. The connection to cholera is not, in this case, apparent, but the disease had been detected and discussed by the British rulers of Egypt as early as 1848 and would explode into a full-blown epidemic in 1883, a year after the song was composed. Along with contagion, Blackness, and a Muslim, Eastern subalternity, laughter carried out a fundamental linguistic function. It belonged, that is, to a network of signifiers capable of conjuring cholera without explicitly naming it. At a time when cases were either underreported or outright denied, particularly in Naples, this network of associations was increasingly functional and powerful.

Others before me have documented the harnessing of ideologies of voice and breath in the service of a biopolitical modernity that is manifested in public health campaigns and violent urban restructuring.⁴⁹ This was precisely what happened in Naples in the aftermath of its annexation by the Savoy monarchy. That northern monarchy's governing of the unruly, sick southern provinces featured violent repression of dissent, hasty plans for urban restructuring, and showy public works that were, by and large, unfinished or nonfunctional. But

the singular aspect of laughter here is that it was able to signify both the negative ideologies, highlighted in Raza Kolb's work, of contagion, subalternity, and race and their positive counterparts: ideologies of quick circulation, strength, and the profitability and exportability of commodities. The laughing contagion presented by Cantalamessa's lyrics is sinister but also desirable, fortifying, *fun*, a version of Herbert Spencer's cure for dyspepsia: a dose of the sickness and an inoculation from it all at once. Nicola Maldacea, who recorded one of the laughing songs we encountered in the introduction, recalls in his memoirs how upon hearing Cantalamessa's "A risa" in a live performance, audience members were sometimes so amused that they needed to leave the hall: "Più di una volta, avvenne che qualche spettatore in preda a sfrenato e convulso riso, dovesse abbandonare la sala per smaltire la . . . sbornia di allegria" (More than once, it happened that an audience member, overcome by unrestrained, convulsive laughter, had to leave the hall so as to come down from the . . . overdose of cheerfulness).⁵⁰ The laughing sickness could be caught during a live performance of "A risa," then, but audiences could also hear the performer's recommendations for antidotes for convulsive laughter. In the spoken section of a second laughing song of his own composition ("A risata nova," 1907), Cantalamessa would quip to his audience that he'd started taking a common digestive tonic, Tot, so he'd stop laughing for no reason.⁵¹ In those years, Tot was pointedly marketed as a fortifier of weak (and thus potentially choleric) guts.⁵² Laughter could be a cryptic symptom of this ailing sovereign gut—but one that could be used for product placement of the appropriate tonics and powders.

APPROPRIATING LAUGHTER

The ability to effect, through laughter, the switch between negative contagion and ideologies of healthy incorporation and circulation—within the bodies politic and natural—is worked out in the genesis of "A risa" as an appropriation.⁵³ After all, laughing songs were *songs*—compositions scripted and performed deliberately, not pathogens traveling from body to body, undetected by conscious thought. Exhibitors and the artists who produced contrafacts could profit by marketing such songs as contagious—as a healthy exposure to a choleric subaltern—but their circulation and the contrafacts they spawned were acts of conscious musical and linguistic thought, the result of several aesthetic and political choices. This is very much the case for "A risa," stolen via a phonograph cylinder from its original composer and performer, published under a new name, performed in *cafés chantants* and cabarets all over Naples, and recorded by Cantalamessa and, as I mentioned above, many others after him. The paradox, then, is that this was an appropriation of a song that needed to seem and be heard not just as catchy but as if it had been caught by the singer himself, as if it compelled its singer-songwriter and others to repeat it mindlessly, automatically, without thought.

Such an effect requires, of course, plenty of thought—from the performer, the lyricist, the publisher, and those who informally and formally promote the song as performance, cylinder or disc, and score. We already know about the lyrics, about the exhortation to laugh written into the published score, about Cantalamessa's attempted spin-off of "A risa" ("A risata nova") and its relationship to gut-strengthening tonics. Let's at last turn to the music. Nicola Maldacea devotes a full chapter of his memoirs of 1933 to the history of Cantalamessa's "A risa." It must have been a very well-loved element of his repertoire, because no other chapter revolves around a single song. The chapter offers us two lines of insight: it gives us, albeit in embellished form, a narrative for how Cantalamessa came across the song, the effect the cylinder had on him, and the steps he took to appropriate it and pass it off as his own; and it shows Maldacea's rhetoric and agenda in outing the song as an appropriation, a move probably intended to legitimize his own performance as more than just an imitation of Cantalamessa's original. We can now also examine Maldacea's story about his and Cantalamessa's first encounter with Johnson's song in Naples, where it was being played over a phonograph at an exhibit in 1895:

"A' risa" is by Berardo Cantalamessa, both the lyrics and the music. Actually, the music, to be honest, was not really the work of that great and much missed artist. Both he and I were under contract at the Salone Margherita [. . .]. One day, after rehearsals at the Salone, we stopped in the Galleria in a shop on the side of the nave that leads to Via Roma, on the right, where the Di Santo bakery is now. There were displayed, for the first time in Naples, phonographs, which had been invented really recently. [. . .] The most interesting product was a song in English, fruit of the labor of a black artist from North America. I don't remember the name of the song. All I know is that it made a huge impression on Cantalamessa and me, because of its irresistible, communicative joy. That singer laughed musically, and his laughter was so spontaneous and so funny that one felt compelled to imitate him.⁵⁴

The galleria in question is the Galleria Umberto I, also known as the Rettifilo, site of the café (Salone Margherita) where Maldacea and Cantalamessa had a regular gig as entertainers.⁵⁵ Any Neapolitan of the late nineteenth century would have known this place as a charged site: it had been built in 1887–1891 over the hastily razed grounds of the working-class quarter of Santa Brigida, which had been decimated by the cholera epidemic of 1884. Now a cross-shaped, Parisian-style glass-and-steel arcade, it symbolized the aspirational modernity that marked the Savoy monarchy's governing of Naples—as well as the disillusionment with this modernity on the part of locals who saw their conditions of poverty and vulnerability to contagion unchanged.⁵⁶ The rhetoric of this useless, violent modernity was a biopolitical one: monarchy bureaucrats proudly named the process of razing and rebuilding *risanamento* ("healing" or "recovery") and, at the same time, *sventramento*—"gutting," or, as Frank Snowden pointedly translates it, "disembowelment."⁵⁷ Such terms are, it should by now be clear, part of the choleric

lexicon, words joining the imaginary of the diseased bowels of the bodies natural and politic and the violence needed to heal them. As he brings us back to this charged site of contagion, poverty, and disembowelment, Maldacea doesn't name Johnson or the song's original title, maybe because he genuinely doesn't remember them but maybe because, in his attempt to remove some of the credit for the song from Cantalamessa, he doesn't intend to then give it to anyone else. So the authorship of the song stays lifted, yet Johnson's ethnicity is refashioned by being glossed as *moro*, Moorish: in other words, he's identified as a North African Muslim Black person. Needless to say, this (far more than an African American) was one of the chief figures of racial otherness in Naples at the time—and a not so distant relative of the gaunt, toothy figure personifying cholera in the illustration from *La follia* of August 20–21, 1887. And of course Maldacea remembers the sung laughter—so “spontaneous” (Fred Gaisberg would have said “natural,” another biopolitical trope) as to compel others (before, perhaps, they quite knew what they were doing) to imitate it. The lore of contagion activated here is, in part, a strategy for erasing the song's original and reducing the deliberate act of appropriation to a mere physiological reflex.

But Maldacea and especially Cantalamessa did know what they were doing: they were members of the Neapolitan petite bourgeoisie and beneficiaries of Naples's new modernity, now hired as regular acts in one of the city's most well-to-do cafés. Ownership of the song—being the copyrighted author—was something to be secured, and quickly. So Johnson's cylinder was remediated into a score: Maldacea's memoirs detail how Cantalamessa asked a friend to transcribe the cylinder on the sly and, presumably with the help of this same friend, adapted the music. He then rewrote the lyrics. This was, interestingly, a reversal of the usual process by which Neapolitan songs were written at the time: one of the city's literati (journalists and columnists for the local newspapers) would pen the lyrics, which someone else would set to music. But here the music came first and involved quite a bit of adaptation (although the harmonic sequence and overall structure remain recognizable). “A risa” is a studied, catchy contraption, put together with surgical precision. Not only is it performed at a faster tempo than the original, but that song's four-bar phrases are here split into units of 2+2 bars restating the same tune over different chords, effectively doubling the amount of melodic repetition. The tune is adapted to be more shapely and mobile—fewer of Johnson's recitatives on a single note, more rotatory motions around a central pitch, giving the song a propulsive spin. Repetition and a kind of quick, circular melody are devices used to make the music as insistent and memorable as possible, as if overacting its catchiness and circulation within the score. Also, the song's upbeat are embellished and highlighted and its downbeats tripped over in syncopation—both original features of Johnson's song but here used much more aggressively and thoroughly, as was common in Neapolitan songs of that era.

It is not surprising that Cantalamessa should have contrived to make the song catchier or adapted it in some ways to emulate the more arched, ornate melodies that were, after all, proper to the Neapolitan vaudeville style in which he operated. Comparing original and contrafact helps us to understand what it meant for Johnson's sung laughter to pass into a Neapolitan setting and, more specifically, what, in Cantalamessa's and his collaborators' ears, was the coveted thing in Johnson's song, the core that needed to be appropriated. The proper of "A risa"—its text, its surgically enhanced catchiness, even its score—tells us that that thing was transmission itself. Cantalamessa stole "The Laughing Song" because he heard, in that particular song, the possibility of enacting a kind of profitable sonic contagion. "A risa" is a song about the transmissibility of Johnson's laughter, and it works because laughter and choleric contagion were part of a live network of signifiers connecting subalternity, race, health, and international commerce.

As we saw earlier, Ranajit Guha reflected on this ideology of contagion as a means by which British colonial bureaucracy dismissed mutinies as mere flare-ups of pathologies rather than planned, reasoned, and reasonable responses to oppression. For hegemonic forces, such thoughts of the subaltern were like a contagion: spontaneous, pathological, and dangerous, but mindless, like a natural disaster. (Of course, the idea that ecosystems are mindless is also a legacy of extractive colonial ecologies.) Guha, however, believed that subaltern people can be understood on their own terms and that ideologies of contagion can be cast off quickly once the dynamics of oppression and rebellion are better understood. Let's put aside the age-old question of whether the subaltern can "speak"—or be interpellated and heard clearly by well-meaning members of the hegemony, provided they are armed with sufficient documentation and adequately moral listening practices. We might instead wonder how the so-called unintelligibility of the subaltern has survived beyond its origin as a distorted colonial appraisal of indigeneity. How is such unintelligibility stored, reified, and capitalized on in ways that render subalterns perhaps less capable of and disincentivized from accounting for themselves as reasonable beings? How did subaltern minorities at a global scale come to actively represent themselves as contagious, mindless, and racialized laughers? What I hope to have shown through this history of contagious laughter is that contagion wasn't just an ideology of subalternity but also one of the key ideologies of successful capital. Combined with late nineteenth-century contagion, laughter made for a protean sound caught between increasing profit and devastating sickness and gave a name and a sound to a particular form of modern unthought. Thus, exhibitors celebrated the contagiousness of laughing songs as a positive feature, not a frightening occurrence, proof that colonial markets were gloriously operative. "A risa" is as much about choleric subalternity in Naples as it is about internationally circulating songs and the markets they opened up: Cantalamessa left for a Latin American tour shortly after recording the song on wax cylinders

and then discs for the Società di fonotipia italiana—and its convulsive laughter, which stops at neither hunger nor despair, was his passport. Raza Kolb's work, as we have seen, argues that the Islamophobic explanation of cholera's spread as being due to the hajj was, in part, a way of papering over how it followed colonial transport and British commercial routes—a willful suppression of the connection between epidemics and international capital. Such repressed connections are not too far beneath the surface in the history of laughing songs: there, the contagiousness of a laugh meant moneymaking, the reproduction of sound, and the sickness of being racialized all at once.

Canned Laughter, Gimmick Sound

The topic of this chapter is something usually described as distasteful, if not disgraceful: the sound of prerecorded television laugh tracks. This technology was introduced into American television around 1953 and was often referred to as “canned laughter.” The epithet was negative even back then, redolent of both the artificial preservation of dead organic matter and abbreviated domestic labor (i.e., canned food). The TV comedian Red Skelton described this laughter thus in 1956: “Now they’ve got whole laugh-track libraries—canned, dehydrated, hermetically-sealed human laughter, artificially preserved . . . the laughter of corpses—that’s what you get on television! Now it’s spreading to radio. The titter-grinder is one of the most shameful frauds ever perpetrated. We are being hoodwinked into laughter, at the cost of our sense of humor. [. . .] You people are only laughing by proxy.”¹

Skelton’s outrage passes through metaphors that are familiar to those who study the history of recorded voices: death, ghosts, embalming, preservation. The word *canned* used in relation to recorded sound became commonplace in American discourse only after World War II, though “canned music” was coined as a derogatory term for recorded music by none other than John Philip Sousa in 1906, and canned goods date back to 1850s wartime food production.² Postproduced laughter was also known in the 1950s as “sweetening”—a word tied to additives, flavoring, and artificial pleasure. Rather than being a crude form of technological determinism, then, the notion of “canned” sound marks a response to the symbolism of canned food after World War II within US bounds (cheap, abbreviated wifely labor in the home) and perhaps also outside them (the emergence of postwar American imperialism and its attendant markets). Yet this briefly sketched cultural history cannot quite account for Skelton’s bellowing indignation. At the end of the quote his tone darkens further as he muses on a laughing crowd piloted into physical response by an invisible hand. From a swipe at Campbell’s soup we are transported to the realm of McCarthyist paranoia and brainwashing. How did this happen? Why was recorded *laughter* able to plunge Skelton—and many others after him—into such depths of disgust?

In this chapter, I mine this disgust, tracing it both to its cultural origins and to the sonic and musical practices that were its target.³ In order to do this, I will adopt a position that is still relatively unusual for those who have written on the theme: I will refuse to erect myself as a judge deciding whether canned laughter amounts to political brainwashing or whether it allows for subtler forms of political agency in its audiences.⁴ Instead, I ask why, of all the relatively unimportant features of televised sound, this technology sparked such intense outrage and paranoia, and what this discourse can tell us about the way we regard our own listening in modern capitalism. My working hypothesis is that midcentury laugh tracks were accompanied by an emerging sense that they were a uniquely audible form of ideology-in-play. As soon, that is, as laughter was postproduced into TV shows, it became important to be able to distinguish—or rather, to imagine that one could distinguish—canned laughter from (let’s call it) free-range laughter, postproduced from live. Of course, the debate about the authenticity of laughter and the capacity to tell “fake” from “real” laughter is a long-standing seam of Western modernity, and canned laughter is only one chapter in a long history. But, to my mind, the history of canned laughter shows us that the dream of being able to pick ideology apart by ear, of acquiring the audile technique for discerning truth from lie, is a peculiar, late-capitalist commodity all its own.⁵ The burgeoning belief that one could prize apart recorded and live laughter gave rise to informal techniques for making this distinction, and such techniques were and are essential rather than detrimental to the success of laugh tracks.

We can begin with some historical reflections, locating a beginning to the systematic use of TV laugh tracks—preceded though they were by a scattered use of prerecorded laughter in radio shows. According to my taxonomy, the term *canned laughter* refers specifically to prerecorded laugh tracks that are postproduced into a TV sitcom (not any other medium). The most famous and most often discussed means of doing this was the so-called Laff Box, a contraption designed by the wartime engineer Charles Douglass that connected loops of taped laughter to a typewriter keyboard.⁶ But many other competing practices for postproduction emerged almost immediately (such as playing a taped show to a live audience or splicing the recorded laughter onto the tape without the use of Douglass’s machine). We will return to the Laff Box and its hegemony later, but in all of these forms, canned laughter was proper to North American television but also widely exported in one of the most glaring examples of US cultural imperialism after World War II. In many ways, canned laughter signified the neocolonial export of the comedic scripts of midcentury American television, scripts that, as Judith Yaross Lee recently pointed out, themselves derived from equivalent British scripts. Lee analyzes the dynamic that allowed American imperialism to obscure its own ideological nervature: “These characterizations specifically twit condescending

British and other former masters or elites of the modern American empire in a fantasy that asserts postrevolutionary American ideals of the ordinary (usually white) citizen. [. . .] By imagining themselves as innocent victims of empire, they, conveniently enough, evaded responsibility for the American imperium that followed as the United States grew westward by focusing attention eastward, across the Atlantic, instead.”⁷

The Californian setting of the conception and production of laugh tracks is key in this respect—as a site of this emerging “westward gaze” that hid its colonial ambitions toward the Pacific under the rubric of an anticolonial, postrevolutionary (and, as Lee points out, largely white) pride. Indeed, we will soon see this ideology of the charmingly innocent white American take center stage in the earliest sitcom to feature canned laughter: *The Hank McCune Show*, which was not only shot but also set in Los Angeles. Yet equally important, and related to the ideology of midcentury Californian television and its catering to white middle America, is canned laughter’s endurance and afterlife as an object of both suspicion and disgust. One oft-quoted example is a scene in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977) in which the protagonist, Alvy, develops violent nausea on a trip to Los Angeles after observing the addition of a laugh track to a TV comedy show. This “ick” factor is an enduring part of the cultural discourse surrounding canned laughter—nowadays not an open moral disgust à la Red Skelton but a kind of fly-swatting liberal irritation. The British newspaper the *Guardian*, which likes to see itself and is often thought of by its dedicated readers as one of the last pillars of the liberal elite—no paywall, commitment to long-term inquiries into burning political issues, some attempts at leaving sensationalism at the door—has devoted hundreds of column inches to canned laughter (all damning) since 2002.⁸ Laugh tracks have also been increasingly disgraced and maligned outside left-wing discourse over the past twenty years, with the emergence of reality TV and, more important, a style of comedy that is shot and edited like a documentary, with lower production values, movable cameras and tracking shots, and deliberately offbeat and awkward dialogue. This mockumentary aesthetic pointedly implies a remove from the high production and postproduction values of the TV studios of traditional sitcoms. It is no mystery that a string of US comedy series—*Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–), *Scrubs* (2001–2010), *Arrested Development* (2003–2019), *The Office* (2005–2013), *30 Rock* (2006–2013), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015)—found success in part by effectively changing the contemporary aesthetic of TV comedy, moving it away from timed gags with punch lines and laughter and toward a slower rhythm and deadpan delivery that dispenses with the need for live audience response.

Yet it is remarkable that, for all its decline as a practice, the use of canned laughter continues to draw attention. Reruns and the wide digital availability on streaming platforms of sitcoms from the era of laugh tracks—especially those within recent memory like *Friends* (1994–2004) or *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019)—keep laugh tracks within the realm of contemporary culture even as the discourse

around them has remained uniformly critical in tone. I mentioned the *Guardian* in the previous paragraph, but there have been contributions from the higher academic echelons as well, with, for example, the journal *Critical Inquiry* publishing a special issue devoted to laughter, including an article on canned laughter.⁹ There are now forms of entertainment that are grounded in the mockery of laugh tracks. For instance, on the digital channel Comedy Central, a June 2016 episode of Amy Schumer's satirical show *Inside Amy Schumer*, titled "The Psychopath Test," parodies a 1990s sitcom, with increasingly racist, sexist, and fatphobic jokes delivered to the sound of uproarious canned laughs on cue, to the increasing distress of one of the characters, who catches on to the ideological trickery at play and tries to warn the others before being abruptly replaced by a more compliant actor. On the level of grassroots, user-generated comedy on YouTube, a whole genre of video has emerged in the past five years in which segments of sitcoms from the 1990s are shown stripped of their laugh tracks. You can watch, say, a five-minute segment from *Friends* featuring Ross Geller making a series of misogynist jokes and then standing there in deafening silence, waiting for the canned laughter to subside. The fact that the characters stop for the laughs makes the confected nature of the shows—and in this case the calculated naturalization of the misogyny—all the more apparent and thus ripe for critique.¹⁰ The moral is clear: canned laughter tells us when to laugh, or worse, it laughs *for* us, becoming a form of mind-numbing social entertainment with dark political ends. The laugh track is, according to this interpretation, a cipher for the enabling of all the things we find distasteful about now-ancient sitcoms as a genre: the whitewashing, the glorification of the middle class, the general disregard for if not mockery of any sort of minority, the misogyny, and so on. But—to repeat—for me the real point of interest is not so much the presence of such ideological constructs in comedy of the past but the fact that laugh tracks can function for contemporary audiences as a perennially ready alarm bell, for such ideologies, or, to switch metaphor, they act as a distancing screen between *us*, a self-styled politically aware public, and past cultural artifacts that we now consume for the peculiar pleasure of diagnosing their ideological flaws. In its new guise as a suspicious ideology that users can peel away courtesy of basic video and audio editing software, the laugh track becomes, paradoxically, an enduring, fungible aural commodity.

Perhaps, then, our distaste for canned laughter, the desire to scrub it out of our ears and off of our soundtracks, is part of the commodity of canned laughter rather than a means of excising ourselves from it. If so, laugh tracks require us to dwell on an uncomfortable thought. Can a commodity such as prerecorded laughter be constructed to second-guess its audience in such a way that the audience's distaste for it becomes a selling point? And is this distaste something that separates contemporary audiences from, say, the supposedly mindless consumers of early laugh tracks? Are we more-evolved listeners than those who preceded us, or are we the latest in a long line of consumers who take pleasure in thinking themselves above the commodity they consume?

The reader may have noticed that, in the previous two paragraphs, I used the first-person plural, in a rather irritating way. Who, really, is the “we” to whom I refer when I flag the distaste for canned laughter and the implicit smugness that sometimes accompanies it? And why does my observation of contemporary disavowal of canned laughter need to be directed at both myself and my potential readers rather than at a more defined and distinct third-person plural? What, indeed, do I know of my readers such that I would include them in this collective pronoun instead of more respectfully allowing them to distance themselves as they see fit? The use of *we* in this chapter is strange, an imperfect solution to a problem of positioning. As I will outline below, many members of the contemporary liberal professional-managerial class have exhibited a revulsion to laugh tracks that is akin to a revulsion to any kind of visibly nonliberal ideology—any ideology, that is, that denies the self-determination, capacity for critical consciousness, and upward mobility of any human subject. Laugh tracks are counted as base attempts at brainwashing and consensus creation that go against the ethos of the critical, self-aware liberal subject, and I hail you, reader, and also myself as people who have held and still hold some hopes and dreams to either be such a subject or foster such freethinking in others. But I also hail us both as members of a neoliberal professional-managerial class for whom participating in the public flagging of racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist discourses has become a highly desirable and marketable (if quickly inflationed) skill.¹¹ This is what Catherine Liu calls “virtue hoarding”: the monopolizing of a discourse of social justice, often enacted at the level only of consumer choice, at the expense of a redistribution of wealth, which marks out the contemporary professional-managerial class (and calls, for Liu, for its abolition).¹² Exposing laugh tracks and “choosing” not to endorse or consume them is, in my view, a minor symptom of this shared ideology.

There are two corollaries to these shared neoliberal desires for public virtue. The first is the frequent implicit belief that it is only we and not our predecessors (in this chapter’s case, 1950s television audiences, media executives, and trade press) who perceive such ideologies for what they are and that therefore we embody the highest, most advanced form of critical consciousness. The second is the inevitable worry that we are, in fact, much more subservient to ideology than we claim to be (indeed, that we may serve ideology precisely through our apparent critique of it). This generates an attending anxiety to stave off ruin by further performatively distinguishing truth from lie, ideology from fact, right from wrong even as our belief in such distinctions quietly and slowly hollows. The desperate wish to display a capacity for telling truth from lie and the ambition to do so more easily than others (those before us and those around us) is something that joins us as members, or aspiring members, of a particular class at this moment in history. The aim of this chapter is to show that not only do we share this exact same wish and ambition with a group of people (white middle-class midcentury Americans) with whom few identify nowadays but these desires were, in fact, anticipated, incorporated, and catered to by the complex commodities that were midcentury laugh tracks.

Were I to vaguely attribute these liberal wishes and ambitions to North American and European audiences—though even that would be inaccurate, as laugh tracks were common in television around the world by the 1960s—the pull of the argument would be lost somewhat, with its subject diluted into a “they” that is too comfortably separated from author and reader. It is only through the performative “we” that I can—awkwardly and imperfectly, but humbly—tie myself and the reader to the historical subjects and artifacts of this chapter.

And now for some historical analysis. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, canned laughter was a subject of discussion as early as the 1950s. In 1953, the prominent TV producer Jess Oppenheimer (the producer and head writer for *I Love Lucy*) wrote a short article in *Variety* laying out the landscape of canned laughter practices and attendant reactions. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

A number of television comedy shows on film have been using certain systems to incorporate laughs which create *an unnatural effect and this is quite disturbing to the home audience*. Some programs put the show on film and then play that film to a studio audience and record that audience’s reaction, which is then put on the sound track of the original film. This gives an honest reaction but that reaction sometimes, in fact, most times, doesn’t correspond with the timing of the actors on the film. Some programs don’t ever play it in front of a studio audience but simply take recorded laughs and dub them in where the producer feels the action calls for it. This too, unless most expertly done, creates *an unnatural result and uncomfortable feeling in the home audience*. The viewer may not have the critical faculties to analyze exactly why he doesn’t like the laugh, *he just knows something is wrong*, and is liable to condemn the whole idea of using laughs.¹³

An interesting counterpoint to Skelton, Oppenheimer thinks of laughter as a consumer good and of audience reaction as, basically, market research. He insists (as I have italicized three times in the above quote) that audiences can tell—although they may not know how—when they are listening to laughs that are spliced into the soundtrack. It is worth noting that his tone is one of ongoing market research and not really so moralizing, although the terms he uses to qualify a functional laughter commodity are political: “natural” and “honest.” The laughter that sells has the shine of authenticity, if nothing else—and it is important to remember that Oppenheimer was soon selling his own laugh-track-making machine (the Jay-O Laughter), which narrowly lost a patent war to Douglass’s Laff Box.¹⁴ Nature and honesty, then, are selling points here, and the belief in the audience’s ability to tell canned from free range becomes a means of marketing the commodity—indeed, of marketing a more “organic” form able to cheaply fulfill the need for live laughter.

As to whether anyone can really discriminate and distinguish between live and canned laughter, the answer, then as now, is no, not really. For instance, some of

the laughter in *Friends*, particularly in later seasons, is from a live audience. Yet that doesn't stop YouTubers from scrubbing it from the audio tracks and knowingly displaying the awkward remains. In any case, it would be naïve to imagine that, historically, laughers have not been coached, planted in the audience, and even put on stage next to the performers to respond on cue.¹⁵ What is crucial here, though, is that the investment in being able to tell true from fake laughter—and, in the twentieth century, prerecorded from live laughter—endures well past such basic critical considerations. We conveniently forget, for example, that early sitcoms using canned laughter sometimes played with the idea of laughter being a recorded sound. Signaling the laughter as artificial was part of the fun. For instance, Ernie Kovacs's show had a gag in which someone opened tin cans that released peals of laughter and applause.¹⁶ But there were also more complex ways of flagging laughs as part of a postproduced soundtrack. In the first televised episode of *The Hank McCune Show*, one of the first series to use canned laughter from Douglass's Laff Box, we see the titular character (a blundering, good-natured young man) attempting to fix a gramophone, only to find that the contraption sounds like a radio skipping stations—and canned laughter rippling on is part and parcel of this moment of technological confusion. In another laborious gag from the same episode, Hank's landlady suspects him of kleptomania and sends a handyman to secure all the furniture in his rented apartment. While Hank is out, the handyman proceeds to methodically nail down every chair, hanging picture, and ashtray while laughing very loudly to himself—an odd, almost pantomimed scene. When Hank returns home and tries to move a chair, only for it to stick and cause him to lose his balance and fall over, the canned laughter that ensues is clearly meant to be heard as an echo of the handyman's cackle as he made the chair fast, almost as if the laughter were stored in the objects at the heart of the gag.¹⁷ A later episode features the handyman oiling a squeaky door hinge and then using the same oil to fix someone's loud chewing—another knowing use of postproduced sounds that is rounded off, of course, by canned laughter.¹⁸

The pleasure in signaling artificiality—and guiding others toward identifying the markers of artifice—also features in the industry press of the same years. Overall, as we have discussed, the TV industry press routinely panned the use of canned laughter. One Jose Walter Thompson, writing for *Variety*, summed up the general opinion when he remarked in 1958 that the laugh track for *Father Knows Best* was “as phoney as a politician's embrace and totally unnecessary.”¹⁹ Critics were also eager to mention the supposed aural giveaways of “laughter from the can,” almost as if to train others to make the distinction by ear. One writer, reviewing a show called *Duffy's Tavern* in 1954, declared that “the canned laughter, poorly selected, much of the time overlapped. Most of the lines and situations invited chuckles rather than raucous laughter, which is how the ‘audience reaction’ came across.”²⁰ Poor syncing and excessive loudness recur as sonic markers in many reviews and became informal means of sorting laughers on the soundtrack. Yet an anonymous reviewer remarked of *You'll Never Get Rich*, a new show by Phil Silvers, that it

had “a plethora of laughs on the soundtrack, some of them even obliterating the film’s best lines. Comment has been loud and long about it, with a couple of critics even declaring that the ‘canned laughter would have to be eliminated.’ Actually, the Silvers show was filmed before an audience at the DuMont Telecenter in N.Y. and they were ‘live’ laughs. [. . .] With the audiences, the laughter is too loud, comes in the wrong places.”²¹ According to this writer, then, the same aural signifiers (loudness and poor timing) could signify at once liveness and postproduction, artificiality and authenticity, giving the lie, as early as 1955, to the idea of an audible technique capable of telling them apart. Of course, this is but one of hundreds of short mentions of canned laughter in industry magazines in the 1950s—hardly a fly in the ointment of a rising desire for aural discernment between real and canned laughter. Yet for contemporary sound historians it is a stark reminder that suspicion of canned laughter, as well as the wished-for ability of locating it by ear, is something that marked the technology’s emergence. Our current feelings about canned laughter are, then, the result of neither an acquired taste nor the wisdom of hindsight but are instead an uncomfortable, enduring inheritance. How did this come to pass?

GIMMICK

Let’s think in another way about the particular commodity that, according to my argument, canned laughter constitutes. Consider its use-value, in both economic and aesthetic terms. Employing prerecorded laughter was, in the burgeoning TV industry of the American midcentury, a means of cutting down costs while keeping up with demand. As more and more pilots were made and then syndicated into series contracts, the studio space capable of hosting a live audience became harder to find, as were actual, physical audiences. Remember that 1950s TV shows were by and large shot with a movable single camera—like films, that is (industry magazine even referred to them as “TV films”). This meant that every scene had to be reshot multiple times, from different angles (unlike contemporary sitcoms with a fixed multiple-camera setup, which has been the norm since the 1960s). Both actors and producers were candid about the ensuing costs and remarkably precise about numbers. The comedian Ray Bolger, writing to *Variety* in 1954 with a mea culpa for having used canned laughter in his TV show, justified himself with a string of figures: “Our elaborate dance production alone, which lasted a little more than three minutes on the screen, often took more than three hours to film. Just one scene. It took three eight-hour days to film the program. Using as many as 11 sets on a show, we could neither find a room to seat a ‘live’ audience nor the audience to sit it out for that long.”²²

With most sitcoms running twenty-five to thirty minutes, shooting time clocked in at around twenty-four hours per weekly episode, which excludes time for scripting, editing, and postproduction. Often, TV sitcoms were adaptations of radio shows fronted by the same comedians (this was the case, for instance,

with Red Skelton and Phil Silvers). Those shows had been recorded in front of live studio audiences, which was obviously a far less cumbersome affair in that technological medium. (It's worth remembering that prerecorded laughter was occasionally used in radio shows too.)²³ Live laughter in TV sitcoms, then, was important not so much—as is often argued—because it made the shows feel more like live theatrical performances but because it sutured a new media format to a previous one that audiences had already come to love: namely, radio. Laughter was necessary to the re-mediation of comedy from theater to radio to TV—it was a reality effect whose absence would have been felt as a rupture, a chink in the product. But live laughter and audience sounds were an unprofitable part of the TV sitcom even as its audiences still expected them.

It's important to be specific about what exactly constituted the issue here. Echoing Bolger, the journalist Bob Spielman wrote in 1955 that “[the TV producer Ray Singer], who uses audience reaction, not canned laughter, says one of the big problems these days is finding the audience to watch a TV show being run off.”²⁴ This is a striking contrast to the willing audiences of the laughing songs we encountered in the previous chapter, who aided economic reproduction by both paying for phonograph exhibits and marketing them with their laughter. I interpreted the laughter of those early phonograph audiences as a form of free reproductive labor that made the phonograph user-friendly and profitable. If we consider the perspective of a TV audience member at midcentury, the strain of such labor is evident: the filming schedule for a sitcom in the 1950s would involve sitting for eight hours as a ten-minute skit was reshot again and again. If for the producer this meant the expense of renting a studio that could seat an audience, there was also the issue of the audience itself. Even assuming one could find a willing live audience for the shoot, they'd likely become less and less prone to laugh over the course of the working day. Not to mention the cost of the hardware necessary to capture their responses: one critic estimated the need for thirty mikes for an audience of three hundred.²⁵ In short, being an audience member—nay, being an *appropriately vocal* audience member—was starting to look less like a form of consumption and more like labor of the kind that could no longer go unpaid. There remains little trace of these early live TV audiences: we don't in fact know if they were ever paid, or how much, but the difficulty in finding a paper trail suggests that they were off the books and so likely unpaid or at least unevenly paid; canned laughter swooped in to elide them right when—and likely because—they finally began to be seen as workers to be hired. After all, the TV industry was then recovering from the—to date—longest-running strike in the history of American entertainment: the Petrillo bans (named for the TV musicians union leader, James Petrillo), which saw musicians working in TV studios withhold their services to protest being recorded and thus made redundant. These strikes were of course unsuccessful, leading to mass dismissals of many who worked in the industry, but they lasted nearly two years, creating a large disturbance in the TV production line.²⁶ On the

heels of this disturbance, laughing audiences were likely taken as a problem to be swept under the rug, and quickly. Just as live audience laughter came to be seen as reproductive labor essential to the maintenance of the TV industry at large, it had to be elided, repressed, and displaced.

This admittedly superficial detour into the means of production of a laugh track—an ironic Marxian twist in a chapter set in the McCarthy era—gives us enough to begin understanding the kind of disgust that laugh tracks elicit. It is a disgust that clings to reproductive labor and emotion work in general, a disgust that implicitly genders, racializes, and dismisses the labor as something other than the rightful toil of a self-possessed, liberal subject. Bill Dietz's use of recorded concert audience sounds in his performance *L'école de la claque* sets up the work of *claqueurs* as nonwhite and nonpatriarchal, if not openly queer: "Contrary to the idealized image of white patriarchs engaged in rational, transparent exchange in Viennese coffee houses (as theorists such as Jürgen Habermas would have it), a history of the public sphere acknowledging the claque (the body of professional audience members paid to guide the evaluatory noise of an audience) would be messy, invested, conflictual, compromised, polarized."²⁷

There is much to be said for this kind of uncomfortable rehabilitation of the claque as anti-Enlightenment noise, yet I want to dwell in a place slightly to the left of this imaginative, positive reevaluation: I want to consider canned laughter as a reproductive labor that induces suspicion and disgust to this day, even among us (readers and writer alike). The renunciation of "the idealized image of white patriarchs"—or rather, their reincarnation in the implicit white middle-class subject of midcentury American television—is a tougher process than one might wish to acknowledge. Alongside a retelling of the history of audience responses, we need a critical consideration of a feeling that has long accompanied canned laughter and its ancestors: the intense desire for and belief in the ability to distinguish true from fake laughter.

To seriously consider what the link might be between disgust for canned laughter and its means of production and of consumption (including, therefore, the long history of our distaste for it), we must turn to a different kind of thinking. There is a disgust, Sianne Ngai reminds us, that is peculiar to our response to labor-saving devices and requires no allegiance to or even knowledge of Marxist tenets.²⁸ Ngai's work is famous for exploring, in original and profound ways, the aesthetic and political functions of negative and mixed emotions in capitalism. Indeed, from a more classical Marxist perspective, the dislike of laugh tracks signifies a critical consciousness that has caught on to a form of ideological conditioning. With this critique we enter a realm of esthesis that is resistant, detached from and antagonistic to the laws of capital. Pleasure, in this line of thinking—a bare-bones version of Frankfurt School aesthetics—is a form of ideological compliance; displeasure

is the door to the awakening of political consciousness. Ngai's work on emotional responses challenges this very basic assumption by showing that suspicion, disgust, fear, and pleasure all do their complex work in capitalism; she is broadly a Marxian thinker, but of a simultaneously wry and compassionate strain: for her, no form of aesthetic attunement can save us from capital, but conversely, a much closer, subtler, and profound connection exists between political and economic conditions and our aesthetic responses. In Ngai's thought, capital is a world of complex feeling, and its workings bind us to one another in incalculable, uncomfortable, and surprising ways.²⁹ It is from this place that I now want to consider the links between the production, consumption, and discourse of postproduced laughter.

I mentioned above our typical response of disgust to abbreviated labor, identified in Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick*. A gimmick is a device—by which Ngai means either an actual machine or, more broadly, a technique of the body or even a turn of speech—that saves labor time. As such, it obviously belongs to industrial capitalism and the long history of machines created to supplant, by being faster and thus cheaper, the labor of humans. Yet the gimmick is a unique subset of industrial hardware, in that it is meant to be observed, watched, and enjoyed as entertainment. Whether it does or does not save labor time is actually not relevant, because its primary function is to fulfill the desire to witness labor time in the process of being shortened and optimized, regardless of success. In this respect, the gimmick is not only the piece of hardware (e.g., the mechanized loom) but also the response the hardware elicits, which is more often than not ambivalent, if not outright negative (e.g., the disgust and fear of the Luddite facing the mechanized loom). Ngai's gimmick finds its primary forms of life in the realm of arts and entertainment and is just as likely to be the bodily technique of an entertainer as to be a machine. The comedian's bit, or hook, is a gimmick (one meant to elicit quick laughter without expending the energy for a full-fledged joke), and so are the many ways that comedic situations depict technology: as articulated, elaborate machines for performing basic tasks like buttering toast, for example. So the truth of the gimmick lies not in the literal description of what it is but—and this is what, for Ngai, makes it a product of industrial capitalism—in the audience's ambivalent aesthetic response to what it does. This kind of ambivalence, including its ties to capitalist production, is something for which Ngai offers us new language. In *Theory of the Gimmick*, she writes, "Repulsive if also strangely attractive, with a layer of charm we find ourselves forced to grudgingly acknowledge, labor- and time-saving gimmicks are of course not exclusive to comedy. We find them in shoes and cars, appliances and food, politics and advertising, journalism and pedagogy, and virtually every object made and sold in the capitalist system. But comedy [. . .] has a unique way of bringing out the gimmick's aesthetic features in explicit linkage to its status as a practical device."³⁰

Two things are particularly striking about this theory: first, the language it gives us for describing the slippage between the subject and objects of perception (the gimmick is a machine that accounts for the aesthetic responses it elicits); second and perhaps most important, the insight that it is in ambivalence, the mixture of pleasure and disgust (rather than mere positive aesthetic responses or dismissal), that industrial capitalism might most extensively reach the realm of the senses.

As may now be obvious, canned laughter partakes of many of the signature traits of the gimmick: it is a technological device (indeed, with machines like Douglass's Laff Box, a tangible bit of hardware) that is meant to abbreviate, optimize, and save on the labor of laughter. We can even turn this around and say that it is precisely because canned laughter was invented that we know that laughter was and is a form of audible labor: the act of laughing was treated the same as any reducible industrial labor cost. Canned laughter has, therefore, a kind of aesthetic-political double edge: it abbreviates labor, yes, but it abbreviates a labor that is reproductive in kind—a form of emotion work, a way of smoothing and maintaining the means of production. Because—and this is broadly the argument of chapter 3—reproductive labor is rarely recognized as such, the sound of laughter simultaneously performs it and, by sounding it, introduces it into the realm of representation. The distaste of critics for laugh tracks—and their evident pleasure at expressing such distaste—is part of the ambivalent aesthetics that radiate from abbreviated reproductive labor. But this is too quick and easy a match of theory to laughing practice. Two things need to be further ironed out in thinking about canned laughter as gimmick: first, the specific mechanism of pleasure that canned laughter produces—why audiences laugh along with it even as they love to hate it; second, the aural implications of a gimmick's mechanisms of display and occlusion. Ngai doesn't use canned laughter as one of her examples, but her work on the gimmick was first published in the aforementioned *Critical Inquiry* special issue on laughter (which she coedited with Lauren Berlant),³¹ and it's especially significant that she offers, as a classic example of the gimmick, the contraption described by the Symbolist writer Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in "The Glory Machine" (1883). This short story's titular device is a machine for eliciting audience reactions on cue during theatrical performances. Stocked up on laughing gas, tear gas, and other vaguely bellicose technologies, the machine sits at the back of a theatre, ready to dispense the right medicine for the desired response, ensuring that every performance will be a roaring success. In the story, the Glory Machine—and this is what makes it a gimmick—becomes the object of audience wonder as much as the onstage action, with theater attendees consenting to be manipulated in order, paradoxically, to witness and understand the workings of the machine that is manipulating them. The Glory Machine offers its audience the pleasure of witnessing the abbreviation of the labor of a cheering crowd at work, and as that crowd, of being both alert

to and complicit in the fabrication of artifice. But that's not all. In a particularly gnomic sentence, Ngai reflects on the strange economy of desire enacted by a gimmick: "One of the gimmick's aims becomes transparent: that of giving its addressee what it says we want (now). We recoil from this interpellation: not because the gimmick's claim to knowing our desire is wrong, but because it usually isn't."³²

How can a gimmick pander to your desire so crassly and still somehow get it right? In the case of the laugh track, we could take this simply to mean that its kitschy way of providing the reality effect of a live audience is both seemingly obvious and ultimately what audiences want, pace all Marxian condemnations. But there is a second, slightly against-the-grain reading of this passage. Perhaps the overt (declared?) purpose of a gimmick (in the case of canned laughter, providing a necessary reality effect to ensure the enjoyment of TV shows at home) is not, in fact, its true purpose. Our being interpellated by the laugh track-gimmick's apparent interpretation of our desire ("You want audience laughter; I keep up with your demand by abbreviating the labor of audience sounds") and then recoiling from that interpellation ("I can tell canned laughter from 'real' laughter and dislike the canned stuff") is part and parcel of the gimmick's workings. We enjoy the gimmick because we think it is a form of ideology we can outsmart, but in fact, the gimmick was catering to our desire for moral and intellectual superiority all along. The righteous distaste for abbreviated labor becomes, then, just another mode of consumption. Canned laughter is meant to fail as "true" laughter, is meant to be disliked and picked apart by ear. The theory of the gimmick reaches its sinister depths precisely by going beyond a mode of scholarship that aims to show us the mechanism, the laboring bodies, the oppression behind a smooth cultural surface: the gimmick, the machine whose workings are pleasurably beneath us, offers an aesthetic category in which the very feeling of revelation, of uncovering abbreviated and exploited labor, is a commodity bought and sold like any other. Indeed, the satisfaction of feeling immune to ideology is a psychic mechanism that can be activated by our aesthetic response to a ridiculous machine. The ways we hear the artificiality of a canned laugh, the means we have of dismissing it (purported tells of syncing, sound quality, volume), are all tricks by which we are led to buy into it. And so there is no escape from the gimmick: it thinks through you in the same moment that you congratulate yourself for thinking yourself out of it.

LAFF BOX

We can now turn to a second issue mentioned above: the role of the aural in canned laughter as gimmick. Because the gimmick relies on displaying, even staging (and then banking on our responses to) the means by which labor is abbreviated, issues arise when it is something that is primarily heard rather than seen. It is one thing to use a phrase or a certain segment of recorded sound (a comedian's bit, an advertising jingle, a laugh track) to save time and labor; it is quite another

to imagine the audience responding to that sonic segment as abbreviated labor: to hear the comedian's bit as a way of getting laughs faster than a full-fledged joke would, the jingle as a means of awarding the commodity it's selling a sense of combined wonder and familiarity, the laugh track as a substitution for the swell of a live audience. How, then, did the gimmick of canned laughter attach itself to the aurality of abbreviated labor—and come to be heard (with that familiar shudder of disgust and delight) as a device?

There are some immediate answers. As we saw earlier, critics writing in both industry and general readership magazines actively rehearsed the ability to tell canned laughter from “the real thing”—citing poor synchronization and the overspill of laughter drowning out the show's dialogue, as well as excessive loudness, as means of distinguishing nature from artifice. We are also aware that such techniques are highly fallible and were known to be so from the beginning—which tells us something about how the desire to be able to prize artifice and nature apart by ear in fact endures far past critique and can, in a gimmicky world, be harnessed toward increasing rather than decreasing consumption. The discourse around the capacity to hear when a laugh track was in play—the search, by ear, for an aural tell, a version of the poker player's giveaway tics when bluffing—continued on and mutated over time. For instance, the poor sound quality of the laugh tracks on Hanna-Barbera's cartoons in the 1970s—due, apparently, to the cost-saving practice of sampling prerecorded laugh tracks from other shows—was one such tell.³³ Another example: as sitcoms were more and more widely consumed and exported abroad and the taped laugh tracks they used became standardized, people gleefully recognized the sounds of certain prerecorded laughs across different shows. As canned laughter went global, along with the shows that it festooned, the techniques for hearing it as an imported artifice multiplied and articulated themselves into a grassroots knowledge that has yet to be systematically documented or discussed.

Going back to the 1950s—the zero hour of televised laugh tracks—there was one further element feeding into the sensing of laugh tracks as abbreviated labor: the Laff Box, also called the Laugh Organ or Audience Response Duplicator. I mentioned this contraption above and am returning to it now—with a mind to think of it not only as a piece of hardware but as a key part of the aural gimmick of canned laughter. The Laff Box came into being together with the practice of using canned laughter and in many ways made it systematically possible. After working as a naval engineer during World War II, Charles Douglass was hired as a sound engineer for PBS, where he must have figured out the gap in the market. His Laff Box, which was one of the main means of adding postproduced laughter until digital soundtracks superseded tape, underwent constant updating and optimizing but essentially consisted of loops of taped laughter ordered by intensity (“from a titter to a guffaw,” as an early account reads) and connected to a series of levers.³⁴ In its

original version there were only six loops and six levers, but in successive iterations the keyboard was that of a standard American typewriter and the number of loops went up to at least thirty-two. The player could activate one or more loops, simultaneously or in succession, by pressing the keys, allowing for a textured, even musical landscape of laughter. Indeed, the Laff Box was a sort of *avant la lettre* mellotron, a keyboard instrument that operates prerecorded samples. And, like any instrument, it outlined a whole practiced knowledge, allowed some things while making others impossible or even unthinkable. For instance, the samples of laughter in the Laff Box came, by some accounts, from the early years of *The Red Skelton Show*—its namesake star the same Red Skelton whose indictment of canned laughter opened this chapter (he would have had no way of knowing this, for the work of cutting loops of laughter was something Douglass did on his own). The show included extended pantomimed bits: sections without any spoken dialogue, whose audience laughter could be cleanly harvested by a sound engineer.³⁵ In those sections, however, the laughter tended to run for longer than in a spoken comedy, as the audience wasn't bound by the resuming of dialogue and could laugh on without missing out on gags. How interesting, then, that one of the reputed tells of the gimmick of canned laughter in those years was, as we saw, laughter spilling over spoken dialogue, which, while actually an unreliable aural signifier of canned laughter, could well have been a peculiar consequence of the Laff Box splicing the extended laughs of a pantomimed show into the pacing of a show based on dialogue.

We need here to delve deeper into the sonic anatomy of the Laff Box—and into the contributions it made to a general aesthetic attunement to what I've been calling the gimmick of canned laughter. Again much like any musical instrument, it had very distinctive methods for handling, generating, and stopping sounds, and these methods affected the discourse on the use of canned laughter as a practice in interesting ways. The little evidence we have of the operation of the machine itself consists of a handful of amateur online videos in which people with no technical knowledge push the buttons of the typewriter, only to release what are now sinister peals of laughter from deteriorated tape.³⁶ Yet even so, we can conjure an image of the machine at work. Let's consider dynamics. By some accounts of the machine, there were essentially two available methods for altering the volume of the laughter: mechanically, with a dial of sorts (although I haven't been able to place where that dial was in the videos of the machine), or manually, by activating several loops at once, a baroque technique of crescendo by polyphonic stacking.³⁷ We can imagine that altering the volume by simply dialing the gain up or down would easily yield an overproduced effect. For instance, operating too quick a fade-out on a laughter encroaching on a spoken line would feel more intrusive, more "canned," than any overlap. Knowing when to activate the loops, then, how to stack them, and how to calculate, on the spot, whether they would

run out in time for the next spoken line would have been essential parts of the performance practice of a well-made laugh track. When operating the Laff Box, Douglass created a mimetic loop between laughter as a peculiar technique of the human body and laughter as the product of the machine—because in reality the laughter of a crowd doesn't stop cleanly or at a beat but deflates gently with the breath of the laughers, but the instrument did not and could not control the rate of decrescendo of its laughter. It was built in such a way that a loop of laughter had to run its course once the key was pressed. Yet that unwieldy decrescendo of laughter could signify, at the very same time, the true "liveness" of audience laughter and the ham-fisted playback of canned laughter on the machine: another engineer who worked with postproduced laughter (though without the Laff Box), Louis Edelman, used laugh tracks to gently fade out live audiences who were laughing too long and too loudly.³⁸ Laughter as a disruption of speech was thus able to equally signify, and through the very same audible characteristics, the mechanical and the human, the canned and the fresh: indeed, this is what made it both so desirable a commodity and so suspect an item.

Overspill into dialogue was inevitable and even desirable to an extent: it was an indispensable reality effect that the machine's particular anatomy, down to its design flaws (it couldn't stop the loop of laughter early), was made to produce. But this same tendency toward overspill, while potentially hiding the workings of mechanical labor, could just as easily give them away. The overspill of a recorded laughter, consolidated into an aural practice by the Laff Box, became one of the unreliable yet ubiquitous aural tells of the gimmick.³⁹

I should say that my remarks here are by necessity, but also by choice, speculative, as I have not had a chance to study any version of the Laff Box in person—indeed, the arcane status of the machine to this day says something about the capability of gimmicks to age into their own mystique. In writing about this topic, I have had to connect and animate an uneven scrapyard of evidence: articles in industry magazines, reported interviews with historians at the Los Angeles Paley Center for Media, copies of shows that, according to scholars and to snippets of Douglass's logbook, were sweetened with the Laff Box, and finally, a handful of short amateur YouTube clips of a version of the Laff Box that resurfaced in 2011 on PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* (whose production team pointed me to the auction house that sold the Laff Box and to the name of the buyer but, because of privacy laws, could not give me any contact information).⁴⁰ Although the YouTube videos give little idea of the performance practice of an instrument that, in its tape-based, analog version, lived and died with its inventor, they are perhaps the most precious evidence of all. The dearth of direct information on the Laff Box is indeed a long-standing issue, since Douglass was very protective of his invention, wheeling it in and out of studios himself, insisting on being its only player, and guarding it against imitations even after he won the patent race.

Yet the lack of direct information has always been part of the Laff Box's allure as the mechanism single-handedly controlling a recognizable facet of the American

entertainment industry. Since Douglass's passing in 2003, and in conjunction with the emergence of digital press outlets like BuzzFeed, Vice, and Jezebel, the Laff Box has been the object of a considerable amount of attention, particularly because of its elusiveness. This is in fact a response to the Laff Box that dates back to its earlier days. As the work of David McCarthy has recently illustrated, the Laff Box's historiography is rooted in a sensationalist tone. In one essay, he shows that already by the early 1960s, industry magazines were fascinated and irritated by Douglass's instrument, depicting it as a kind of acousmate awaiting revelation.⁴¹ Cartoons depicted the inventor and sole player of the Laff Box as a deranged Lisztian keyboard god. And this iconography—provoked precisely by the secretive nature of the machine—served in turn, and perhaps unwittingly, to market the Laff Box and the unique services it rendered. The Laff Box earned this credit not only because it was occluded from sight but because it was the obvious visual element of a whole complex process—the process of substituting live audiences with laugh tracks in postproduction—that otherwise couldn't be observed. It gave a predominantly aural form of gimmickry a visual anchor. Indeed, its very role in 1950s television is overestimated (there were many ways of postproducing laughter into a sitcom, and this was but one of them) precisely because this machine became the cipher for both the act of laying a laugh track and the feelings this practice elicited. Chasing the Laff Box as the ultimate repository of the strange history of laugh tracks (and what they do to us) is, of course, a form of technological determinism. But it is a lot more than just that. The desire to grasp the labor-abbreviating machine, to which I am far from immune, is also our particular contemporary way of inhabiting the realm of the gimmick. Like the audiences who prick up their ears for recurring laughs or overlaps of laugh and dialogue, we seek the unique pleasure in revealing the laboring mechanism lying beneath; we want to believe we are beyond the ideology we consume (and indeed we consume the ideology because it makes us feel superior); we want to believe our senses can be trained on the difference between truth and lie. The fun in thinking ourselves especially privy to the workings of ideology—whether as consumers or as scholars judging (often negatively) others on their ability to tell truth from lie—has become, in late capitalism, a commodity bought and sold like any other.

Ngai's theory of the gimmick poses the question of the identity, position, and sensorium of the gimmick's intended audience. From what (implicit and unacknowledged) position in history do we examine the gimmick? There seem to be at least two modes of spectatorship and of listening at play: the enjoyment of the gimmick's offerings, and the more insidious pleasure of feeling immune to its trickery. One must both enjoy the gimmick's workings—laugh along with the canned laughter—and feel like one is consuming it with a higher level of political awareness than others. The pleasure of intellectual writing about canned laughter is one that the gimmick accounted for all along: you laughed along with a laugh track yet distinguish yourself from the imaginary dupes of the past who were fooled, entertained, and even brainwashed by the canned laughter. This is a form

of historical, moral, and political superiority born of the fragile but enduring capitalist belief that contemporary North American and European audiences must live in the most advanced, most aware, most progressive of all possible worlds.

CANNED LAUGHTER PURGE

And so, the use of laugh tracks persists—even past its official death as a televisual practice—despite their being disliked, and perhaps because of it. As Anca Parvulescu puts it, the distinction between fake and real laughter—a modernist conceit that she links to the suspicion of canned laughter—serves to fuel the “hope that not *all* laughs are fake.”⁴² By condemning canned laughter—as Red Skelton does in the opening of this chapter—as a form of (attempted) brainwashing, then, we implicitly conjure another, true laughter: spontaneous, self-determined, free, and pleasurable, like the life of the well-adjusted liberal subject.⁴³ We saw in chapter 3—via the work of Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora—how laughter has long constituted a kind of technological aid to the illusion of this idealized liberal subject’s existence.⁴⁴ Laughter helps the liberal subject be maintained, reproduce, continue in time but is also that which threatens it by showing it to be dependent on others for its survival and so not autonomous after all. It is little wonder, then, that laugh tracks should have germinated and proliferated in an era, the McCarthy era, that put extreme pressure on the distinction between an ideologically compromised, mechanized, brainwashed communist “East” and the assumed, and threatened, liberal democracy of the West, led by the United States.⁴⁵ Indeed, we can be more concrete, as laugh tracks intersected with McCarthyist witch hunts at a precise point in time. On October 6, 1959, after Charles Lincoln Van Doren, a contestant on NBC’s TV quiz show *Twenty-One*, went on record admitting that his win had been piloted by the producers ahead of airing, a subcommittee of the House of Representatives, led by Congressman Oren Harris, began hearings in Washington, DC, on various forms of malpractice in the TV industry. The subject was ultimately whether producers were allowing a distorted version of reality to be represented on TV, a medium obviously prized as a form of live visual broadcast. And while the inquest began by examining TV quizzes, it soon found another target—namely, pretty much all forms of prerecorded audio and visual material used in lieu of live footage. This included news reporting, interviews in which the answers to the questions were pretaped instead of being given live on air, the ubiquitous prerecorded mini advertisements and product endorsements placed inside sitcoms, and last but not least, canned laughter.

The reaction of network executives to this kind of scrutiny was in some cases so intense as to border on panic. CBS president Frank Stanton responded—perhaps impulsively—to the fear that sponsors would withdraw support by announcing, on October 21, not only the axing of all TV quizzes but the immediate end to all canned laughter on his network. Even more striking than Stanton’s quick and

drastic decision—an obvious attempt to appease state authorities that instantly irritated the network’s many private sponsors—is the particular wording of his announcement, reported by *Variety* magazine: “It took a quiz scandal to end canned laughter. CBS president Frank Stanton, who a day earlier announced the end of quiz shows on the network, told various networks executives last Saturday (17) that he meant it when he said that *his web wasn’t going to permit anything further on the air that purported to be something it wasn’t*.”⁴⁶

We are here far from canned laughter as a device merely in the service of “liveness,” a cheap reality effect. In this quote, Stanton equates the use of prerecorded material with a fundamental manipulation of reality, a technical means of fabricating a sensorium and orienting it toward a hidden—and harmful—political agenda. The world evoked by Stanton in this pledge is close to that of the 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* and its celebrated 1962 feature film adaptation. There too, the first step in steering people toward compliance is to alter their sensoriums. In the film’s memorable opening scene—executed with a dazzling series of pans and cuts—eight American prisoners of war are shown, slumped and lackadaisical, listening to a middle-aged white woman lecture about hydrangeas to a small room of other middle-aged white women, only for us, the viewers, to slowly discover that these soldiers are, in fact, on the floor of a forbidding surgical theater, being evaluated by a team of Chinese and Russian scientists who have brainwashed them into believing they are somewhere dull and nonthreatening: an amateur horticultural society meeting. The manipulation of their sense of reality, in the film, allows them to be fully controlled by communist handlers. And, in Stanton’s wording, the peddling of canned laughter as a live event is, if not a full mind control operation, at least its gateway—the equivalent, then, of *The Manchurian Candidate*’s lecture on hydrangeas. We should not push the analogy too much further, particularly because *The Manchurian Candidate* (despite the subtle gender implications of the paradomestic, white, feminine space of the amateur horticultural society) does not foreground another key aspect of canned laughter—its connection to reproductive labor. Suffice it to say, though, that canned laughter was, at that moment, a means of connecting and rendering interchangeable a series of aesthetic and political binaries—namely, the difference between live and postproduced, between truth and lie, and ultimately between liberal self-determination and its others: the specter of reproductive labor and imaginary Eastern and racialized forms of mind control.⁴⁷

It is hard to imagine that the distinction between live and canned laughter could take on such intense political overtones. Certainly, the typically McCarthyist tension between hailing the free market as a pillar of American democracy and then sanctioning and closely monitoring all nongovernmental influences on mediatic output produced a simultaneous reverence for and distrust of commercial sponsors of TV networks and their influence on content. If canned laughter could be used to promote enjoyment of and consensus around, say, the General

Mills cereal whose product placement funded a particular sitcom, it could also be used to brainwash people into accepting deftly deployed bits of communist propaganda. But the flare-up of aural paranoia regarding canned laughter was also, and perhaps mainly, performative and sensational. Producers and sponsors worried, briefly, about the impact of the TV quiz scandal and addressed their concern, as well as Stanton's ban, by commissioning surveys on audience responses to canned laughter and to the scandal in general. These surveys are one of the first datasets on audiences of canned laughter. Outsourced to a few advertising agencies, they give us little indication as to their criteria, questions, or methods, and they are also discordant. One survey by Sindlinger's cites a healthy majority, 55.9 percent of about one hundred million consumers, who found canned laughter "not deceitful." This report, trumpeted in an issue of the industry magazine *Broadcasting* under the heading "Minor Vices: The People Don't Care," is obviously puzzling: in what, exactly, would the deceit consist?⁴⁸ And is canned laughter not deceitful because audiences can tell canned from live or because it doesn't matter whether the laughter is prerecorded or not? Another survey, by the Schwering Corporation in New York, ascertained, a month later, that "56% of people [. . .] found canned laughter and applause 'objectionable.'"⁴⁹ Stanton himself commissioned yet another agency, Gallup, to determine how aware audiences were of the TV quiz scandal, which revealed the level to be staggering (92 percent of interviewees)—though it is unclear to which parts or elements of the scandal they were specifically alert.⁵⁰ These interpellations of the audience were as unreliable as they were inconclusive—they are, however, indicative of the moment of panic, of the tension between consumer satisfaction and government interference, and, more broadly, of the tension between pleasure and moral outrage.

As it happened, however, within the industry, things flared up and died down quickly. The bout of communist-infiltration paranoia was readily capitalized on by both the government and TV networks: the US Treasury commissioned a special episode of the network favorite *Father Knows Best* (a CBS show that was sweetened by Douglass's Laff Box), titled "24 Hours in Tyrant Land." The episode, which had a somber tone and featured, pointedly, no laugh track, showed the titular, triumphantly white middle-class father and his family wake up to a dystopian America where their spending and earning habits were curtailed by the advent of communism. The expunction of the laugh track and the dramatization of the "red threat" were, then, openly joined up. Yet the episode never made it to air. Instead, CBS reintroduced laugh tracks on December 14, barely eight weeks after Stanton's issue of the ban, with the caveat that a sitcom's opening credits would now duly inform viewers when it featured a prerecorded laugh track.⁵¹ NBC commissioned an internal inquest, hiring ex-FBI agents to do an informal investigation, and on January 27, 1960, announced a five-point program in response to the scandal. It rejected all banning and labeling of canned laughter, on the grounds that "[when canned laughter] offends, its fault is not that it is deceptive but that it is obvious"—

a convoluted statement landing us back in the gimmick's world of outrage, discernment, and garish mechanization.⁵² On March 18, canned laughter returned to CBS exactly as it had been before the scandal, and the issue was dropped.⁵³

What, then, to make of this brief chapter of history? For one thing, it is striking that the desire and attempt to denounce and scrub canned laughter on political grounds hardly originates in the twenty-first century and is instead a spectacular product of the technology's early days, though I have not found this to be documented elsewhere. And so the revelation, outrage, and pleasure of the aural gimmick of laughter join us in uncomfortable fellowship with the TV audiences of the midcentury—indeed, all we can do is the thinking and listening anticipated for us by the gimmick. The main question, really, is not why canned laughter was denounced and scrubbed six decades ago but why it so quickly returned. If, as Parvulescu suggests, we declare some laughter fake because we want to believe that some laughter is true, if our sense of self-determination and freedom from ideology can be conjured by excising some sounds and canned laughter has become one such, why, then, does it keep returning to us, albeit in new guises, through similar processes of purging and reintroduction? The obvious answers—that it is by now an expected reality effect and a staple of the soundscape of entertainment television, that to remove it altogether would be, in 1959 as now, unprofitable—are not so much wrong as dissatisfying. Stanton scrubbed canned laughter from his network for eight weeks not because he truly wanted it gone but perhaps to ride the wave of a moral panic that resolved itself, oddly, by labeling canned laughter as such, almost as if to train audiences to distinguish it from live laughter. Although we cannot know this, it is easy to imagine that audiences found having canned laughter so clinically labeled to be off-putting, patronizing, and perhaps pointless. But it did something essential to the gimmick's workings: it reactivated the desire for and belief in the ability to identify the workings of mechanized laughter by ear even as it created, most likely, an increased annoyance with that very sound. Once the labeling ended a few weeks later, the pleasurable exercise of telling the gimmick by ear could continue in peace, and with an added degree of reassurance—and so it is with contemporary YouTubers who take the laugh tracks out of sitcoms. The point, surely, is not to stop watching old sitcoms or to watch them all without a laugh track. It is that we can return to watching them with the belief that we *can* tell canned laughter from the chimera of its authentic other, that we can uphold a mistaken but essential belief in our aural capabilities as liberal subjects. These beliefs are fed precisely by the kinds of distasteful sounds that we hold in righteous contempt even as we laugh along with them.

Conclusion

The close of this book is fundamentally tied to a closing moment in my work writ large. I remember telling friends—at a leaving party days before I flew to Philadelphia to begin a graduate program in musicology—that I wanted to write a book on laughter called *Laughing Matters*. That title, as I found out in a university library across the Pond shortly after, had long been claimed by another pun-loving scholar. But the ambition to write about laughter endured past this initial disappointment. Even as I was writing my PhD on a more sensible topic, I read and gathered insights about laughter. By the time I managed to get an academic job, I was ready to leave my doctoral thesis behind and write a whole new book—my tenure book—on laughter. I started out by writing about 1890s laughing songs—and remember exactly where in Berkeley I was when I muttered to myself that laughter and phonography were at heart the same thing. This led to an investigation of laughter and phonography as gendering and racializing techniques and also as complementary techniques of reproduction. The process of writing this book was—unlike what I was told by mentors and colleagues—one of the best things that has happened to me. Not easy, but rewarding, consuming, infuriating, and joyous all at once. Part of the intensity came from realizing as I wrote that the journey between the two covers of the monograph would also be the journey to the end of my time as both a musicologist and an academic in a US institution. These decisions I made consciously and carefully over the course of writing this book, and, for better and for worse, I think *Risible* reflects that thought process in ways that may be helpful to others inside and outside my field of origin: music studies. I will briefly consider some of those ways below—though I know that what others end up finding useful about a piece of writing is (so) seldom aligned with the author's guesses.

One of the themes of this book is that when we speak of laughter we are automatically entering an ideological landscape from which no amount of critique can fully extract us. Indeed, the ideology lies precisely in the fantasy of being able

to prize from a laugh its ultimate reason, the kernel of its authenticity, the fully human being behind it. We all enact that ideology when we assert that *this*, not *that*, is a genuine laugh; this, not that, is a sign of amusement (and not, say, a physiological response to tickling); this, not that, is the hearty laughter that will restore our health; this, not that, is a human (and not a primate or a horse or a machine) laughing. I think that these kinds of statements have a value, in that they comfort us by performing distinctions that are, in fact, impossible to make outright. They show the dubiousness of the phenomenon that is laughter by doing what any reasonable person would with a doubt: try to resolve it one way or another. But when it comes to laughter, it is ultimately the doubt—not its resolution—that endures. And in this book I have told the story of the doubt that is laughter, have tried to behold the doubt before rushing to its resolution. Even so, I suspect that in my everyday life I will continue to parse laughter for the certainties it cannot give me. That is okay. One can have multiple minds, doubt and decide at once, wish oneself outside one's episteme while helping oneself and others to inhabit it peacefully. I don't think we always need to believe the stories we tell ourselves in order for them to work on us. Still, it seems important to remember that laughter is and has been valued—particularly as risibility, the capacity for laughter that makes one human—precisely for being doubtful, before it became attached to the whole enterprise of determining what, exactly, causes a particular laugh. Laughter is the incarnation of a doubt about what happens to our human faculty of speech when we laugh, about what kind of creature makes the sounds that laughter entails, about whether we need laughter to help with supposedly natural processes, about whether laughter is proper to certain people more than others, about whether laughter can be produced on demand and whether it should be paid for if so, and about whether we become machines—sound-reproducing machines—when we laugh. These doubts are precious and have been preserved, through the discourse and act of laughter, for a long time. The history of the risible—of those strange creatures able to laugh—is the history of how these doubts both buttress and sabotage, to my mind, all issues regarding the nature of comedy, wit, and psychological reasons for a laugh. To paraphrase the passage by Bataille I cited in chapter 1, we insist on knowing why we laugh—despite the ever-dissatisfactory answers provided in the history of Western discourse—precisely because laughter is how the doubt as to what we are has been preserved and passed on. If doubt is a frustrated will to knowledge, laughter is the bait of that knowledge and the snap of the uncertainty that entraps us as we reach for it.

As for disciplinary stakes: this is a book about music and sound in which music appears very little; in itself, this is not so remarkable. Musicologists of my generation are often unsentimental about the category of music, so much so as to write themselves out of it altogether. This has allowed us to be sentimental about a bunch of other things instead and to approach music from a vantage point of ascetic denial, a willfulness to dip amateurishly into areas of which we know not

enough in order to avoid the things we are supposed to do. I am very glad to have belonged to this generation of disidentifying musicologists, because I have been allowed such radical freedom in determining my object of study, and this has suited me well. I sense, though—partly from talking to my graduate students—that an incoming generation of musicologists will now need to reconceive their attention to music. I wonder, sometimes, if they will feel paradoxically hemmed in by the *laissez-faire* attitude of my generation on the one side and a traditionalist approach to musical close reading that doesn't apply to them anymore on the other. I would like to offer some of my insights into questions about the ontology and epistemology of music and sound, in the hope that this will be of assistance to others after me and not simply a confirmation of my generation's particular orientation toward music scholarship. I can start by holding myself accountable to a few of the grand promises I made in the introduction—most notably, the contention that music and sound studies have something extraordinary to offer to our political understanding of laughter as a sonic and physical phenomenon and that, in turn, this new understanding highlights some key moments in the history of mass-reproduced voices and other sounds. What, then, do music and sound studies have to offer to the intellectual and political history of laughter? And what does laughter have to offer to sound studies? For one thing, I hope to have made a convincing case for how the constitution of the sonic should be addressed through intellectual and political history. It is not the case that because laughter (or indeed anything capable of being heard) is audible or has an audible component, music and sound studies ought to have a stake in it. If music and sound studies is to have a robust intellectual underpinning, its point of departure should be questioning whether and how anything was parsed as a sound, as an event whose key information was made to reside primarily in the realm of the audible. Such a move implies identifying (rather than blindly enacting) a bias toward the audible as a site of meaning and truth: it means pinpointing the moment in which a particular thought or unthought became parceled and known as sound and the specific manner in which this act of parceling and even reification operated. The most interesting question that sound studies has asked has been, in my mind, precisely this: how did something come to be a sound for us?

My answer here has been something like this: Phonography was the condition of possibility for the sound *ha ha ha* not only to exist at a physical remove from its source and context (like all phonographed sounds) but to be recognizable as a laughter separate and separable from any particular cause. Yet what laughter as sound did for phonography is even more remarkable. Laughter's sonic outline—a series of discrete vocables that can be parsed as either a broken-up long signal or the repetition and proliferation of discrete short impulses—made phonography into an entire ontology of the voice, of labor, and of reproduction. Phonography—the earliest form of mechanized sound reproduction—was worked out in the late nineteenth century, and thus it carried ideological concerns of that

era, which it folded into the sound of laughter. To speak of phonography means to speak of worries about the enhancement and exploitation of biological reproduction, especially human sexual reproduction; the emergence of global processes of racialization and the ways in which they were negotiated in different colonial and imperial contexts; and the possibility of commerce of an unprecedented amount of commodities at an unprecedented geographic scale. Because laughter was already a sound coded, in Western discourse, as strangely human and connected to reproductive functions, it was the means for these problems to become attached to, nameable by, and containable in recorded sound. Laughter—as a discrete phenomenon away from comedy—was constituted by sound reproduction. But without laughter, there would be no epistemology of sound reproduction as such.

I realize this is a rather circular, looped answer. As I stated in the introduction, the loop is deliberate: that is, laughter as sound exists only because phonography actualized the potential severing of laughter from reason (and from the human conceived as having reason), and in turn, it was laughter that allowed early, globally circulated phonographic sound to be received and understood as such. This is indeed why, when we enter into the discourse of laughter as sound, we are leaning into our very own, twentieth-century phonographic bias, but we are at least doing so with a degree of self-consciousness that is closer to emancipation than any manifest rupture or injunction to hear the right way. I see this extraordinary, sophisticated enacting of the link of laughter and phonography (what Antonio Gramsci would have called an immanent philosophy) in George Washington Johnson's simultaneous offering and cutting withdrawal of his own racialized voice in "The Laughing Song," in Berardo Cantalamessa's thieved choleric laughter in Naples, in Nicola Maldacea's use of laughter to emulate a skipping record. None of these people were trying to make political or philosophical statements, but their use of laughter, so odd to us now, has much to teach us. Despite Kyle Devine's recent call to reevaluate gramophone technology at a technological and environmental level, I still worry that phonography is written up, sometimes, as the clunky, undemocratic, extractive predecessor to either more user-friendly analog technology (vinyl or tape) or digital technology, with its appearance of free and easy circulation and appropriation.¹ We seem to be eager to separate ourselves from the phonographic regime (as Andrea Bohlman and Peter McMurray's work on tape intimates) so as to be more emancipated from the early twentieth century tout court.² As we grapple with the increasingly reactionary third decade of the twenty-first century, I offer a humbler, less declarative approach to our past, one less concerned with ascribing progressivism to some sound technologies over others. Respect your phonographic episteme, laughter says, and the people who inhabited it—sometimes more than a century ago—with as much plasticity, subtleness, and sophistication as you, if not more.

And now for music—or the lack of it. I do think there is a version of this book that could have been written as an examination of similar functions of the category of music: music as that which is both human and not; music as a gendered aid to health, reproduction, and reproductive labor; music as a technology complementary and sometimes coextensive with phonography; music as a racializing but also redeeming force for those considered less than articulate within certain forms of colonial and imperial government; music as a source of paranoia about live versus prerecorded in certain media forms. Many of these are topics handsomely accounted for in existing scholarship. But it would have been a far more disperse series of case studies, given that the category of music is not as stubbornly accounted for as a historical product of discourse—laughter is, all in all, a much smaller vector in the history of Western thought. What this smaller vector allowed me to do was to question and track the process by which something—in this case, laughter—became parsed as sound, and the consequences of that parsing. But also, and most important, laughter’s discourse is indeed similar to the discourse around music, if much more negatively charged: laughter, unlike music, cannot overcome language but can only mark its loss; laughter, unlike music, points to the similarity of humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, but mostly in discomforting ways; if laughter can obviate the need for reproductive labor, it can just as easily undo and disrupt reproduction. With music—musicologists know this—the negative, the power to undo, to kill, to end, and to break, generally has to be treated as a shock, an exception, an aberration, even an object of fascination, something produced under exceptional circumstances, such as protest, war, or torture. Whenever music is considered as a force to withhold and undo, it is all too often as a means of affirming or reinforcing a better liberal subject, of making us better attuned to our identity and place in the world. Laughter, on the other hand, carries its negativity, but lightly, not as an exception. Laughter brings out a quotidian sort of negativity, an ordinary sense of maladjustment. It is the quietly imploding proper of our species, the daily journey to the loss of human form, the reproductive aid that loudly glitches, the presence and absence of a Black voice on the phonograph, the audible sickness of expanding capital, and the crowd of cackling ghosts echoing through our TV sets. It has been put to use where music’s consolatory power would not serve, at times and in places where ordinary doubt had to be stored and sustained, managed without resolution. There is, I believe, much to be learned from the sound of such times and places.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. *OED Online*, s.v. “risible,” accessed September 22, 2022, www.oed.com. The adjective *risible* is defined as having three primary meanings: “having the faculty or power of laughing”; “related to laughter”; “capable of provoking laughter; laughable, ludicrous, comical.” The earliest English usage of the last meaning dates to 1727.

2. The term *risibilis* used as a means of defining the human dates back—to the best of my knowledge—to Boethius’s sixth-century CE Latin translation of Porphyry’s *Isagoge* (268–270 CE). The specific section of the *Isagoge* is chap. 9 (“Of Community and Difference of Genus and Property”), in Aristotle, *The Organon*, vol. 2, English translation by Octavius Freire Owen, Latin translation by Boethius (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.logicmuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Porphyry/isagoge/parallel>. The journey of risibility as a signifier of the human is tracked in more critical detail in chap. 2.

3. The laughter of Risible 2.0 is a laughter that is both reduced (in that it has to have an object) and reductive: it is a laughter that disciplines and hems in its object. The most powerful proponent of this understanding of the risible was Henri Bergson, whose 1900 book *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (repr. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007) uses the term *risible* (in the original French) with precisely this second meaning, of being the potential cause of laughter and the object of a derogatory laugh. Bergson’s essay is further discussed—and cited in English translation—in chap. 1.

4. Giambattista Vico, “Vindications of Vico” (1727), trans. Donald Phillip Verene, in *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the “New Science,”* ed. Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 118–119. As 119n47 specifies, the phrase “deceives us by the semblance of right” comes from Horace’s *Ars poetica*, line 25.

5. I am referring to Sylvia Wynter’s seminal essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an

Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337. I will engage with this essay at various points throughout the book, especially in chap. 2.

6. Nicola Maldacea’s recording is very difficult to track down as an artifact. From the video on YouTube (accessed October 4, 2018, <https://youtu.be/p21zABevdmg>), one can see the title and that it was released by the International Zonophone Company (no. X-92184). That organization was eventually renamed the Gramophone Company. Entries for this recording placing it in Milan in 1906 can be found in John R. Bennett, *Voices of the Past: Vocal Recordings, 1898–1925*, vol. 2, *The Gramophone Company Limited (HMV) Italian Catalogue* (Lingfield, UK: Oakwood Press, 1957), 17. The Kelly Online Database, which lists historical recordings made by the Gramophone Company, cites this one as having been made in Milan and under the supervision of Fred Gaisberg (accessed July 30, 2023, <https://www.kellydatabase.org/PDF/File%20C%20-%20Suf-b.pdf>). This recording (and Gaisberg) will return in chap. 5.

7. Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22 (in chap. 1, “Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity”); Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2020).

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

9. Vladimir Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore: A Propos of the Tale of the Princess Who Would Not Laugh [Nesmejána],” in *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124–146. This text features prominently in chap. 3. I am discussing theorists who wrote nearly a century ago—and so with outdated understandings of gender. Yet the beauty of Bakhtin’s and Propp’s work is that their Marxist angle allowed them to grasp gender dynamics as the result of economic structures and thus avoid an outright gender-essentialist perspective. This also makes these thinkers easy to carry forward into an intersectional analytic that takes gender and racial formations as cosubstantial forms of oppression. From a Marxist perspective, race and gender result from the creation of a class of laborers who will, unpaid, further the interests of a dominant (white) middle class.

10. This kind of undetected and unremunerated labor moved the Marxist philosopher Silvia Federici (who, alas, did not write about laughter) to formulate an intersectional theory of reproductive labor in her *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004; repr., Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics, 2021).

11. Most influential for me have been Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Maggie Hennefeld, “Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter: Feminist Killjoys, Humorless Capitalists, and Contagious Hysterics,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 2 (2021): 110–144.

12. Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); Brandon Labelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

13. Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

14. See, e.g., Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 4 (“The Black Tradition from George W. Johnson to Ozella Jones”), 185–237; Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pt. 1 (“George W. Johnson, The First Black Recording Artist”), 13–73.

15. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; “Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds,” *Politique africaine* 100, no. 4 (2005–2006): 71–91.
16. Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020).
17. Simon Schaffer, “Imitation Games: Conspiratorial Sciences and Intelligent Machines,” lecture delivered on October 27, 2015, posted November 3, 2015, CRASSH Cambridge, YouTube, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://youtu.be/I1yr-bNprak>.
18. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

1. UNKNOWN CAUSES, OR THE LIMIT OF LOGOS

1. The 1988 performance of “The Mask” is included in “Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise,” which first aired on February 21, 2017, as episode 2 of season 31 of the PBS series *American Masters* (see <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/maya-angelou-film/7533/>, accessed May 28, 2022). It is also available on YouTube, under the title “Maya Angelou, We Wear the Mask,” posted by tparbs on February 7, 2017, accessed May 28, 2022, https://youtu.be/_HLol9InMlc.
2. Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” in *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, OH: Hadley and Hadley, 1895), 21, accessed May 28, 2022, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Majors_and_Minors/PvMpAAAAYAAJ.
3. Angelou, “The Mask,” transcribed by tparbs on the page for “Maya Angelou, We Wear The Mask” (see n. 1 above). This poem’s published text is “When I Think about Myself,” in Angelou, *The Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2015), 29. It does not include the lines from Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” or the story about Miss Rosie and her laughter, which is why I have used the transcript of the performance instead.
4. W. E. B. Du Bois’s term “double consciousness” appears, most notably, in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903). It has proved influential to critical theories of race ever since, despite the fact that Du Bois himself did not use it after *The Souls of Black Folk*.
5. “Cloud of unknowing” is a quotation of Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), 238.
6. See n. 1 above for details of the video recording of the performance. The transcription of Angelou’s speech is my own.
7. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640), ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), chap. 9 (“Of the Passions of the Mind”), 41. Anca Parvulescu quotes Hobbes in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 34, and reflects on laughter’s uneasy relationship to control and to language.
8. Parvulescu offers a cogent theory of laughter as an early modern passion—a kind of excess produced at the emergent division between mind and body. See *Laughter*, chap. 1 (“The Civilizing of Laughter”), 23–58, esp. 23–35.
9. Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears” (1953), in the posthumous collection of Bataille’s oeuvre titled *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2004), 134–135.

10. Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

11. This is also an implicit glossing of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, after Alfred Herz, of a history of laughter, which famously opens *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59.

12. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1914), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm>.

13. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 71: "Let us stress once more that for the Renaissance (as for the antique sources described above) the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning. This clearly distinguishes it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter, including Bergson's conception, which bring out mostly its negative functions."

14. Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. 1, sec. 1.

15. Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. 1, sec. 1.

16. John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). To give a sense of his influence, Morreall is the author of the "Philosophy of Humor" entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published November 20, 2012, substantive revision August 20, 2020, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>. His bibliographic output on humor stretches back to 1983.

17. Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 4–9 (Superiority Theory), 9–15 (Incongruity Theory), 15–23 (Relief Theory).

18. Aristotle, *Poetics* (ca. 350 BCE), trans. S. H. Butcher, sec. 1, pt. 5, accessed May 11, 2023, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>.

19. Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. 1, sec. 1: "Here I would point out, as a symptom . . . , the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion." Emphasis in the original.

20. The full passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* is quoted in Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 23, but I find the above gloss, offered by Morreall in "Philosophy of Humor," sec. 5 ("Humor as Play, Laughter as Play Signal"), more cogent and convincingly put.

21. The combined acceptance and call to moderation vis-à-vis laughter in Erasmus's *The Education of Children* is discussed in Parvulescu's *Laughter*, 24–26.

22. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* (ca. 350 BCE), trans. William Ogle, bk. 3, pt. 10, accessed May 11, 2023, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/parts_animals.html.

23. See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 42–43.

24. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 45, quoted in Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 5.

25. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans J. H. Bernard, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1914), accessed May 6, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/48433/pg48433-images.html>, quoted in Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 11. Emphasis in the original.

26. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, first pt., first div., sec. 54 ("Remark").

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (1883), trans. Thomas Common, published by Project Gutenberg on December 1, 1999, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1998/pg1998-images.html>. The figure of transcendent laughter is ubiquitous in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, but a representative passage can be found in chap. 73 (“The Higher Man”), esp. secs. 18–20.

28. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 3 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909). Note that Schopenhauer is another philosopher for whom, in laughter, the failures of reason and causality are blended together; indeed, he writes of a “very remarkable phenomenon which, like reason itself, is peculiar to human nature, and of which the explanations that have ever anew been attempted, are insufficient: I mean *laughter*” (vol. 1, *The World as Idea*, 76; emphasis in original).

29. Hélène Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–893.

30. Michel Foucault, “Preface to the 1961 Edition,” in *History of Madness* (1961), ed. Jean Khalifa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa (London: Routledge, 2006), xxviii. Cf. Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 878: “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition.”

31. Though Foucault is here specifically upholding the language of science as the one to be challenged, I think that the work of logos and causality can be carried out just as easily in discourses like philosophy and psychology—we should, that is, beware of assuming the humanities to have the language of critique and alternative.

32. Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007). It is striking that it should be two scholars trained in the history of literary modernism—Bussie and Parvulescu—who have retroactively harvested the crop of laughter without reason from the middle ages onward. The reevaluation of laughter as a political phenomenon with revolutionary potential is, without doubt, a twentieth-century move.

33. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11–12.

34. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 120.

35. Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1579), trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 49.

36. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 50.

37. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 51.

38. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), trans. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), art. 124 (“About Laughter”), 83–84.

39. Indeed, Bakhtin was the first high-profile champion of Joubert’s *Treatise on Laughter*.

40. Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 3, referring to Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). The idea that laughter is either the incarnation of or the means toward an extractable fleck of reality, indeed, of nature, is a powerful fiction of the twentieth century, one we see at work in this passage by Bakhtin:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell,

look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. (“Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” [1975], in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, edited by Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 23)

41. See Stephen Kidd, “Laughter Interjections in Greek Comedy,” *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 61, no. 2 (December 2011): 445–459.

42. The term *schizophonia* was first used by R. Murray Schafer, in *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* (Scarborough, Ontario: Berandol Music, 1969), and reprised in most of his subsequent work, including notably *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). On the concept of the acousmatic, see Pierre Schaeffer, *À la recherche d'une musique concrète* (Paris: Seuil, 1952); Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux: Essai interdisciplines* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), trans. Christine North and John Dack as *The Treatise of Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile / Cahiers du Cinéma, 1982), trans. Claudia Gorbman as *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), chap. 5. Chion was fundamental in importing Schaeffer's concept into film theory and relating it to the question of voice.

43. The politics of the philosophy of laughter is beautifully exposed in Parvulescu, *Laughter*, chap. 1, 23–58. More broadly, the notion that post-Enlightenment modernity subjected laughter to a regime of causality tied to codifiable humor is of course one of the key points of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.

44. Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. 1, sec. 1.

45. Bataille wrote about laughter throughout his life but never in a systematic way; the most cogent and relevant essay on the topic is “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears.” A discussion of the anti-Hegelian significance of his idea of laughter and community is found, again, in Parvulescu, *Laughter*, chap. 3 (“The Philosophical Avant-Gardes, or The Community of Laughers”), 79–100.

46. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), introduction (“The Acousmatic Question: Who Is This?”), 1–38.

47. See Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

2. RISIBLE CREATURES

Epigraphs. Porphyry, *Isagoge* [268–270 CE], chap. 9 (“Of Community and Difference of Genus and Property”), in Aristotle, *The Organon*, vol. 2, English translation by Octavius Freire Owen, Latin translation by Boethius (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), accessed

May 11, 2023, <https://www.logicmuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Porphyry/isagoge/parallel>; Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Ecclesiastae sive de ratione concionandi* (1535), bk. 4 (Leipzig: Libraria Weidmannia, 1820), chap. 125, 340, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.0038130181>, trans. Michael A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3n6.

1. The choice of the masculine pronoun here is pointed—for the ideology of the human, which is the topic of this sentence, has long been critiqued as being always implicitly European, white, and male. A particularly eloquent example of this critique is Sylvia Wynter’s seminal essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>. I will engage with this essay at various points throughout this chapter.

2. François Rabelais, *La vie très horrible du grand Gargantua père de Pantagruel* (1532), in *Œuvres de Rabelais: Texte collationné sur les éditions originales avec une vie de l’auteur, des notes et un glossaire*, ed. Louis Moland, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier frères, 1873), 3 (“Aux lecteurs”), accessed May 3, 2023, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1044326s/f115.item>. All translations from French are my own unless otherwise noted.

3. These are two of the finest historical studies on laughter in medieval and Renaissance times, and the Rabelais quote is the basis for the first chapter of each: “Laughter Is the Property of Man,” in Michael A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–5; “Pour ce que rire est le propre de l’homme,” in Daniel Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 7–43, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4804966t>.

4. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* (ca. 350 BCE), trans. William Ogle, bk. 3, pt. 10, accessed May 11, 2023, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/parts_animals.html.

5. Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire*, 13:

En fait, la formule de Rabelais n’a rien d’aristotélien. C’est le Moyen Âge qui répète à satiété que le rire est le propre de l’homme et Rabelais qui connaît bien l’héritage médiéval ne pouvait l’ignorer. D’où un paradoxe déconcertant: une expression scolastique (la notion de propre) qui sert à formuler une idée nouvelle. La surprise augmente quand on remarque que Rabelais, en fait, a trahi la pensée d’Aristote. Dans son passage sur le rire, celui-ci ne faisait pas usage de la notion de “propre.” En bon naturaliste, il se bornait à constater qu’ “aucun animal ne rit sauf l’homme.” Cette remarque figure au milieu d’une série d’observations scientifiques concernant la graisse des reins et les viscères. Rien de moins métaphysique que cela. Le rire n’est donc qu’une particularité de l’espèce animale appelée homme. Exactement comme le hennissement est une particularité du cheval. La prudence d’Aristote est d’autant plus remarquable qu’il a forgé, par ailleurs, la catégorie logique du “propre.” Mais quand les *Topiques* donnent des exemples des différentes espèces de celui-ci, ils ne font pas intervenir le rire. On peut donc affirmer que jamais Aristote n’a écrit que le rire était le propre de l’homme.

6. Helen Adolf, “On Mediaeval Laughter,” *Speculum* 22, no. 2 (1947): 251–252. The definition of humans as capable of learning/receiving knowledge originally comes, I believe, from the opening discussion of the relation of sense and knowledge in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (ca. 350 BCE), trans. W. D. Ross, accessed May 11, 2023, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>.

7. The tension regarding the moral and philosophical value of laughter is indeed the topic of one of the best modern novels about the medieval period, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1984). In Eco's novel, the topic of Aristotle's definition of laughter famously causes an entire Benedictine monastery in fourteenth-century northern Italy to run riot. It is not a coincidence that Eco was trained as a scholar of medieval philology—the logical and theological implications of Aristotelian laughter are as politically charged as they are intricate. Details of the scholastic reception of Aristotelian laughter can be found in Adolf, "On Mediaeval Laughter," 252; Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire*, chap. 1; Screech, *Laughter*, chap. 1. Another helpful source is Giorgio Stabile, "Risibile," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Rome: Treccani, 1970), accessed May 10, 2022, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/risibile_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/.

8. Erasmus, *Ecclesiastae sive de ratione concionandi*, chap. 125, 340, trans. Screech, *Laughter*, 3n6.

9. *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii in Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta*, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 48, ed. Samuel Brandt (Vienna: F. Tempusky; Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1906), 80, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/CorpusScriptorumEcclesiasticorumLatinorum48/>, cited in Screech, *Laughter*, 2, and Adolf, *On Medieval Laughter*, 252. I am here using Screech's translation.

10. Ishak Ibn Suleiman's references to laughter can be found, according to Screech, *Laughter*, 2, in his *Opera* (Lyon, 1515), fol. vii, recto, col. 1. Albertus Magnus uses the word *risibile* in relation to the concept of human property in *De animalibus*, vol. 26, chap. 5 ("De naturalibus proprietatibus hominis et divinis"): "Est autem adhuc proprium hominis disciplinae esse perceptibilem propter rationis usum, et esse animal mansuetum natura propter civilitatem et esse animal risibile et gloriabile propter perfectas gaudendi rationes quae soli contingunt homini" (*Albertus Magnus, De animalibus libri XXVI, nach der Cölner Ur-schrift: Mit unterstützung der Kgl. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München, der Görres-gesellschaft und der Rheinischen Gesellschaft für Wissenschaftliche Forschung* [Münster: Aschendorff, 1916–1921], 1354). Thomas Aquinas uses the term *homo risibilis* to give examples of circular logic and considers risibility an accidental rather than essential property of humankind; see his *Expositio libri Posteriori Analyticorum* (ca. 1270), trans. Fabian R. Larcher, ed. Joseph Kenny, (accessed May 11, 2023, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/PostAnalytica.htm>), bk. 1, lectio 8: "omne animal rationale mortale est risibile; omnis homo est animal rationale mortale; ergo omnis homo est risibilis" (every rational mortal animal is risible; every man is a rational mortal animal; therefore, every man is risible), and bk. 2, lectio 3: "Et quia non omne quod est proprium alicui pertinet ad essentiam eius, sicut risibile homini" (But because not everything which is proper to something pertains to its essence, as is the case with risibility [being proper] to man"). Larcher left out "sicut risibile homini" in his translation of Aquinas, so that phrase's translation is my own. Duns Scotus also uses the word *risibile* for the purpose of elucidating logical constructions; see his *Ordinatio 1*, dist. 21, 11, trans. Peter Simpson (accessed May 11, 2022, http://www.logicmuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Duns_Scotus/Ordinatio): "ista enim 'tantum homo est risibilis' licet communiter ponatur habere duas exponentes, sufficienter tamen exponitur per istam 'nullus non homo est risibilis'; ex qua sequitur 'nullum risibile est non homo' (per conversionem), et ultra 'ergo nullum risibile non est homo'" (for this proposition 'only man is capable of laughter', although it is commonly posited as having two exponents, is nevertheless sufficiently expounded by this one, 'no non-man is capable of laughter'; from

it there follows (by conversion) ‘nothing capable of laughter is a non-man’, and further that ‘therefore nothing capable of laughter is not a man’).

11. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 25. The Erasmus work is *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530), not coincidentally another text that deals with the (this time cultural) making of the human. For a modern translation of the relevant passage, see “On Good Manners for Boys,” trans. Brian McGregor, in *The Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings 3—De Conscribendis Epistolis; Formula; De Civilitate*, ed. J. K. Sowards (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 275–276. As Parvulescu points out in her commentary on Erasmus, Aristotle notes, in *The History of Animals*, bk. 7, pt. 10, that children begin to laugh before they can speak, a phenomenon that marks them as human prior to the acquisition of language (*Laughter*, 158n9).

12. Laurent Joubert, *Traité du Ris suivi d’un dialogue sur la cacographie française* (1579; repr., Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973), accessed May 11, 2023 | <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k44729>, published in English as *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1980). Joubert, who was a physician, here makes a distinction between healthy and unhealthy laughter, with the latter (cachinnation) being prolonged, exaggerated, and uncontrolled.

13. Michel de Montaigne, “Apologie de Raimond de Sebonde,” in *Les essais de Michel seigneur de Montaigne* (1588), edited by Pierre Coste, tome 2 (London: J. Tonson and J. Watts, 1724), chap. 12, 123–331, accessed May 11, 2022, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=hog_AQAAMAAJ, published in English as “Apology for Raimond Sebond,” in *Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (1588), trans. Charles Cotton, ed. William Carew Hazlitt (1877), bk. 2, chap. 12, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm>.

14. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 266: “It was to be the discourses of this [modern Humanist] knowledge, including centrally those of anthropology, that would function to construct all the non-Europeans that encountered (including those whose lands its settlers expropriated and those whom they enslaved or enserfed) as the physical referent of, in the first phase, its irrational or subrational Human Other to its new ‘descriptive statement’ of Man as a political subject.”

15. The passage containing both definitions is found in Aristotle, *Politics* (ca. 350 BCE), trans. Benjamin Jowett, bk. 1, pt. 2, accessed May 11, 2022, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>:

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. [. . .] Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.

16. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being” 296. See also the section “Logos Undone” later in this chapter.

17. References to Scholastic discussions of risibility can be found in n. 10 above; Porphyry, the Hellenistic philosopher who influentially glossed and adapted Aristotle’s logical categories, is the source of this chapter’s first epigraph and is the topic of the following section. Agamben uses the two definitions of the human in the *Politics* in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12. He sets up an equivalence between bare life/political life on the one hand and *phoné*/logos on the other. However, voice—intended as an animal sound distinct from language—is really not a driving concern of those who write about risibility, nor is sound writ large. No other specific forms of human vocalization (coughing, stuttering . . .) feature in Porphyry, who also never uses the term *phoné*, indicating the voice as an entity unto itself. I therefore do not think—convenient as it would be for musicologists—that “voice” is the key to understanding the political significance of laughter in the Western tradition. Laughter has the power to disrupt logos, but without necessarily inviting us to lapse into a fetishization of the voice as the other side of language.

18. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 266.

19. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 331.

20. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 318.

21. Denise Ferreira da Silva expresses an uneasiness (one that I share) about Wynter’s separation of “Man” and “human” when she writes: “Hence, the ethico-political question becomes whether or not critical projects toward global justice, and the images of justice they carry, should work toward disassembling the subjects of raciality to institute a Human universal, but one which, as Wynter hopes, will not be just a refiguring of one particular ‘descriptive statement of the human’ as the global norm and thus a replication of the present role played by the notion of humanity, as overrepresented by Man, in the global present” (“Before *Man*: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015], 102).

22. Silva, “Before *Man*,” 104.

23. Silva, “Before *Man*,” 98–99.

24. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 282 (quoting Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* [New York: Basic Books, 1983]):

The West would therefore remain unable, from [the Humanist and colonial sixteenth century] on, to conceive of an Other to what it calls human—an Other, therefore, to its correlated postulates of power, truth, freedom. All other modes of being human would instead have to be seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are “out there,” but adaptively, as the lack of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description. [. . .] This central oversight would then enable both Western and westernized intellectuals to systemically repress what Geertz has identified as the “fugitive truth” of its own “local culturality” [. . .] with this systemic repression ensuring that we oversee (thereby failing to recognize) the culture and class-specific relativity of our present mode of being human.

25. Erasmus, *Ecclesiastae sive de ratione concionandi*, chap. 125, 340. I am using a modified version of James L. P. Butrica’s translation in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*:

Spiritualia and Pastoralia—Exomologesis, Ecclesiastes 1, ed. Frederick J. McGinness, trans. Michael J. Heath and James L. P. Butrica (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 650. My modification concerns “Porro risibile, quod ceu homini proprium tribuitur, videtur et canibus et simiis commune,” which Butrica renders as “It is ridiculous that what is attributed to man as his own seems to be shared with both dogs and apes.” This translation totally alters the import of the sentence. At stake here is the double meaning of the word *risibile* (the Latin equivalent of the English *risible*, which is discussed at length in the introduction) as both “capable of laughter” and “ridiculous.” I have substituted Screech’s translation (*Laughter*, 3n6) because he employs the former meaning of *risibile*. Considering the word’s usage in the Scholastic texts that Erasmus is glossing, I believe this to be accurate.

26. The *Isagoge* offers a system of five categories, five ways of thinking about being and qualities of being: in descending order of generality, genus, species, difference, property, accident. These provide, in Porphyry’s summary of Aristotle, the pathway for navigating from the particular to the general and vice versa. Porphyry elucidates them with the following series of examples, with “risible” as the core example of property: “Now genus is such as ‘animal,’ species as ‘man,’ difference as ‘rational,’ property as ‘risible,’ accident as ‘white,’ ‘black,’ ‘to sit’” (*Isagoge*, “On Genus”).

27. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, bk. 3, pt. 10. A note on the implications of the original Greek (available at <https://www.loebclassics.com/>), with which Porphyry is wrestling in the *Isagoge*: Aristotle, in his section on laughter in *On the Parts of Animals*, uses the infinitive form of the verb “to laugh” (γεῖν) to chain laughter to humanity when he writes, τὸ μόνον γεῖν τῶν ζώων ἄνθρωπον. This sentence, though usually translated as “the human is the only laughing animal,” is literally “the only laughing among the animals is the human.” This phrasing gives “laughing” great prominence in the sentence, and also, because of the infinitive used as a predicate of “human,” presents laughter as an event, something in process. Porphyry strips this quality from laughter by operating a shift from γεῖν (laughing) to γελαστικόν (capable of laughter)—a canny move that decouples the actual event of laughter from the definition of laughter. I am grateful to Anna Barker for her help in navigating the grammar of Aristotle’s Greek in this passage.

28. Porphyry, *Isagoge*, “Of Property.”

29. Porphyry, *Isagoge*, “Of Property.”

30. It is also important to remember that without the shift from laughing to risibility, Porphyry would have risked implying that humans are only such while laughing—and not fully so when not.

31. Porphyry’s logical implication of laughter with reason may have been the motivation behind Thomas Aquinas’s attempt to decouple laughter from humanity by naming risibility an accidental rather than essential property (meaning that humanity could lose risibility and still stay human, which is a correction of Porphyry’s understanding). On Aquinas’s commentary on risibility, see n. 11 above.

32. It is important to note that a perhaps well-known, at least to musicologists, reference here is the medieval theory of signs, which took its lead from another Neo-Platonist philosopher: Priscian, the author of the *Institutiones Grammaticae*. Particularly interesting for a medieval theory of laughter was Priscian’s four-part distinction between *vox in/articulata* and *vox il/literata*, which elaborates on the Aristotelian notion of the human voice as a *phoné semantike*. Within musicology, Elizabeth Eva Leach’s *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007) offers a really

interesting take on the relation of animals, theories of signs, and music. An original and beautifully written reflection on theories of signs and the investment made by medieval literature in the dismantling of semantics is Jordan Kirk, *Medieval Nonsense: Signifying Nothing in Fourteenth-Century England* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021). The reason I do not delve into these theories here is that, in many ways, they are about nonsignifying sounds far beyond laughter—and do not account for the special place that laughter has in political definitions of the human, which is an essential part of the argument of this chapter and of the book as a whole.

33. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 296.

34. The critical historical literature on the *Requerimiento* is too vast to cite adequately in a note, but these are a few relevant references about its theological, performative, and linguistic underpinnings: Lewis Hanke, “The ‘Requerimiento’ and Its Interpreters,” *Revista de Historia de América* 1 (1938): 25–34; Robert A. Williams, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69–100; Anthony Pagden, “Dispossessing the Barbarian: The Language of Spanish Thomism and the Debate over the Property Rights of the American Indians,” in *Theories of Empire, 1450–1800*, ed. David Armitage (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 168–184; Paja Faudree, “Reading the *Requerimiento* Performatively: Speech Acts and the Conquest of the New World,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 24, no. 4 (2015): 456–478.

35. See the English translation and Spanish text of the *Requerimiento* in the Early Caribbean Digital Archive, Northeastern University, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://ecda.northeastern.edu/home/about-exhibits/requerimiento/what/>.

36. Jon Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 2–3, citing, in order of appearance, Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 97; Robert A. Williams, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 92, quoting Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 31–32; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 56; Kamen, *Empire*, 97.

37. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 295.

38. Wynter (“Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 295) reports how Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote that in reaction to the *Requerimiento* he did not know whether to laugh or cry—something that echoes this chapter’s theme of laughter in relation to the failure of logos. See Las Casas, *History of the Indies* (1561), trans. and ed. Andrée M. Collard (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 196.

39. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 296–297.

40. The text by Mair is his 1510 commentary on book 2 (particularly the forty-fourth *distinctio*) of the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, itself a four-volume commentary on Aristotle which was one of the most widely read theological tracts of the Scholastic tradition.

41. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indians and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 42, referenced in

Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 296, and citing Juan de Matienzo, *Gobierno del Perú* (1567; repr., Paris: Guillermo Lohmann Villena, 1967), 17–18.

42. Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 1, pt. 4.

43. Pagden, *Fall of Natural Man*, 18: “The teleological view of nature, to which all Greeks (and subsequently all Christians) subscribed, allowed for the existence of a scale of humanity going from the bestial at one end to the god-like at the other.”

44. The transition from logical proprium to ideas of ownership is of course a far more delicate matter than can be adequately explored here. It is likely that the slippage between logical property and material property happened precisely with the theological discourse on property in the Hispanic *conquista*, but I have not done the adequate research to prove this. On the topic of Spanish colonial interpretation of Aristotle see Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150–1625* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), esp. chap. 12 (“Aristotle and the American Indians”). I thank Drew Hicks for the comments he made to me about this particular issue and for recommending Tierney’s work.

45. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 297.

46. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to Wynter, Jon Beasley-Murray argues that the repeated performance of an empty, meaningless logos was and is at the heart of the entire notion of government, not just in a colonial context but in contemporary Latin America and beyond (*Posthegemony*, 4–6). For Beasley-Murray, it is not logos and consensus that form the state—not hegemony in any rationalist sense—but the sheer mass of repeated inertial statements that undo any real dialogic interpellation.

47. An important work—within music studies—on the notion of sense and its undoing in settings of military conflict is Gavin Williams, ed., *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound and the Unmaking of Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

48. In a different context, Rei Terada parses the locus of Hegel’s racialization of Black Africans as precisely this moment of abrasive nonrelation between colonizer and colonized. The colonizers cannot bear nonrelation, must turn it into relation by any means necessary. The colonized are seen as being constitutively indifferent to nonrelation: they laugh or sleep through it. This indifference is then perceived by the colonizer as a lack of intelligence and inability to grow. See “Hegel’s Racism for Radicals,” *Radical Philosophy* 205 (Autumn 2019): 11–22, esp. 15–16.

49. Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* [. . .] (1578), trans. Janet Whatley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

50. Léry, *History of a Voyage*, 161–162.

51. Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire*, 17.

52. The special relationship that Lévi-Strauss had to Léry’s work is documented, among other things, in Frank Lestringant, “Léry-Strauss: Jean de Léry’s *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*,” *Viator* 32 (2001): 417–430.

53. The becoming-oyster of the anecdote can be read as a proof of a kind of hyper-humanist arrogance—an ability to let go of logos and human form without losing one’s humanity. Wynter reads this arrogance into a stalwart text of Renaissance Humanism—Pico della Mirandola’s 1486 *Oration on the Dignity of Man*—in which humans are granted by God the power to turn themselves toward either divinity or bestiality as they see fit. See Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 276–277. However, I see it far more as a kind of negotiation of one’s human species through the plastic power of language—something

closer, in fact, to the Deleuzian world of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology*, ed. and trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

54. Léry, *History of a Voyage*, 161.

55. Léry, *History of a Voyage*, 97.

56. A deep seam of African American literature connects Black life to bodies of water and particularly the ocean—a cipher that dates back to the transatlantic slave trade and has been elaborated, poetically, to reconceive enslaved people, particularly those who died at sea, as marine-human hybrids. One key reference is Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Afrofuturist artists and collectives have drawn from the history of Black and marine life, such as the Otolith Group (founded in 2002); alternative histories of the middle passage have also been crafted by poets and scholars, for instance M. NourbeSe Philip's cycle of poems *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008). Most relevant here, though, is the work of scholars who have imagined the ocean as a place for a meeting of the historical memories of Indigenous and Black people of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery. See, e.g., Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

57. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12: "The question 'In what way does the living being have language?' corresponds exactly to the question 'In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?' The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it."

58. In biopolitical terms, the sovereign human corresponds to the faculties of speech, thought, and language, and the subaltern to the physiology of feeding, reproduction, and digestion. In the moment of laughter, these two figures are clasped together and, indeed, are capable of switching places with each other. In the European philosophical canon, they became more and more distinct, separated into different traditions and even different branches of knowledge.

59. Giambattista Vico, "Vindications of Vico" (1727), trans. Donald Phillip Verene, in *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the "New Science,"* ed. Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 118.

60. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, bk. 3, pt. 10.

61. Vico, "Vindications of Vico," 118.

62. Vico, "Vindications of Vico," 118–119.

3. LAUGHTER AS (SOUND) REPRODUCTION

Epigraphs. Vladimir Propp, "Laughter in Ritual Folklore (A Propos of the Tale of the Princess Who Would Not Laugh [Nesmejána])," in *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 131; @CaptHandlebar, quoted in Nirash Choshki, "Amazon Knows Why Alexa Was Laughing at Its Customers," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/business/alexa-laugh-amazon-echo.html>; Maya Angelou, "The Mask," available on YouTube, posted February 7, 2017, accessed May 28, 2022, https://youtu.be/_HLol9InMlc. See also chap. 1, n. 1. Transcription is my own.

1. Silvia Poli et al., “Laughs and Jokes in Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Video-Recorded Doctor-Couple Visits,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (April 2021): 1–9, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648333>. The visits transcribed and used for this article were also used for a previous article on the topic of doctor-couple communication: D. Leone et al., “Doctor-Couple Communication during Assisted Reproductive Technology Visits,” *Human Reproduction* 33, no. 5 (2018): 877–886.

2. Poli et al., “Laughs and Jokes,” 1.

3. I am broadly drawing here from Raymond Williams’s consideration of literary genre in scientific literature: “Marxism and Literature,” in *Politics and Letters: Interviews with “New Left Review”* (London: Verso, 2015), 324–361, esp. 326–329. The other important reference for any humanist examining the construction of scientific discourse is Bruno Latour’s oeuvre, beginning with his classic *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) but also including the lesser-known *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

4. The corpus of medical research I am referring to is classified under the topics of “patient satisfaction,” “patient-centered care,” and “patient retention” in the MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) database. The statistics on these MeSH terms on PubMed indicate that these topics have become increasingly important in the past ten years, with the highest volume of related articles being published in 2017 (accessed February 10, 2021, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Patient-Centered+Care%22%5BMAJR%5D>).

5. Poli et al., “Laughs and Jokes,” 2.

6. See Poli et al., “Laughs and Jokes,” 2: “All visits have been re-analyzed to include jokes and laughter that could have been categorized differently, giving priority to another code (e.g., in the RIAS coding system the utterances of ‘biomedical information’ or ‘concern’ have the priority on the coding of ‘laughs’).”

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), chap. 1 (“Rabelais in the History of Laughter”), 105.

8. For one of the earliest published editions of the *Caquets* as a single volume, see *Recueil general des caquets de l'accouchée* (1624), accessed February 17, 2022, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k83146x>. The book was likely known to Bakhtin through its nineteenth-century edition, Antoine Le Roux de Lincy, ed., *Les caquets de l'accouchée* (Paris: Jannet, 1855), accessed February 16, 2022, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Les_Caquets_de_l%27accouch%C3%A9e.

9. Domna C. Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France: Women Writ, Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 2014), chap. 1 (“Recuperating Women and the Man behind the Screen: [Un]classical Bodies in *Les caquets de l'accouchée* [1622]?”), 37–62.

10. Stanton, *Dynamics of Gender*, 44–45.

11. For these instance of transcribed laughs, see *Recueil general des caquets*, 11–13. The same passage can be found in the modern edition, Le Roux de Lincy, ed., *Les caquets de l'accouchée*, 17–21. On early modern laughter, see Manfred Pfister, “Beckett, Barker, and Other Grim Laughers,” in *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. Manfred Pfister (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 175–190. Of course, this publication concerns English laughter rather than French, but even so, its argument adds a further possible linguistic and historical dimension to the Bakhtinian argument about the material laughter in the *Caquets*.

12. Le Roux de Lincy, ed., *Les caquets de l'accouchée*, 191, translated in Stanton, "Recuperating Women," 45–46.

13. Genesis 17:17, 18:10–12. All biblical quotes are taken from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Emphasis in the original.

14. Genesis 21:5–6. There is also a line of interpretation that takes the Qur'anic reference to Sarah's laughter as a pun on the word for menstruation, another element linking laughter with the physiological potential for sexual reproduction. See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Sarah and the Hyena: Laughter, Menstruation, and the Genesis of a Double Entendre," *History of Religions* 36, no. 1 (1996): 13–41.

15. Vladimir Propp, "Ritual Laughter in Folklore (A Propos of the Tale of the Princess Who Would Not Laugh [Nesmejána])," in *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124–146.

16. Propp, "Ritual Laughter in Folklore," 131.

17. I am obviously not claiming Derridean orthodoxy here—insofar as such a thing even exists outside the petty bounds of the academic humanities. The logic of the supplement—which I am simplifying here—is the contradiction inherent in anything that aids and completes "natural" processes, thereby revealing their precariousness. It is explored across Derrida's oeuvre, starting with its introduction in *Of Grammatology* (1967). For an overview of the concept, see Robert Bernasconi, "Supplement," in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook (London: Routledge, 2014), 19–22.

18. "All reproduction is assisted" was the topic of a literary forum published in the *Boston Review* on August 10, 2018 (accessed February 16, 2022, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/merve-emre-reproduction/>); the prompt that gave the forum its title was penned by Merve Emre, and the respondents were Irina Aristarkhova, Andrea Long Chu, Marcy Darnovsky, Merve Emre, Chris Kaposy, Sophie Lewis, Annie Menzel, Diane Tober, Alys Eve Weinbaum, and Miriam Zoll.

19. This is Foucault's famous description of biopower as the specular opposite of classical sovereignty, which arrogates to itself the power to "make die" or "let live." Biopower, by contrast, in Foucault's definition, is the power to either violently foster life ("make live") or neglect it to death ("let die"). The key passage about the switch from sovereignty to biopower is found in the lecture of March 17, 1976, published in "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 241.

20. The bibliography given here for the historical emergence of reproduction as the key process to be monitored in human life is, of course, drastically reduced. Foucault's *An Introduction* (1976), vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), famously explores the nineteenth-century turn toward tracking sexual activity (including the criminalization of same-sex intercourse) with an eye to population increase and control. Nicholas Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell's large edited book, *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), provides a cultural history of the emergence of the discourse of reproduction in mainly European and American contexts, confirming Foucault's thesis about reproduction becoming a dominant episteme of the nineteenth century. Alys Eve Weinbaum's *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019) draws on the work of Black feminist scholars

such as Hortense Spiller, Saidiya Hartman, and Dorothy Roberts in connecting the concern with reproduction to the practices of transatlantic slavery, particularly in North America. This concern with the production, exchange, and exploitation of laboring bodies—in which formations of “race” find their roots—is termed *biocapitalism*.

21. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

22. I am thinking here of the following texts, the first of which I have already discussed and the second of which I discuss later in this chapter: Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears” (1953), in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2004), 133–150; Hélène Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–893; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 325 (frag. J54, 1).

23. Maggie Hennefeld, “Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter: Feminist Killjoys, Humorless Capitalists, and Contagious Hysterics,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 2 (2021): 111.

24. Hennefeld, “Affect Theory,” 139.

25. Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore,” 136, quoting Friederich Engels, “Author’s Preface to the First Edition, 1884,” in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1908), 9–10.

26. I owe the remark about the vitalism of laughter to my colleague Juan Carlos Castrillón Vallejo, who is also one of the few people to write in depth about laughter, gestation, and birth from an anthropological and sound studies perspective. See his remarkable essay “*Yuruparí’s* Disappearance: Women’s Laughter and Organology without Musical Instruments in Vaupés,” in *Creation and Creativity in Indigenous Lowland South America: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Ernst Halbmayer and Anne Goletz (New York: Berghahn, 2023), 231–252.

27. Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore,” 135.

28. Propp quotes a letter from Engels to Conrad Schmidt (accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_10_27.htm) that encapsulates this understanding of the general feedback loop between “low economic development” and “false” understanding of the nature of things (such as the belief that laughter increases human and vegetal fertility):

We may quote from Engels’s letter to Conrad Schmidt of 27 October 1890: “As to the realms of ideology which soar still higher in the air, religion, philosophy, etc., these have a prehistoric stock, found already in existence and taken over in the historical period, of what we should to-day call bunk. These various false conceptions of nature, of man’s own being, of spirits, magic forces, etc., have for the most part only a negative economic basis; but the low economic development of the prehistoric period is supplemented and also partially conditioned and even caused by the false conceptions of nature.” (Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore,” 135)

29. Propp, “Ritual Laughter in Folklore,” 139–140.

30. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. Gregory Nagy, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html>, verses 198–204.

31. See, e.g., Douglas Cairns, “Psyche, Thymos, and Metaphor in Homer and Plato,” *Les études platoniciennes* 11 (2014): 1–42. It is also significant that *thymos* was associated, for

Homer, with phren/phrenes, the elusive membrane that Aristotle cites as the site of laughter (see chap. 2 for an in-depth discussion of this issue); see Thomas Jahn, *Zum Wortfeld "Seele-Geist" in der Sprache Homers* (Munich: Beck, 1987), 14–15, cited in n. 5 of Douglas Cairns, "thymos," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, accessed July 18, 2023, <https://oxfordre.com/classics>.

32. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, n. 18. Emphasis in the original. Note also Robert Graves's gloss of this episode in *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (London: Folio Society, 1996), vol. 1, 92: "Iambe and Baubo personify the obscene songs, in iambic metre, which were sung to relieve emotional tension at the Eleusinian Mysteries; but Iambe, Demeter, and Baubo form the familiar triad of maiden, nymph, and crone."

33. Clement of Alexandria offers a version of Baubo's story within the Demeter mysteries in his *Exhortations to the Greeks* (bk. 2, trans. G. W. Butterworth [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919], accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/ClementExhortation1.html>): "But to continue; for I will not forgo to tell the rest of the story. Baubo, having received Demeter as a guest, offers her a draught of wine and meal. She declines to take it, being unwilling to drink on account of her mourning. Baubo is deeply hurt, thinking she has been slighted, and thereupon uncovers her secret parts and exhibits them to the goddess. Demeter is pleased at the sight, and now at least receives the draught—delighted by the spectacle!" A few lines after this passage, Clement quotes a poem attributed to Orpheus in which Baubo then produces Demeter's young son Iacchus from under her skirts, and the child runs, laughing, to his mother—thus adding to the sexual and reproductive undertones of the episode: "This said, she drew aside her robes, and showed a sight of shame; child Iacchus was there, and laughing, plunged his hand below her breasts. Then smiled the goddess, in her heart she smiled, and drank the draught from out the glancing cup."

34. The literature on Baubo is vast, as was her representation in fertility statuettes, which were mass produced and circulated across the Greek world. Two key anthropological texts on Baubo and her significance are Georges Devereux, *Baubo: La vulve mythique* (Paris: J.-C. Godefroy, 1983), and Winifred Lubell, *The Metamorphosis of Baubo: Myths of Woman's Sexual Energy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994). Recent works by Frederika Tevebring have explored the impact of Baubo statuettes found in Priene by German archaeologists and the subsequent absorption and dissemination of Baubo in Austro-German intellectual traditions, including writings by Nietzsche and Freud: "Baubo, Truth, and Joyful Philology in Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*," *German Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2020): 359–73; Tevebring and Alexander Wolfson, "Freud's Archaeology: A Conversation between Excavation and Analysis," *American Imago* 78, no. 2 (2021): 203–213.

35. The call for historical materialist precision in tracing laughter in Propp's "Ritual Laughter in Folklore" is at its clearest when he writes, "We must [. . .] discover the character of laughter in general, though not in the sense of abstract philosophical constructions, the way Bergson did in his book on laughter [*Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900)], but as a historical entity. We must examine the phenomenon in its development and in its connections with the life of the peoples among whom we observe it. [. . .] We do not laugh now as people once laughed. Therefore, it is hardly possible to give a general philosophical definition of the comic and of laughter: such a definition can be only historical" (126–127).

36. The turn of phrase *pratum ridet* endures in some Romance languages as a cipher for flourishing nature—*ridente* in Italian, *risueño* in Spanish, *riant* in French—and there are traces of the same idea in Anglo-Saxon languages as well. Although an investigation into the linguistic diffusion of the metaphor of laughing meadows in contemporary languages is far beyond the scope of this paper, note, e.g., Ralph Waldo Emerson’s figure of the scornful laughing land in his 1876 poem “Hamatreya” (accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52341/hamatreya>): “Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys / Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs; / Who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet / Clear of the grave.”

37. Umberto Eco, “La metafora nel Medioevo latino,” *Doctor Virtualis* 3 (2008): 43. Eco’s abbreviated citation for Rosier-Catach’s work doesn’t correspond to any published text. However, it is likely that the essay in question is Irène Rosier-Catach, “Prata rident,” in *Lan-gages et philosophie: Hommage à Jean Jolivet*, ed. Alain de Libera, Abdelali Elamrani-Jamal, and Alain Galonnier (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 155–176.

38. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1914), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm>. The phrase recurs throughout the book.

39. Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1579), trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

40. Indira Ghose, “The Paradoxes of Early Modern Laughter: Laurent Joubert’s *Traité du ris*,” *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 28 (2013): 19–31.

41. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 75.

42. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 74.

43. Ghose, “Paradoxes of Early Modern Laughter,” 20.

44. There is an important passage of Joubert’s treatise in which he posits a distinction between *sain* (healthy/natural) and *malsain* (unhealthy/unnatural) laughter. Healthy laughter is, for Joubert, effectively a convulsion that is not necessarily prompted by something comedic as defined by Aristotle. Astonishingly, though, after an excursus on various pathological laughs, Joubert retracts the distinction by writing, “All these different types of [unhealthy] laughter, even though we may call them against nature, are nonetheless formed in the very same fashion as natural and healthy [laughter]” (*Treatise on Laughter*, 74–75, amended to better reflect the meaning of the original French text: Joubert, *Traité du ris suivi d’un Dialogue sur la cacographie française* [1579; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973], 173, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k44729>).

45. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 75.

46. On the question of laughter as multiplication, Anca Parvulescu, in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 110, makes an interesting connection between laughter and Mladen Dolar’s tracing of a relationship between philosophies of the voice and the myth of Echo in “The Vocal Stone,” in *Bild und Stimme*, ed. Maren Butte and Sabina Brandt (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 31–47.

47. The relevant texts are cited by Parvulescu in *Laughter*, chap. 4 (“Feminism, or: She’s Beautiful and She’s Laughing”), 101–119. Full citations are as follows: Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Annie Leclerc, *Parole*

de femme (Paris: Grasset, 1974), excerpted in translation as “Parole de femme,” in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 73–79, and “Woman’s Word,” in *French Connections: Voices from the Women’s Movement in France*, ed. and trans. Claire Duchon (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 58–63.

48. I am drawing from Parvulescu’s important work on the relationship of feminism and laughter in the twentieth century. In *Laughter*, chap. 4, Parvulescu takes her lead from Cixous and proceeds to offer a virtuosic account of second-wave European feminism’s relationship to laughter, passing through figures of feminist laughter such as the medusa and the hysteric.

49. Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa.”

50. Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 876–877: “Besides, you’ve written a little, but in secret. And it wasn’t good [. . .] because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty—so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time.”

51. The shattering power of withholding laughter as affective labor is eloquently conjured by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 223:

When we are laughing, we are facing each other; our bodies are mirroring each other. I might hear the joke, and when I register what has been said, I might find that I do not [find] it funny, or even that I find it offensive. When I hear the joke, it becomes a crisis; I might hear it even more clearly and distinctly. To find this joke offensive would not only be to lose my good cheer, but to become affectively ‘out of tune’ with others. If I stop laughing, I withdraw from a bodily intimacy. I might break that intimacy; it can shatter like a jug. I might be left having to pick up the pieces. Sometimes we keep laughing because we fear causing a breakage.

52. Sara Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 591–592: “We can talk about being angry black women or feminist killjoys; we can claim those figures back; we can talk about those conversations we have had at dinner tables or in seminars or meetings; we can laugh in recognition of the familiarity of inhabiting that place. There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (and we do not). There can be joy in killing joy. And kill joy we must, and we do.”

53. Hennefeld, “Affect Theory,” 110.

54. The figure of the multitude appears for the first time in Negri’s *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics* (1981), trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). It then reemerges throughout most of Negri’s oeuvre, though in a far less tortured—and perhaps less interesting—form. We must remember that *The Savage Anomaly* was conceived and written in 1978, during Negri’s time in prison on account of his left-wing political activism. His retreating into a more theoretical approach to the political coincided with his imprisonment and, more broadly, the persecution and systematic discrediting of the radical Marxist left in Italy.

55. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 411.

56. The rethinking of reproductive labor is the single topic of all of Federici’s work in one way or another. The two texts I have in mind in this chapter are the collection of essays

Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), and Federici's magnum opus, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004; Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics, 2021).

57. Silvia Federici, "Wages against Housework" (1975), in *Revolution at Point Zero*, 16.

58. These topics are encompassed by Federici's work on the commons: see, e.g., "On Elder Care Work and the Limits of Marxism" (2009), 115–126, and "Women, Land Struggles, and Globalization: An International Perspective" (2004), 126–138, in *Revolution at Point Zero*.

59. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 199: "But the fact remains: childbirth is at best necessary and tolerable. It is not fun. (Like shitting a pumpkin, a friend of mine told me when I inquired about the Great-Experience-You're-Missing.)" Also important is Sophie Lewis's discussion (via Firestone) of human gestation as uniquely treacherous labor in her *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (London: Verso, 2019), introduction, esp. 6–10.

60. Feminist takes on Sarah's laughter include Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Interpretation, Contemporary Feminism, and the Concept of Delight* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Roberta Sabbath, "Jouissance and Trauma in Sarah's Laugh and Aporia: The Construction of Collective Identity in the *Parshat VaYera*," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 3 (2020): 346–359. The nonprofit Sarah's Laughter, founded in 2004, describes itself as "Christian Support for Infertility and Child Loss." Its attachment to Christianity is nondenominational and open, as its website (accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.sarahs-laughter.com/>) specifies: "We are a Christian ministry that welcomes and offers support to people of all faiths as well as no faith. We are neither affiliated with nor underwritten by any church or denomination. We do, however, try to represent Jesus Christ in all we do, and treat people as He would."

61. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), esp. introduction and chap. 1 ("Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues"), 1–24. The feminist Black theological take on Hagar is very rich, Williams being one of the most celebrated names in this intellectual lineage. Other works in this tradition include Emily Peacock, "Hagar: An African American Lens," *Denison Journal of Religion* 2 (2002): 1–11; more recently, Nyasha Junior's *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), which provides a critical and thorough account of how Hagar was integrated into the African American theological tradition and also became a broad signifier of Blackness beyond North America.

62. Genesis 16:1–2, 4.

63. Although I am focusing specifically on the African American theological interpretation of Sarah's laughter and Hagar's surrogacy, it is important to note that Sarah's laughter and reproduction and her relationship to Hagar are also part of the Islamic tradition (Sarah features in the Qur'an). In Christian-, Muslim- and Jewish-oriented scholarship, the Sarah-Hagar relationship has been interpreted as linked to intersectional issues (solidarity across class, ethnicity, and racialization) and typologically related to various forms of political tension, including between Jews and Arabs. The amount of literature covering these three areas is simply too vast to cover in a note, so a few examples will have to do. I have already mentioned Stetkevych's work in n. 16 above. See also, e.g., Bryan Wright, *Seeds of Turmoil: The Biblical Roots of the Inevitable Crisis in the Middle East* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), chap. 3 ("Two Women Who Shaped History: Sarah and Hagar"); Matthew

Elia, “Sarah’s Laugh, Sodom’s Sin, Hagar’s Kin: Queering Time and Belonging in Genesis 16–21,” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 28, no. 4 (2020): 398–427.

64. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 3. Williams is here of course referencing the legal doctrine of *partus sequit ventrem* (“that which is born follows the womb”), established in colonial Virginia in 1662, which dictated that children by enslaved women were also enslaved by default. This doctrine is the cornerstone of studies of the relationship of chattel slavery and reproductive rights and has also, importantly, cast an enduring shadow on reproductive rights in Black America. The argument about the contemporary political significance of the *partus* doctrine was first made in Dorothy Roberts’s seminal *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

65. Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596>. Emphasis in the original.

66. Weinbaum, *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, chap. 1 (“The Surrogacy/Slavery Nexus”), 29–61.

67. An account of the literature on surrogacy and its consequences for contemporary feminism is provided in Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, chap. 3 (“The World’s [Other] Oldest Profession”), 57–84. Important work on surrogacy has been done by Kalindi Vora, who, as we will see, links it as a gestational practice to the question of technological reproductive labor: see “Potential, Risk, and Return in Transnational Indian Gestational Surrogacy,” *Current Anthropology* 5, no. S7 (2013): S97–S106.

68. I am referring to Weinbaum’s *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, Atanasoski and Vora’s *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), and Lewis’s *Full Surrogacy Now*.

69. See Patricia Hill Collins’s seminal work “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images” (1990), in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69–96.

70. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, introduction, esp. 10–17. Weinbaum, in *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 48, echoes Roberts’s description of these figures of the “bio-underclass.”

71. For a swift survey of the scientific racist discourse on Black women, including its use of laughter, see Rupe Simms, “Controlling Images and the Gendered Construction of Enslaved Women,” *Gender and Society* 15, no. 6 (2001): 886.

72. Ronald Radano explores the relationship of laziness, labor, and Black vocalicity in “Black Music Labor and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound,” *Boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (2016): 173–208.

73. Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” in *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, OH: Harley and Harley, 1895), 21, accessed May 28, 2022, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Majors_and_Minors/PvMpAAAAYAAJ. The episode of the Black maid on the bus is part of Angelou’s performance of her poem (accessed May 28, 2022, https://youtu.be/_HLol9InMlc; see also chap. 1, n. 1), which is titled “When I Think about Myself” in her *Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2015), 29, but “The Mask” elsewhere.

74. See, e.g., Mary Pietrowicz, “Exploring the Expressive Range of Conversational Laughter with AI” (2019), IBM Research Blog, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.ibm>

.com/blogs/research/2019/05/conversational-laughter-ai/; Carlos Toshinori Ishi, Takashi Minato, and Hiroshi Ishiguro, "Analysis and Generation of Laughter Motions, and Evaluation in an Android Robot," *APSIPA Transactions on Signal and Information Processing* 8 (2019): e6.

75. Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 1 ("Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity"), 15, quoting Jonathan Rosenbaum's review of *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, "The Best of Both Worlds," *Chicago Reader*, July 13, 2001, available on Rosenbaum's personal website, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2021/08/the-best-of-both-worlds/>.

76. Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, 59. Emphasis in the original.

77. Marie Thompson, "Music in the Post-mom Economy," Peter Le Huray Lecture, presented at the 56th Royal Musical Association Annual Conference, Goldsmiths, University of London, September 8, 2020.

78. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 5. Emphasis in the original.

79. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 8–12.

80. Bergson, *Laughter* (see this chapter, n. 38).

81. Nirash Choshki, "Amazon Knows Why Alexa Was Laughing at Its Customers," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/business/alexa-laugh-amazon-echo.html>.

82. The conversation transcribed here featured in the March 7, 2018, episode of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and can now be viewed as a clip on Kimmel's YouTube channel (accessed February 20, 2022, <https://youtu.be/tMJm4cZ9yxQ>).

83. Choshki, "Amazon Knows."

84. Franz Kafka, "The Cares of a Family Man" (1917), in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 473.

85. On the invisible work of women in factories producing music technology, see Lucie Vágnerová, "Nimble Fingers' in Electronic Music: Rethinking Sound through Neo-colonial Labour," *Organised Sound* 22, no. 2 (2017): 250–258.

4. GEORGE W. JOHNSON'S LAUGHABLE PHONOGRAPHY

1. See Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 4 ("The Black Tradition from George W. Johnson to Ozella Jones"), 185–237; Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pt. 1 ("George W. Johnson, the First Black Recording Artist"), 13–73; Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 1 ("Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity"), 15–49.

2. Matthew Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 802.

3. This is an expression that Morrison uses in "Race, Blacksound," 802, borrowed from Saidyia Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), chap. 5 ("The Lived Experience of the Black Man"), 89, cited in Morrison, "Race, Blacksound," 796.

5. Lyrics as printed in George W. Johnson, “The Laughing Song” (New York: Ko-La’R, 1894). The stereotype specifically invoked in this song is the “zip coon”: the free man and Northern urban Black dandy of the Jim Crow era, contrasted with the character of Jim Crow, an enslaved man who goes by his master’s name (see Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891], 115–116, cited in Morrison, “Race, Blacksound,” 801). This is an interesting point because of what I shall argue is the evident technicity of Johnson’s laughter in this song, which could be said to relate to the performative interaction of the “zip coon” with technology and urban modernity. See Morrison, “Race, Blacksound,” esp. 800–816. The lyrics of Johnson’s song have been the subject of much sophisticated analysis—most striking are Wagner’s reading of an impending lynching and laughter as a defensive, deescalating strategy (*Disturbing the Peace*, 197–199), and Anca Parvulescu’s virtuosic interpretation of Johnson’s laughter as a deeply ambiguous response to an act of racist hailing (*Laughter: Notes on a Passion* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010], chap. 2 [“Modernism, or an Extravagance of Laughter”], 59–79, esp. 69–70).

6. A word on how “The Laughing Song” can be accessed nowadays: several digital copies of the original wax cylinders recorded by Johnson are available online. See, e.g., the many separate entries for “The Laughing Song” (also listed as “Laughing Song”) in UC Santa Barbara’s Discography of American Historical Recordings (s.v. “Johnson, George W.,” accessed June 22, 2021, <https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/names/107861>). It is also important to remember that the number of extant wax cylinders pales in comparison to the number of those cut back in the day: according to the historian Tim Brooks (*Lost Sounds*, 40–41), “The Laughing Song” sold between twenty-five and fifty thousand copies (each of which would have been played in an exhibition context where up to ten headsets would be hooked to a single phonograph) between 1891 and 1902. There is also the above mentioned score printed in 1894 by the New York publisher Ko-La’R and copyrighted to George W. Johnson himself as an additional bit of merchandise following the phonographic success and a belated (and unsuccessful) attempt by Johnson to control the consumption of his music via copyright. It is available as part of the New York Public Library Digital Collections (accessed June 22, 2021, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-0659-a3d9-e040-00018064a99>).

7. The racist commentary on the Black voice’s technological reproducibility is found in the 1891 review of “The Laughing Song” in *Phonogram* magazine, an industry publication on sound recording technology. The incriminated passage is the following: “Negroes [record] better than white singers, because their voices have a certain sharpness or harshness about them that a white man has not” (quoted in Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 30).

8. The work of Anita Pesce is, to my knowledge, the first serious scholarly acknowledgment of the origin of Berardo Cantalamessa’s song, but she never names George W. Johnson, instead focusing on the version by the white performer Burt Sheppard despite the fact that Nicola Maldacea, who documented Cantalamessa’s encounter with “The Laughing Song” in his memoirs, openly attributes it to a Black singer. See Pesce, *La Sirena nel solco: Origini della riproduzione sonora* (Naples: Alfredo Guida Editore, 2005), 43–44; Maldacea, *Memorie di Maldacea* (Naples: Bideri, 1933), 141.

9. Morrison, “Race, Blacksound,” 802.

10. See Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 1 (“Hearing Sonic Afro-modernity”).

11. There is, to my knowledge, no in-depth discussion of musicalized laughter in opera and operetta repertoires, much less a discussion of the influence of operatic laughing songs

(such as Adele's "Mein Herr Marquis" in Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* or the letter scene in Verdi's *Falstaff*) on minstrelsy repertoire or the phonograph market of laughing songs. An excellent dramaturgical account of laughter in *Falstaff* is provided by Michal Grover-Friedlander's *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 81–113.

12. Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 2 ("Magic Flute, Nocturnal Sun"), 78.

13. Melina Esse, "Rossini's Noisy Bodies," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 27–64.

14. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound," 790: "Particular to the political legacy of Blacksound is the historical and essentialist attempt to delimit black performativity, black personhood, and the ability for black people to be by circulating counterfeit and imagined performances of blackness in and out of blackface."

15. This idea that North American Black laughter is doubly coded—as, simultaneously, acquiescence to whites and a mark of suffering and potential rebellion to Blacks—connects to Parvulescu's point about laughter as a kind of aural "double consciousness" (after W. E. B. Du Bois) in *Laughter*, chap. 2 ("Modernism, or an Extravagance of Laughter"), 59–79.

16. Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Parvulescu, *Laughter*, chap. 2.

17. For full references, see chap. 1, nn. 1–2.

18. See Nina Sun Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), chap. 2 ("Phantom Genealogy: Sonic Blackness and the American Operatic Timbre").

19. The racialization of operatic roles was, as Eidsheim shows, one of the gateways for Black singers to find work within the operatic tradition. She opens her reflection on the racialization of the operatic voice with Marian Anderson's debut at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, on January 7, 1955, as Ulrica (*Race of Sound*, 61–63). This detail becomes all the more interesting when Eidsheim shows how Black opera singers often resorted to supplementing their (limited) income from operatic performances with minstrelsy stage shows—making the interconnection of masking, racialization, and laughter something that emerged precisely across the operatic and minstrelsy stages.

20. I am thinking here specifically of Enrico Caruso's recorded performance of "È scherzo od è follia" (Victor 10005, 1914, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-134880/>), which includes quite a bit of laughter ad-libbed by Caruso, a practice that may or may not have been informed by the burgeoning market for laughing songs. Adele's laughing song, on the other hand, features musicalized laughter as part of the score, but it is possible that its popularity as a sound recording increased because of the success of laughing songs in the 1890s. In 1911 it was recorded as a *whistled* tune by the singer Guido Gialdini (an interesting fact, given that whistling songs were, along with laughing songs, a big part of the North American coon song tradition) for Columbia (cat. no. A997, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-645505/>).

21. Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 199–200.

22. Parvulescu, *Laughter*: on 68, she introduces the idea of double consciousness and its connection, in Du Bois, to smiling; she then works this insight into the history of depictions of Black laughter, which passes through George W. Johnson at 69–70 and culminates in a reading of a passage from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) at 74–75.

23. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, chap. 3 ("The Trial of George W. Johnson"), 49–73.

24. Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chap. 1 ("Fugitive Sounds: Fungible Personhood, Evanescent Property"), 29–98.

25. Best, *Fugitive's Properties*, 98.

26. Robert P. Nevin, "Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy," *The Atlantic Monthly* 20, no. 121 (November 1867): 610, quoted in Best, *Fugitive's Properties*, 96 (the Rice and Cuff story is discussed at 91–96).

27. Best, *Fugitive's Properties*, 98. Emphasis in the original.

28. Morrison, in "Blacksound, Race," 801–802, traces an alternative genealogy to *The Atlantic Monthly's* canonical account of the Jim Crow character's birth. In the version offered by Morrison, Rice bases the character on a Black worker at his theater, whom he watches from a distance and whose demeanor he mimics without the worker's being any the wiser. I believe Morrison cites this version of the story because it is less reliant on the notion of an original, spectacular theft—no material item is stolen from a Black performer. As I show above, although I do not subscribe to the idea of a foundational theft, nor of a thievable essential Blackness, the act of property being beheld and heard in the act of changing hands is key to my argument.

29. Much literature on African American music has examined the impact of the phonograph on the creation of a cultural Blackness based on visual occlusion and also disembodiment. Morrison offers a concise bibliography in "Blacksound, Race," 794; to that list I would add Weheliye's *Phonographies*. The discourse of proximity and medical notions of interiority allowed by heart tubes comes from Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 98.

30. Fred Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round* (New York: MacMillan, 1942), 8. This quote is replicated in most English-language accounts of Johnson's "Laughing Song," but the most sustained reflection on the meaning of Gaisberg's remarks is found in Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 195–196.

31. Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 134.

32. See Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

33. Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*.

34. A version of this alchemy of double negatives is also present in Ronald Radano's striking take on the vocal labor of the Black voice, a topic to which I will return later. In "Black Music Labor and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound," *Boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (2016): 173–208, Radano argues that the Black voice is an originary withholding against white ownership and that we should understand white appropriation as a retaliation against this negation; he concludes by attributing a certain "enchantment" to Black singing voices as a result of this combination of withholding and theft.

35. Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 194.

36. Weheliye, *Phonographies*. Weheliye's antihumanist stance—already evident in his careful rejection of the ideal of the voice as a symbol of human self-determination in *Phonographies*—is systematically expanded in his ensuing work on biopolitics, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

37. Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 39.

38. It is important here to acknowledge two famous and at the time incendiary items of modernist literary theory: Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–893; James Snead's "On Repetition in Black Culture," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (1981): 146–154. Both render the figures of interruption, rupture, and repetition as resistance in the face of a progressivist, linear, and continuous form of expression signifying Eurocentric whiteness—and specifically in Cixous's case, also a specifically masculine form of elocution.

39. See n. 22 above.

40. Brooks details Johnson's pay stubs in *Lost Sounds*, 30, but it is also important to note that in the 1890s, when its market was still in formation, most performers recording for the phonograph were relatively unknown—and therefore cheap—vaudeville acts rather than expensive, high-prestige actors and singers. For further details, see Tim Brooks's article "A Directory to Columbia Recording Artists of the 1890s," *Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal* 11, nos. 2–3 (1979): 102–138.

41. Roger Beardsley and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "A Brief History of Sound Recording to ca. 1950" (2009), AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, King's College London, accessed May 11, 2023, https://charm.rhul.ac.uk/history/p20_4_1.html.

42. Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 224.

43. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 40–41.

44. Though this account of the recording process comes mainly from Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 13–73, it is important to note that Fred Gaisberg, who was a sound engineer (and sometime accompanist) for Johnson's recordings, marked the move from zinc to wax discs, which was also an important step toward the possibility of mass reproduction, as the moment when he had "The Laughing Song" rerecorded by Bert Sheppard after having "acquired it" from Johnson (*Music Goes Round*, 41–42).

45. The politics of voyeurism and violence are central to Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

46. This is the broad argument of Eidsheim's *Race of Sound*.

47. See n. 7 above for the racist commentary in *Phonogram*, the object of critique in Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 30; Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 69; Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 189. Similar remarks on the depth and strength of the "negro" voice are found in Gaisberg, *Music Goes Round*, 8. The *Washington Post* ("Negroes as Singers," quoted in Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 69) offered this assessment on April 25, 1903: "There is a peculiar vibrating quality in the negro voice, due, perhaps, to a peculiar arrangement of the vocal chords [*sic*], which is not found in the white race."

48. We might read such a tension between the titular ideas in Eric Lott's famous work on minstrelsy, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), in this way: love is an attraction to an intrinsic quality perceived in the other, and theft the compulsion to take something that is always already perceived as property and therefore ownable.

49. Sophia Rosenfeld, "On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 316–334; Ana Maria Ochoa, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

50. Best, *Fugitive's Properties*, esp. chap. 1.

51. This point about the implicit continuation of property law in cultural domains is at the heart of George Lipsitz's work in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

52. Achille Mbembe, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," *Politique africaine* 100, no. 4 (2005): 85.

53. Mbembe's original version of this argument was published as "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40. With minor alterations, it was republished as chap. 3 of his monograph on this topic, *Necropolitics*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 66–92.

54. Radano, "Black Music Labor," 203.

55. Best, *Fugitive's Properties*, chap. 1.

5. CONTAGION

1. Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (1901), trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 65.

2. On the Orientalist trope of the happy, singing, beautiful Neapolitan person, see Goffredo Plastino, "Lazzari felici: Neapolitan Song and/as Nostalgia," *Popular Music* 26, no. 3 (October 2007), 429–440.

3. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 63.

4. This association between continuity and the bel canto voice I am taking from Mary Ann Smart's *Waiting for Verdi: Italian Opera and Political Opinion, 1815–1848* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), chap. 1 ("Risorgimento Fantasies"), 4. Smart remarkably makes a connection between the smoothness of bel canto and the notion, rooted in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary criticism, that such singing sprouted from a language that was both more natural and more musical than French or German, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously argues in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781; see *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. and ed. John T. Scott [Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998], 289–332). By the late nineteenth century, such forms of positive Orientalism had developed into negative, criminalizing stereotypes. On Orientalism and the Italian south, see Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country* (New York: Berg, 1998). More recent analyses associate Italy's incorporation of its south with colonialism, a perspective I will say more about in the last section of this chapter. See, e.g., Enrico Dal Lago, "Italian National Unification and the Mezzogiorno: Colonialism in One Country?," in *The Shadow of Colonialism on Europe's Modern Past*, ed. Róisín Healy and Enrico Dal Lago (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 57–72.

5. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 64: "So there is no plague in Venice?' Aschenbach asked the question between his teeth, very low. The man's expressive face fell, he put on a look of comical innocence. 'A plague? What sort of plague? Is the sirocco a plague? Or perhaps our police are a plague! You are making fun of us, signore! A plague! Why should there be? The police make regulations on account of the heat and the weather. . . .' He gestured."

6. In the title "A risa," the apostrophe indicates the dialectal elision of the letter *L*. See n. 12 below for details of the musical score and recorded versions of the song in the early twentieth century.

7. Although not the topic at hand, it seems important to note that Tonino Apicella was the father of Mariano Apicella—another Neapolitan singer, whose fortunes changed for the better

when he recorded songs with lyrics by the prime minister Silvio Berlusconi as part of the album of Neapolitan songs *Meglio 'na canzone*. See Pasquale Elia, “Apicella: ‘Canto a contratto per il cavaliere,’” *Corriere della Sera*, October 29, 2003, accessed October 4, 2018, https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Spettacoli/2003/10_Ottobre/29/disco-berlusconi.shtml.

8. A very famous musical version of *Death in Venice* is of course Benjamin Britten’s opera of 1973; because of my specific focus on laughing songs—rather than *Death in Venice* as a literary, filmic, and operatic item—I haven’t found the opera particularly relevant here. Part of the issue might well be that the opera necessarily engulfs “The Laughing Song” not just into its visual realm but also into its sound world, therefore erasing all traces of the Neapolitan artifact and, I would argue, the ethnic-political undertones of the song in general from its system of representation. In Visconti, we are grappling with at least a degree of reality, in the choice of Apicella as performer and of “A risa” as the designated song. In Britten, we are living too fully within Aschenbach’s auralty to envisage the possibility of “The Laughing Song” as anything other than a projection of Aschenbach’s fears. A recent musicological essay by Janina Müller examines this same passage’s implications in film and opera history; see “Performance as Transformation: The Laughing Songs of ‘Death in Venice’ in Literature, Film, and Opera,” *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 69–100. My work here is opposite and complementary: I am attempting to trace the aesthetic political significance of the song referenced by Mann beyond the realm of high culture.

9. Massimo Donà, *Filosofia dell'errore* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), chap. 4 (“Male”), Kindle.

10. Fred Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round* (New York: MacMillan, 1942), 5. Gaisberg says that Maurice Farkoa’s “Le fou rire,” the French version of the laughing song, was “the most natural and contagious laughing song ever invented” (39).

11. Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), chap. 2 (“The Gramophone in China”), 53.

12. The song is known in the following versions and mediums: It is attributed to Berardo Cantalamessa as a score, “A risa: Canzonetta eccentrica” (Naples: G. Santojanni, 1899), and as a phonograph cylinder recorded in Milan on August 5, 1901, “La risata,” Edison Gold Moulded Record 12445. This recording was rendered digitally available by the UCSB Cylinder Audio Archive, accessed July 30, 2023, <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/OBJID/Cylinder11061>. For more details on this recording, see Anita Pesce, *La Sirena nel solco: Origini della riproduzione sonora* (Napoli: Alfredo Giuda Editore, 2005), 43–45. The cylinder was then reissued as a 78 rpm disc in 1902 by the Zonophone Company (cat. no. X-459). Some important notes for researchers here: at the time of my research, the Italian and Neapolitan internet entries on “A risa” fancifully backdate Cantalamessa’s first recording to 1895. This is inaccurate and, I believe, due to Nicola Maldacea’s dating of the song’s conception to 1895 in his *Memorie di Maldacea* (Naples: Bideri, 1933), 141. As I noticed in browsing Italian and Neapolitan websites, “A risa” is valued for being among the first sound recordings cut in Italy, and the fact that it is by a Neapolitan artist is often implied to be significant and a source of pride, hence perhaps the tendency to backdate.

13. Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 4 (“The Black Tradition from George W. Johnson to Ozella Jones”), 189–194.

14. Not all of these recordings can be cited with precision, but here are the details I could find for each version after Maldacea’s 1906 recording of “La risata” with the International

Zonophone Company (see introduction, n. 6): Daniele Serra, “A risa (La risata),” cat. nos. R10042 and HN258, matrix number 252241 BF2441-1, recorded November 1, 1928, accessed May 22, 2021, <http://www.ildiscobolo.net/SERRA%20DANIELE%20HOME.htm>. Ettore De Mura, in his discussion of the performers of “A risa,” lists the versions by Serra, Pasquale Jovino, Leopoldo Fregoli, Giuseppe Petrone, Luigi Prestini, and Roberto Mario De Simone in his monumental *Enciclopedia della canzone napoletana*, 3 vols. (Naples: Il Torchio, 1968–1969), vol. 2, 59. The personal archive of the ethnomusicologist Roberto Leydi (recently digitally cataloged by the Centro di dialettologia e di etnografia in Bellinzona, Switzerland, accessed May 22, 2021, https://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DCSU/CDE/pdf/collezioni/leydi/Fondo_Leydi_dischi78rpm_20180413.pdf) includes gramophone records of Jovine’s version (for Società fonografica napoletana, year unknown), Serra’s version (listed above), and one by M. Zoli for Fonotecnica elettrofonola (year unknown).

15. Aurelio Fierro, “A risa” / “Ah! L’ammore che ffa fa!,” 45 rpm single, King Universal, AFK 56060 (1962), accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/Aurelio-Fierro-A-Risa-Ah-Lammore-Che-Ffa-Fa/release/12346188>; Tonino Apicella, “A risa” track 3 on side 1 of *Da Marechiaro a Londra*, 45 rpm album, Phonotype Records, AZQ 40098 (1987). Some post-World War II anthologies of Neapolitan song feature either Cantalamessa’s or Maldacea’s version. See, e.g., *Antologia della canzone napoletana*, 33½ rpm, Columbia, QSZ 12032 (1958), accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/Variou-Antologia-Della-Canzone-Napoletana-6/release/15401430>.

16. Gaisberg, *Music Goes Round*, 41. Worth noting here is the colonial terms in which Gaisberg heard the Indian listeners’ laughter: as a precious resource that was unlocked and released from native bodies by the gramophone.

17. Details of these records can be found on the website of the Gramophone Museum, accessed May 21, 2021, <http://gmuseum.azurewebsites.net/2018/04/09/laughing-song/>. Sunny Mathew, the museum’s owner, did a live Facebook session about the laughing songs in his collection in October 2020, but the video has not been publicly released; he also posted a video of Bhai Chhela’s “Laughing Song” (His Master’s Voice, P 7013, year unknown) on Facebook, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=466227187199824>.

18. Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music*, chap. 2 (“The Gramophone in China”), 53.

19. Gaisberg, *Music Goes Round*, 41: “These songs I brought over from America, having transcribed them from memory and taught them to Bert [Sheppard]. I had acquired them from George W. Johnson, the tragic negro mentioned earlier, who was hanged for throwing his wife out of a window when in a drunken frenzy.” Gaisberg’s notion of “acquiring” here is just a straightforward act of appropriation via transcription, with no indication of any compensation or purchase of rights. Gaisberg (whose accounts are notorious for inaccuracies) also offers false information about Johnson’s death: he was not hanged for murdering his wife but was tried and acquitted in 1899 for the murder of his common-law wife and finally died of illness, in poverty, in 1914, fifteen years after the incident and trial misreported by Gaisberg. Earlier in the book (*Music Goes Round*, 7), Gaisberg mentions another white singer, John York Attlee, recording “The Laughing Song” in the 1890s (with Gaisberg on the piano part), so it is possible that Sheppard was not the first white American singer to whom Gaisberg gave Johnson’s song.

20. Charles “Jolly” Penrose’s first contrafact of “The Laughing Song” was “I Tried to Keep from Laughing,” with the British record label the Winner, in 1912, cat. no. 2155; the

version most commonly known was recorded with Regal Records in 1922 (G-7816) and then again with Columbia Records (cat. no. 4014) in 1926. Details of these versions and of other laughing songs released by Penrose (under multiple names) are available on <https://www.discogs.com/artist/415001-Charles-Penrose>, accessed June 1, 2021.

21. Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music*, chap. 2 (“The Gramophone in China”), 160n1, citing Michael Chanan’s *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1995), 90, and quoting Wole Soyinka, *Aké* (London: Arrow, 1983), 108.

22. Maurice Farkoa’s “The Laughing Song” was released in 1905 by Gramophone Concert Record, cat. no. G.C.3 2261. A picture from colonial Nigeria in the 1920s shows locals huddled around a gramophone playing this record (CO 1069/66/90, National Archives, Kew, UK, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9757102>).

23. “The Okeh Laughing Record,” OKEH, cat. no. 4678, released in 1922 (the performers, though uncredited, are thought to be Felix Silbers on the cornet and Lucie Bernardo and Otto Rathke on vocals), accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/Lucie-Bernardo-Otto-Rathke-The-Okeh-Laughing-Record-The-Gypsy-Baron-Wer-Uns-Getraut-/release/6270616>); “Sh-h-h-h-h-h,” directed by Tex Avery for Walter Lantz Productions, 1955, accessed July 28, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9woQoQX48kw>; “Le fou rire,” Odéon 78.252/BE2682, 1923 (adopts the same premise as “The Okeh Laughing Record”—musical performance interrupted by laughter—with the performance being a tenor’s rendition of the “Toreador” aria from Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*), accessed June 2, 2021, https://youtu.be/FwgfHw9_Zg.

24. The category of the vernacular here is a nod to Michael Denning’s exploration of 1920s anticolonial movements and their relationship to burgeoning gramophone markets in *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015). There is an argument to be made for the early history of laughing songs as fitting this idea of an emergent category of global vernacular, but I am not sure the fundamental point about a solidarity among subaltern populations stands here—I do not believe that the market for laughing songs, whose appearance preceded Denning’s historical subject matter by about twenty years, displays the same interracial solidarity and awareness, though it may have created the conditions for the phenomenon that Denning explores.

25. Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 1 (“Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity”), 22. In his chapter, Smith employs the notions of “frame disintegration” and “flooding out” to discuss the blur between machine and human activated by laughter. These ideas come from Erving Goffmann, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). They have also been used in relation to laughter by Anca Parvulescu, in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), chap. 1 (“The Civilizing of Laughter”), 23–58. In short, laughter is taken as a moment of dissolution of the social frameworks that hold reality in place (and uphold distinctions such as “human” versus “nonhuman”). As I detailed in chap. 3, I find this proposition insufficient to explain how laughter becomes entangled with sound reproduction—and ideas about reproduction more generally—at the turn of the twentieth century.

26. Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 46.

27. This observation is inspired by Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's commentary, in *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020), 55–58, on Guha's "Prose of Counter-insurgency."

28. Gaisberg, *Music Goes Round*, 41.

29. Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, chap. 2 ("The Blue Plague"), 90.

30. Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 91.

31. More precisely, see chaps. 1–3. Another important reference here is Parvulescu's consideration of laughter in the history of social hierarchies in *Laughter*, chap. 1 ("The Civilizing of Laughter"), 23–38.

32. See "The Laughing and the Risible" and "Logos Undone" in chap. 2.

33. Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Macmillan's Magazine*, March 1860, 395–402, accessed July 28, 2021, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/agb23fva>; Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton, 1872).

34. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640), ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), chap. 9 ("Of the Passions of the Mind"), 41. See also chap. 1, especially n. 7.

35. Darwin, *Expression of the Emotions*, chap. 8 ("Joy, High Spirits, Love, Tender Feelings, Devotion"), 206–207.

36. Spencer, "Physiology of Laughter," 398.

37. Spencer, "Physiology of Laughter," 400: "The excess [nervous energy] must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; and in the way already explained, there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter."

38. Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 81–89.

39. Darwin, *Expression of the Emotions*, 205.

40. Spencer, "Physiology of Laughter," 401.

41. Much important work has been done over the past decade to rethink questions of race within both Italian unification history and Italy's colonial expeditions. See, e.g., Róisín Healy and Enrico Dal Lago, eds., *The Shadow of Colonialism on Europe's Modern Past* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). The issues of hygiene and cleansing of the body politic are particularly considered in Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Bodies: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860–1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

42. Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente: In rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria (cause e rimedi)* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1897), chap. 1 ("Meteore e clima, stagioni, mesi, caldi eccessivi"), accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59298/59298-h/59298-h.htm>.

43. Plastino, "Lazzari felici."

44. *La follia*, year 11, no. 34 (August 20–21, 1887), accessed July 29, 2021, https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/La_follia_giornale_serio_ossia_teatro_co/l6KKTNWjrgoC.

45. "I casi," *La follia*, year 11, no. 34 (August 20–21, 1887): p. 2 (unnumbered), accessed July 29, 2021, https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/La_follia_giornale_serio_ossia_teatro_co/l6KKTNWjrgoC.

46. Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, 84.

47. "Salamelic," lyrics by Roberto Bracco, music by Luigi Caracciolo (Milan: Ricordi, 1882). Although I wasn't able to locate the sheet music for this song, the context and lyrics

are given in Raffaele Cossentino, *La canzone napoletana dalle origini ai giorni nostri: Storia e protagonisti* (Naples: Rogiosi, 2015), 140.

48. “Africanella,” lyrics by Roberto Bracco, music by C. Clausetti (Milan: Ricordi, 1894). The context and lyrics of “Africanella” are given in Cossentino, *Canzone napoletana*, 142–143.

49. Among the most significant biopolitical examinations of voice and singing are James Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

50. Maldacea, *Memorie di Maldacea*, 143.

51. Berardo Cantalamessa, “A risata nova: Canzonetta napoletana con accompagnamento d’orchestra,” 78 rpm, Società italiana di fonotipia, A 92072, Milan, 1907, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k10806117.media>. During the performance, Cantalamessa says, “Per non ridere per un nonnulla ho preso il ‘Tot’ perché tutti lo dicono un rimedio per tutti i malanni” (So as not to laugh for no reason, I have taken “Tot,” because everyone says it cures any ailment).

52. In 1909 (a year before the 1910 cholera epidemic hit Naples), a poster advertising Tot showed a giant hand emerging from the clouds to hammer the brand’s name onto a globe, with the following caption: “Sotto il martello di una propaganda geniale e scientifica a base di fatti clinici e di guarigioni ispirate, il ‘tot’, digestivo-antisettico, regolatore dello stomaco, penetra in tutto il mondo arrecando benessere e salute” (Under the hammering of a brilliant and scientific campaign, based on clinical facts and unhopèd-for recoveries, ‘tot,’ antiseptic-digestive, regulator of the stomach, penetrates the whole world, bringing well-being and health) (accessed July 30, 2023, <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en/italian-school/tot-colour-litho/colour-lithograph/asset/2815188>).

53. A great account of the birth of “A risa,” as mentioned above, and of Italian phonography in general may be found in Pesce, *La Sirena nel solco*, chap. 4 (“Alla ricerca di un surrogato”), 17–42.

54. “‘A risa’ è di Berardo Cantalamessa, versi e musica. Ma la musica, a essere sinceri, non è proprio farina del sacco dell’ottimo e compianto artista. Eravamo scritturati, egli ed io, al Margherita [. . .]. Un certo giorno, dopo la prova al Salone, ci fermammo in Galleria in un negozio di quel lato della crociera che dà in via Roma, a destra, là dove ora c’è la pasticceria Di Santo. Vi erano esposti, per la prima volta a Napoli, i fonografi, di recentissima invenzione. [. . .] La maggiore attrattiva era costituita da una canzonetta in inglese, speciale fatica di un artista moro del Nord America. Non ricordo il nome della canzonetta. So solo che essa produsse in Cantalamessa e in me una grandissima impressione, perché di allegria irresistibilmente comunicativa. Quel cantante rideva a suon di musica, e la sua risata era così spontanea e così divertente che si era invitati senz’altro ad imitarlo.” Maldacea, *Memorie di Maldacea*, 141. Chap. 17 (“‘A risa’ di Cantalamessa e le trasformazioni di Fregoli,” 141–149) is devoted to “A risa.”

55. On the history of the Salone Margherita, see Vittorio Paliotti, *Salone Margherita: Una storia napoletana—il primo café chantant d’Italia, dalle follie della belle époque all’avanspettacolo e oltre* (Naples: Altrastampa, 2001).

56. Frank M. Snowden, *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 220–221.

57. Snowden, *Naples*, chap. 5 (“Rebuilding: Medicine and Politics”), 181–232.

6. CANNED LAUGHTER, GIMMICK SOUND

1. Red Skelton, "There's Too Much Laughter in the Can," *Pageant* (a now defunct monthly reader's digest), December 1956, reprinted in *Broadcasting, Telecasting* 51, no. 22 (November 26, 1956): 86 (part of a recurring feature called "Playback: Quotes Worth Repeating").

2. John Philip Sousa, "The Menace of Mechanical Music," *Appleton's Magazine* 8 (1906): 278–284, accessed June 22, 2021, https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/21m-380-music-and-technology-contemporary-history-and-aesthetics-fall-2009/resources/mit21m_380of09_reado2_sousa/.

3. In many ways my critique here of the distaste for canned laughter (and the kind of superiority of hearing and discernment that it implies) resonates with Will Cheng's subtle account of the morality of humor in "Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails," in "Comedy: An Issue," ed. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 528–549. Cheng is mainly talking about humor, though, whereas I am interested in the kind of processing awarded to the recorded sound of laughter.

4. The difficulty in leaving behind morality-based arguments is evident, for instance, in Kenneth Brewer's "Don't Make Me Laugh! Morality, Ethics, and the Laugh Track," *Studies in American Humor* 4, no. 1 (2018): 10–36. Brewer suggests an overcoming of moralistic judgment of laugh tracks but eventually lands on an ethics-based approach revolving around the need for laugh tracks to be declared as such in TV shows. In this call for full disclosure, Brewer continues to draw on laugh tracks' long ties with fears of misinformation and brainwashing.

5. This is, in a way, also the topic of Nina Sun Eidsheim's work on Billie Holiday in *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), whose chap. 4 ("The Inimitable, Imitated Billie Holiday") traces similar ideologies of authenticity at play in listening, though in her case the authenticity concerns vocal imitation of Billie Holiday. Still, Eidsheim's detangling of the history of what listeners think they can and *should* be able to tell by ear speaks to my project here.

6. General information on the Laff Box is nowadays fairly easy to retrieve, thanks to recent coverage in the popular press. A media-studies approach to the history of recorded laughter can be found in Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 1 ("Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity"). In the realm of musicology, a striking essay by David McCarthy treats the history of the Laff Box, the vocal layerings that it allowed, and potential modes of listening that attend to them: "Textured Voices and the Performance of Ethical Life in the Case of the Laff Box (1966)," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 1 (2016): 109–137.

7. Judith Yaross Lee, "American Humor and Matters of Empire: A Proposal and Invitation," *Studies in American Humor* 6, no. 1 (2020): 10.

8. A selected few highlights from the *Guardian's* (mostly negative) coverage of the topic of laugh tracks: Janine Gibson, "Sofa So Good for a Revolution in Sitcom Land," October 2, 1999, which declared the end of laugh-track-based comedies; Darragh McManus, "No Laughing Matter: Silence Is Golden When It Comes to Comedy TV Shows," March 24, 2010; Sam Wollaston, "Can It! Why Studio Laughter Has No Place in Modern Sitcoms," June 29, 2016; Ian Sample, "Good for a Laugh: Canned Laughter Makes Jokes Seem Funnier," July 22, 2019. Some articles have instead tried to dismantle the taboo around canned laughter, particularly since the 2020 coronavirus pandemic made it necessary to reintroduce

postproduced laughter in lieu of live audiences: see Andrew Collins, “Canned Laughter Doesn’t Exist, So Why Complain about It?,” August 13, 2013; more recently, Phil Harrison, “Pull the Other One: Is It Time for Canned Laughter to Return to TV?,” August 15, 2020.

9. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, eds., “Comedy: An Issue,” special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017). This issue brings together a range of fresh perspectives on the cultural politics of laughter. Prerecorded laughter features substantially in Anca Parvulescu’s essay, “Even Laughter? From Laughter in the Magic Theater to the Laughter Assembly Line,” 506–527. Parvulescu is more astute than casual commentators who dismisses canned laughter, but I am struck by the way her essay leans into the negative aspects of canned laughter as a symptom of political and emotional dysphoria under capitalism. My chapter here makes the complementary effort of figuring out how prerecorded laughter came to be covertly enjoyed as a repulsive sound effect as early as the 1950s.

10. There are many other genres of user-generated comedy revolving around misplaced and erased laugh tracks—this being the most obvious one for the argument I am making. But it’s worth noting that for every sitcom with the laugh tracks taken out, there is a channel devoted to placing laugh tracks in a show that didn’t originally feature them. The splicing of laugh tracks into comedic (but not particularly amusing) shows, for instance, is meant to alert the viewer, again, to the ideological function of laugh tracks; other kinds of videos, splicing laugh tracks into dramatic shows and films, aim to create a kind of comical alienation from the genre in question.

11. By *neoliberal* I here mean in particular the modes of activism that correspond to rather than challenge economic neoliberalism. Economic neoliberalism is defined by increasingly privatized infrastructure, deregulated markets driven by the highest bidders, and renunciation of state-driven redistribution of wealth through, for instance, taxes. In neoliberal political discourse, individualism, incommensurable minoritarian identities, and mindful consumer choice are prized and rewarded over collectivity, solidarity and intersectionality, and disruptive systemic change. I take issue here with a politics that consists *only* in one’s individual participation in a public discourse championing and defending minoritarian identities, as well as a politics based on the belief that social justice can be enacted by capital through righteous consumer choice.

12. Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

13. Jess Oppenheimer, “Review-Preview: Every Television Home a Projection Room,” *Variety*, July 29, 1953, 38, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032359048>. My emphasis.

14. The patent competition for the two machines is briefly mentioned in “Who’ll Laugh Last?,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, January 24, 1955, 83, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1285713790>.

15. On this long history, see Małgorzata Szubartowska, “On the Political Uses of Orchestrated Laughter: From the Claque to Canned Laughter,” in *Histories of Laughter and Laughter in History: HistoRisus*, edited by Rafał Borysławski et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 73–84. A striking artistic response to this tradition was Bill Dietz’s *Lécole de la claque*, a series of rehearsals and interventions commissioned for the 2017 edition of the Donaueschinger Musiktage (accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.on-curating.org/book/lecole-de-la-claque.html>). I thank Amy Cimini for pointing out this artwork to me and will turn to some of its implications later in this chapter.

16. This sketch is described in “In Review: The Ernie Kovacs Show,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, December 19, 1955, 14, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014910275>.

17. The episode with the malfunctioning record player and the handyman who nails down the furniture in Hank’s apartment is “The Magic Story,” first broadcast in 1950. Because *The Hank McCune Show* wasn’t syndicated, there is no public digital copy available, and it is impossible to obtain a personal copy, but the episodes that I discuss in this chapter are available for on-site perusal at the Paley Center for Media and the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

18. This gag features in the episode titled “Lester Needs Peace and Quiet” (1950) and is preceded by yet another bit involving recorded and postproduced sound: Hank tries on a stethoscope and has comical encounters with various amplified sounds.

19. Jose Walter Thompson, “Television Reviews: *Father Knows Best*,” *Variety*, September 24, 1958, 28, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032384583>.

20. Ed Velarde, “Reviews: Duffy’s Tavern,” *Billboard* 66, no. 10 (March 6, 1954): 9, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1040159024>.

21. “Laughin’ Can Be a Serious Matter,” *Variety*, October 5, 1955, 35, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014785504>.

22. Ray Bolger, “The Last Laugh Track,” *Variety*, July 28, 1954, 98, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032361162>.

23. Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks*, 35–36.

24. Bob Spielman, “TV-Film: Production Notes,” *Billboard*, February 12, 1955, 16, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1040114828>.

25. “The Serious Side of Laughter,” *Variety*, November 2, 1955, 48, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014784535>.

26. On the Petrillo bans, see Marina Peterson, “Sound Work: Music as Labor and the 1940s Recording Bans of the American Federation of Musicians,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2013): 791–823. Within musicology, Scott DeVaux made an interesting case for the bans being one of the catalysts for the passage from big band jazz to bebop, as musicians were forced to forgo large professional studios when they cut records: see “Bebop and the Recording Industry: The 1942 AFM Recording Ban Reconsidered,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41, no. 1 (1988): 126–165.

27. Dietz, “L’école de la claqué,” accessed October 17, 2022, <https://www.on-curating.org/book/lecole-de-la-claque.html>.

28. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

29. The capitalist use of minor unpleasant feelings—and their connections to race and gender—is the topic of Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

30. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, chap. 1 (“Theory of the Gimmick”), 53.

31. Sianne Ngai, “Theory of the Gimmick,” in “Comedy: An Issue,” edited by Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 466–505.

32. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, chap. 1 (“Theory of the Gimmick”), 58.

33. The sampling of laugh tracks is reported in informal online sources such as “Laugh Track,” Hanna-Barbera Wiki, Fandom, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://hanna-barbera>

.fandom.com/wiki/Laugh_track. A more reputable (if far less detailed) reference is Jared Bahir Browsh, *Hanna-Barbera: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022), 92.

34. “Who’ll Laugh Last?,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*.

35. The chief source for this information is Ron Simon, senior curator at the Paley Center for Media in New York. Simon is cited in the obituary for Charles Douglass by Susan King and Bob Baker, “Charles Douglass, 93: Inventor Brought Canned Laughs to TV,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2003, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-apr-25-me-douglass25-story.html>, as well as Willa Paskin, “The Man Who Perfected the Laugh Track,” *Slate*, April 30, 2018, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/04/charlie-douglass-and-his-laff-box-invented-the-laugh-track-as-we-know-it.html>, and Tucker Reed, “Who Is on a Laugh Track?,” *Fortune*, June 25, 2001, 44.

36. “The Audience Response Duplicator, or Laugh Box, Laffbox, Recorded Studio Laughter [*sic*],” accessed June 4, 2021, https://youtu.be/tpYoMuy_1qI; “The Laff Box, Laugh Box, Audience Reaction Reproducer, Laugh Track, Charlie Douglass, Canned, Fake... [*sic*],” accessed June 4, 2021, <https://youtu.be/yCUCBkVG-Dw>.

37. The issue is whether there was a separate command through which laughter could be amplified or whether one needed to play multiple laughs on top of one another to create a higher volume. The two descriptions I have found make it sound as if both amplification and stacking of laughs were likely options. See Peter Day, “No Laughing (by Machine),” *Picturegoer*, February 5, 1955, 17, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1705010529>: “It has six levers (apparently there are only six kinds of laughs) and a volume control”; “Who’ll Laugh Last?,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*: “Mr. Douglas’ Laugh Organ contains six cylindrical sound tracks, recorded during regular programs and graduated from a titter to a guffaw, which can be amplified. By pressing a lever or combination of levers, the program engineer can set any volume of laughter.”

38. “Serious Side of Laughter,” *Variety*, details Edelman’s work, particularly the way he used canned laughter to “correct” and otherwise edit live laughter in postproduction, a process that, the article argues, requires real artistry.

39. The Laff Box’s keyboard interface has many resonances with Roger Moseley’s work on keyboards and play, *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). Indeed, if I were to translate this work into Moseley’s terminology, we couldn’t find a better example of what he calls a “digital analogy” (a blend of digital and analog technologies). The Laff Box consisted of a keyboard (digital, based on on-off, 0-1 signaling) that activated tape, creating continuous, graduated, analog sound. I am interested here, though, in its faulty switch between analog and digital. As I see it, the Laff Box was a digital analog not fluidly operating between two modes of aural processing but stuck in between. The digital technology for controlling canned laughter—the keyboard of the Laff Box—was irritatingly contaminated by the continuity of the analog tape.

40. “Appraisal: 1953 Charlie Douglass ‘Laff Box,’” clip from season 15, episode 5 of PBS’s *Antiques Roadshow*, aired January 30, 2011, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/video/antiques-roadshow-appraisal-1953-charlie-douglass-laff-box/>); see n. 31 above for the YouTube videos of the Laff Box in action.

41. McCarthy, “Textured Voices.”

42. Parvulescu, “Even Laughter?” Emphasis in the original.

43. This kind of doubleness of good and bad laugh, healthy and unhealthy laughter has been part of the Western discourse of laughter since Hippocrates and has taken on different connotations throughout history, some of which we saw in Laurent Joubert's discussion of laughter (chap. 3, especially n. 44).

44. See "Toward Surrogation" in chap. 3.

45. Crucial here is Simon Schaffer's work on theories of brainwashing and mind control in the American midcentury, which exposes some of the neuroses and racialized understandings of self-determination at the heart of postwar US democracy. Though Schaffer hasn't yet published on the topic, he gave several lectures in 2015 as part of the Conspiracy and Democracy project at Cambridge University's Center for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. The one I am drawing on here is "Imitation Games: Conspiratorial Sciences and Intelligent Machines" (October 27, 2015), accessed June 4, 2021, <https://youtu.be/I1yr-bNprak>.

46. "Stanton Tabus Canned Laughter," *Variety*, October 21, 1959, 29, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014817243>. My emphasis.

47. I take the reference to *The Manchurian Candidate* from Simon Schaffer's work on mind control and artificial intelligence in the 1950s; he delved into the film in "The Manchurian Automaton," a lecture delivered at the conference "Brainwash: History, Cinema and the Psy Professions," Birkbeck Cinema, University of London, July 3–4, 2015, accessed June 4, 2021, <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/blog/the-manchurian-automaton/>. Interestingly, *The Manchurian Candidate* also revolves around a gimmick, a flashy trick that abbreviates the labor of brainwashing: the queen of diamonds card, which, when pulled up during a game of solitaire, instantly delivers the mind of a present preconditioned soldier into the control of his communist handler.

48. "The Public: Calm in Eye of the Storm," *Broadcasting*, November 2, 1959, 43, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014447426>.

49. "The Last Laugh," *Broadcasting*, December 7, 1959, 48, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014445285>.

50. "Stanton's Survey Cites U.S. Concern over TV Scandal," *Variety*, December 9, 1959, 37, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032407419>.

51. "CBS Edict: 'Certain Portions of This Recorded Program Were Pre-recorded,'" *Variety*, December 16, 1959, 24, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032384695>.

52. "NBC's New Directives: Nos. 4 & 5; Poses 'Monitor' Open-End Problem," *Variety*, January 27, 1960, 31, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1032394105>.

53. "CBS-TV Has a Change of Heart on Its Canned Laughter Edict," *Variety*, March 23, 1960, 23, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1014827696>.

CONCLUSION

1. Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

2. Andrea F. Bohlman and Peter McMurray, "Tape: Or, Rewinding the Phonographic Regime," *Twentieth-Century Music* 14, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

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Risible explores the forgotten history of laughter, from ancient Greece to the sitcom stages of Hollywood. Delia Casadei approaches laughter not as a phenomenon that can be accounted for by studies of humor and theories of comedy but rather as a technique of the human body, knowable by its repetitive, clipped, and proliferating sound and its enduring links to the capacity for language and reproduction. This buried genealogy of laughter re-emerges with explosive force thanks to the binding of laughter to sound reproduction technology in the late nineteenth century. Analyzing case studies ranging from the early global market for phonographic laughing songs to the McCarthy-era rise of prerecorded laugh tracks, Casadei convincingly demonstrates how laughter was central to the twentieth century's development of the very category of sound as not-quite-human, unintelligible, reproductive, reproducible, and contagious.

"A virtuoso meditation on laughter, music, and sound reproduction, moving from transfixing insights to a bold vision of laughter as a sonorous force that troubles our conceptions of humanity and rationality. How sounds acquire meaning, how they make sense or nonsense or lie somewhere between the two: Delia Casadei's *Risible* considers these fundamental issues in startling and thought-provoking ways."
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"A thrillingly unclassifiable and profound work of cultural theory. Casadei reveals how laughter holds relevance for every dimension of life and its biopolitical regulation via gender, race, labor, and reproduction. She also reminds us that there is much genealogical work yet to be done on mediatized, electrified soundworlds of the twentieth century and offers a powerful, welcoming push in new directions."
—AMY CIMINI, author of *Wild Sound: Maryanne Amacher and the Tenses of Audible Life*

Delia Casadei is a scholar, writer, and translator based in Italy and the UK.

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