

Laughter without Humor: Affective Passages through Post-War Culture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

There is a scene in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in which Offred, eponymous handmaid to the totalitarian theocracy that now governs America, is overwhelmed by the sudden need to laugh. Spasms wrack her body. She crams her hands into her mouth, she fears she will vomit, she imagines she is giving birth. Finally, well aware that her convulsions would register as subversion to a regime that polices bodies and supervises affects, Offred crawls into a cupboard in an effort to "compose herself." *Laughter without Humor* arose from this passage, from the inexplicable laughter that overwhelms Offred's disciplined body and demolishes her carefully composed self. The suspicion that laughter challenges the self-contained "I" has always been buried in our idioms: the subject "dissolves" in laughter, the individual proliferates suddenly into a "barrel" or "bundle" of laughs, ontological boundaries are breached as we "roar" or "bark" with laughter. In the twentieth-century, laughter appears across a wide variety of artistic forms as a vigorous affective force capable of convulsing being and exploding calcified structures of thought. This project examines the interrelationship between fictional depictions of humorless laughter and the dissolution and reconfiguration of the subject in poststructuralist theory.

The field of humor studies, which counts Aristotle, Kant, and Freud among its contributors, avoids laughter's irrational properties and instead offers scientific

reasons—physiological, evolutionary, and psychological—as to why we laugh. In contrast, *Laughter without Humor* seeks to understand laughter on its own terms by posing an alternate question: what does laughter *do*? In four chapters, I consider four discrete strains of humorless laughter: the dankly corporeal flow of a specifically female “dangerous laughter” (Chapter 1), the blustering wave of “ecstatic laughter” associated with mystic experience (Chapter 2), an infectious “grotesque laughter” that tosses the individual back and forth between ontological categories with uncanny fervor (Chapter 3), and the shattering shriek of “atomic laughter” that indexes the experience of total nuclear annihilation (Chapter 4). In particular I focus on literary work from William James, André Breton, T.S. Eliot, Nathanael West, Henri Michaux, Kurt Vonnegut, Stanley Kubrick, Margaret Atwood, and Steven Millhauser; and on philosophical texts by Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, Édouard Glissant, Brian Massumi, and Eugenie Brinkema. I ultimately argue that the messy burst of laughter disturbs the intelligibility of both self and text. In so doing, it clears a space to imagine new, provisional models of personhood that are based on affective entanglement rather than rational self-containment.

to my mother and father

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Preface

I. A LIFE

In the final months of his life, Gilles Deleuze wrote “Immanence: A Life” (1995), a short essay that would be his last. In it, he articulates his philosophical ethics by way of a literary example, for, he tells us, “no one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens” (Deleuze 2001, 28). Deleuze recounts a passage from *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), in which a “rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying” (Deleuze 2001, 28). Hovering on the brink of death, the man’s roguish particularities melt away and he becomes, just for a moment, something else: no longer *the* life but *a* life. For Freud, such ontological trembling between subject and object would mean we had entered the terrifying terrain of the uncanny. However, in Dickens’ version, the crowds do not shrink back in estranged fear from this vibrant nexus of life-death. Instead, they rush forward, propelled by a sudden surge of collective empathy. Deleuze describes the scene:

Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of an individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life [...] with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. (Deleuze 2001, 29)

Deleuze, via Dickens, demarcates the difference between “the life of an individual,” which is marked by one’s actualized actions and particular personality traits, and “a life,” which is the non-individuated texture of existence that becomes detectable only in the

brief interludes when the garrulous “I” is thrown into abeyance. The passage is a parable: confronted with the raw presence of *a* life the crowd swells forward, possessed by empathy, desirous of communication, bound by love.

II. A LAUGH

The Dickens-Deleuze anecdote—its new conception of life and attendant impersonal ethics—beats at the center of this work. For one does not need to occupy the “strange interval before death” in order to disclose the uncertain dimensions of a life; other routes are possible (Rajchman 2001, 8). Deleuze confirms that “we shouldn’t enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. *A* life is everywhere” (Deleuze 2001, 29). The indeterminate dimensions of *a* life are hard to see because we have learned to train our gaze instead on the individual and its associated structures of consciousness, personality, and subjectivity. This is why, although it is “everywhere,” Deleuze chooses to exemplify *a* life in its most dramatic, vivid form—the moment unto death.

This project is rooted in my conviction that the convulsive event of laughter is one such non-fatal index of *a* life. Throughout the course of four chapters, I argue that laughter does not belong to the individual, but is instead an impersonal force that passes through and momentarily dislocates a person from her subjectivity. In this moment of dislocation, laughter forges an aperture in which an alternative mode of existence,

“impersonal yet singular,” may come rushing in. The radical political and philosophical possibilities of laughter have been woefully under-examined, I suggest, because the field of humor studies, which counts Aristotle, Kant, and Freud among its contributors, has routinely avoided its irrational properties and instead offered scientific reasons—physiological, evolutionary, and psychological—as to why we laugh. In Chapter 1, I show how this scholarly preference for humor (as opposed to laughter) evidences a commitment to the emotionally legible, self-contained individual who can answer the question, calmly posed: *now tell me, why did you laugh?*

To best see and attend to laughter’s convulsive properties, I focus on literary and cinematic examples of laughter that are wholly without humor. Such laughter may adopt any number of forms but is always recognizable on the page or screen by its oddly jarring character: it may arrive as a sinewy spasm of spit and sound that contorts the body into grotesque shapes, a blustering gale that crashes through and destroys the inner coherence of the individual, or a sonic contagion that pours out of one mouth to infect another.

III. IN DEFENSE OF HORROR

While the laughs considered here are vehemently singular, they do share an identifiable feature: all stand in close proximity to horror. The dankly corporeal flow of the specifically female “dangerous laughter” that is under investigation in Chapter 1

recalls the obliquely gendered, abject bodies of body horror. The “ecstatic laughter” of Chapter 2 defenestrates the subject into a vast, cosmic abyss that echoes the radical alterities found in supernatural horror. Chapter 3 examines an infectious “grotesque laughter” which tosses the individual back and forth between the ontological categories of human, animal, and machine with an uncanny fervor, and the shattering shriek of “atomic laughter” described in Chapter 4 indexes the inexpressible horror of imagining total planetary death; a world without us.

Bolstered by the critical work of Julia Kristeva and Eugene Thacker, I argue throughout that the powerful sensations associated with horror—disgust, unease, dread, or terror—are the affective effects of having the Cartesian rug yanked from beneath our feet. In this vertiginous moment of sudden groundlessness we are given a choice: we can scabble for the old threads that previously bound us, or we can tarry for a while amidst the disquietude of uncertainty, on the lookout for the arrival of something other, something new.

Deleuze’s parable, of course, rewards the loiterer. The sudden revocation of the rogue’s personal subjectivity is uncanny, yes. But it is also the condition upon which the affirmative dimensions of *a* life may come into visibility. Confronted with an unintelligible burst of laughter, we too must jostle past our own upsurges of horror in

order to glimpse the tentative forms of community and personhood that become possible in its wake.

IV. IN DEFENSE OF LITERATURE

My understanding of laughter as an impersonal experience charged with political and philosophical possibilities marks my project's affinity with recent work in affect theory which, following Deleuze, conceives of affects as subjectless expressions of "pure potentiality" (Deleuze 2003b, 109).

As I detach the visceral spasm of laughter from the comprehensible structures of humor, so affect theory begins with the jimmying open of a critical gap between personal emotion (the cognitively recognizable, "named" feeling that proves the internal emotional intelligibility of the individual) and impersonal affect (the corporeally messy, "nameless" feeling that viscerally overwhelms and discombobulates the same). Affect theory is routinely accused of an ironically sentimental imprecision that answers concrete political questions by gesturing vaguely off-stage toward some virtual future. "I guess "affect" is the word I use for "hope,"" Brian Massumi tells one interviewer (Massumi 2002b). To construe of laughter as a condition of possibility, a "margin of maneuverability," is to invite similar accusations of crude optimism: *that is all very well, but we are forced to ask, what possibilities, what maneuvers?* (Massumi 2002).

My project bypasses such abstractions by turning to imaginative texts— literature, philosophy, and film—as experimental sites where the potentialities of laughter are fleshed out in thickly descriptive forms. This methodology was largely inspired by Eugenie Brinkema’s recent book, *The Form of the Affects* (2014), which insists on close-reading as a means of attending to the formal dimensions of affect. “I care about the little things,” Brinkema says, “like the shape of the curve of something that may or may not be a tear” (Dizikes 2014). As Deleuze discovered in Dickens one literary illustration of a life’s communal possibilities, so I set out to examine the specific ways in which the eruptive burst of laughter enters, unsettles, and reconfigures the aesthetic and narrative form of a text.

V. READING INTERRUPTION

Laughter interrupts. Walter Benjamin, the philosopher of fragments, recognized the value of laughter as an engine of interruptive illumination. In a scribbled note that later found its home as a fragment of the gargantuan assemblage *Das Passagenwerk*, he wrote, “Laughter is shattered articulation” (Benjamin 2002, 325). This aphorism should be coupled with another. In a 1934 speech, Benjamin interrupted himself to offer an aside, “by the way,” he tells his audience, “there is no better starting point for thought than laughter” (Benjamin 2003, 101). Taken together, these fragments forge a dialectical image of laughter as both a destructive, shattering agent and a fecund point of

departure. Like Deleuze's *a life*, Benjaminian laughter is an uncanny threshold between death (of articulation) and birth (of thought).

Strewn across his oeuvre, Benjamin's epigrammatic notes mimic laughter's interruptive, fragmentary properties. To become visible, the reader must become both archaeologist and architect, first extracting and then assembling Benjamin's fragments into a single "lightening flash" of laughter. This project as a whole has required a similar rethinking of critical method. To examine laughter without disfiguring it one has to collect, combine, and inhabit texts in new ways; to craft what Judith Jack Halberstam has in a different context called "scavenger methodologies" (Halberstam 2012, 266). The scavenger raids any and every aesthetic form, critical method, and academic discipline to create a singular, inclusive archive that extends across great distances. For Halberstam, such readerly dexterity rescues queer strategies of being and belonging from being liquidated under the lumbering weight of traditional conceptual frames. Spanning continents and disciplines, this project performs a similar salvage mission. In four chapters, I exhume and examine literary and cinematic examples of impersonal, anti-cognitive laughter which have previously been marked as "abnormal" or "pathological" by the twin disciplinary structures of humor studies and medical dictionaries.

In assembling these irrational bursts, disjunctive shrieks, and spasmodic barks of twentieth-century laughter into a single archive, I have sought to temper the grasping ferocity of Halberstam's scavenger figure with Édouard Glissant's poetics of errant thought. In what is still one of my favorite sentences in criticism, Glissant describes the errant as he who "strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides" (Glissant 2010, 20). At the heart of Glissant's work is an ethics of unintelligibility that seeks to develop methods of critical engagement that do not enclose or abbreviate difference. *Laughter without Humor* shares these ambitions. Rather than delineating a global theory of laughter, each chapter stages a discrete encounter with a singular strain of humorless laughter and examines its specificities as it unfolds across the open spaces of literature, philosophy, and film.

This errant approach to laughter produces its own trajectories, however, the shape of my archive was not inevitable. This document is not a closed one; a host of other examples not explicitly materialized here informed my thinking about the problem and possibilities of laughter. There is the Tanganyika laughter epidemic of 1962, which disabled the social infrastructure of an African tribe for six months, the unprecedented online popularity of an interminably looped video of Natalie Portman laughing at the 2011 Golden Globe Awards, and the anonymous laughing voices caught forever on the

now-decaying spools of CBS's infamous "laff track." There laughs and many others remain untapped; they hang in the wings of this project as pure potentialities, tangible reminders that laughter always stands in excess of the limits of meaning, narrative, and knowledge that organize our scholarly work.

VI. TRAJECTORIES

In what follows, I have selected writers whose work exhibits a prolonged philosophic or poetic engagement with laughter. This prerequisite has brought to the fore two discrete intellectual genealogies: French poststructuralist theory and American black humor. Viewed along the vector of laughter, these two lineages plait together, as one reveals itself to be an expression of the other.

Chapter 1 provides a model for encountering laughter without humor in philosophy and literature. I chronicle the scattered emergence of a "laughter of unreason" in the philosophical works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault. I show how this model of laughter was taken up for feminist purposes by Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, before turning to three literary portraiture of a specifically female laughter to examine how the philosophical conceptualization of "laughter without reason" is imaginatively reworked into the literary conceit of "dangerous laughter." Close-readings of pieces by T.S. Eliot

("Hysteria"), Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), and Steven Millhauser ("Dangerous Laughter") organizes the chapter's latter segment.

Chapter 2 interrupts the expansive genealogical sweep of the previous chapter to concentrate its gaze on the "ecstatic laughter" of Georges Bataille. I examine a specific moment in intellectual history—the public vitriol between André Breton and Bataille that marked the devastating disunion of the Surrealist movement in Paris, 1929—as a means of dramatizing the complicated philosophical divergence of laughter from humor. In the wake of the split, Breton repurposed Hegelian idealism and Freudianism to coin the term "humour noir," which he posited as the unsmiling triumph of the ego against the harsh buffetings of external reality. Meanwhile, Bataille built his materialist philosophy on the messy limit-experience of laughter. Bataillean laughter is an affective torrent that overwhelms the individual and in so doing affords her temporary access to a plane of ecstatic deindividuation. Bringing Bataille into contact with the nitrous oxide philosophy of William James and the psychedelic art of Belgian poet and Surrealist Henri Michaux, I trace the inchoate dimensions of ecstatic laughter to ask whether it can articulate its own mode of politics without relying on the tools of humour noir (ego, intellect, language) for representation.

The latter half of the dissertation focuses on the jarring laughs that populate American black humor. Chapter 3 provides a close-reading of Nathanael West's final

novel, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), which in its tone and aesthetic serves as a useful hinge between Surrealist humour noir and American black humor. Bringing the theoretical work of Theodor Adorno, Henri Bergson, and Mikhail Bakhtin in conversation with recent criticism by Tyrus Miller and Justus Nieland, I identify two strains of laughter in West's novel. The first is "self-reflexive" laughter, a rigid "ha-ha" that fixes the laughing person as a mono-affective general type and in so doing camouflages him among the crowds of caricatures that inhabit West's Hollywood. The second is what I term "grotesque" laughter—an affective overflow that dismantles subjectivity into a series of ontologically unstable performances. I argue that while this precarity has positive dimensions, Westian laughter ultimately fails to generate new models of subjectivity or sociality, registering instead as a terrifying dispossession of sense and self.

Chapter 4, "Shattered Thought, Shattered Being," takes up the previous two chapters' closing questions about whether the non-signifying burst of laughter can be translated into a workable political and philosophical practice. I coin the term "atomic laughter" to refer to a shattering strain of laughter that emerged in American black humor texts in the wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Taking three darkly comic works in which the nuclear bomb plays an explicit role—Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)—I argue that the "explosion" of atomic laughter obliterates humanist discourse to

create a newly flattened philosophical terrain no longer riveted by the strictures of Enlightenment thought. The chapter concludes with a meditation on laughter as an affective embodiment of the planetary thought of Kostas Axelos and the nomadic poetics of Édouard Glissant.

Chapter One. Dangerous Laughter in American Literature

“There is never a single reading—just as there is never a single laugh in laughter.”
Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*.

“The revolutionary practice of the text [i.e. of literary and poetic texts] is a kind of laughter whose explosions are those of language.”
Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

“life constantly escapes; it steals away.”
Fred Moten, *B Jenkins*.

In 1900, a series of three short essays by the philosopher Henri Bergson were published in the *Revue de Paris*. In the same year, Felix Alcan Press published these essays as a slim volume titled *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. In the book’s preface, Bergson positions himself alongside “the greatest thinkers, from Aristotle downwards” who have attempted to pinion and render knowable the elusive cry of laughter. “What does laughter mean?” he asks his readers, before admitting the impossibility of the project: laughter, he explains, has a fugitive quality, an idiosyncratic “knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation” (Bergson 2012, 1). Bergson goes on to issue a caveat that reads like a promise. In the work that follows, he “shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition,” but instead “regard it, above all, as a

living thing” that possesses “a logic of its own” (Bergson 2012, 1). The gauntlet thrown, the reader prepares herself for a speculative philosophical encounter with the alien logic of laughter.

But this foray into unintelligibility never comes to pass. *Laughter*, as it turns out, is not concerned with laughter but with the laughable. Despite his title and prefatory remarks, the bulk of Bergson’s essay is dedicated to the careful curation and dissection of comic objects, actions, and situations—the pratfall, the hunchback, the jack-in-the-box, and the stutterer, among others—in search of a common principle that answers not the original inquiry into what laughter means but an alternate question that will come to organize the still nascent field of humor studies, why do we laugh? The seamlessness of Bergson’s substitution of the spasm of laughter for the neat taxonomy of the laughable masks a rift in logic. For, as Suzanne Langer writes in *Feeling and Form* (1953), “what is laughable does not explain the nature of laughter, any more than what is rational explains the nature of reason” (Langer 1953, 340). The symmetry of Langer’s phrase, her coupling of the laughable with rationality, gestures toward a more basic substitution on Bergson’s part. Laughter contains the promise of an alternate logic, a system of thought that operates outside or beyond rational tenets. In contrast, the laughable lends itself to

traditional modes of knowledge such as the taxonomy and the inventory.¹ These forms offer a different promise: to root out a common denominator, a general principle or “basal element” from a discrete collection of data (Bergson 2012, 1).²

Out of his own exhaustive inventory of the laughable, Bergson derives a common theory of humor, which, he argues, is born out of “a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (Bergson 2012, 4). Laughter functions as a corrective to this particular form of social inelasticity. Bergson describes it as “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men” (Bergson 2012, 31). However, Bergson trades one form of rigidity for another. Keywords like “SOCIAL,” “INDIVIDUAL” and “CONSCIOUSNESS” recur, capitalized,

¹ Consider, for example, Freud’s careful inventory of “joke techniques” in *The Joke and Its Relation To The Unconscious* (1905):

- I. Condensation
 - a) with the formation of composite words,
 - b) with modification.
- II. Use of the same material:
 - c) as a whole and in parts,
 - d) rearrangement,
 - e) slight modification,
 - f) the same words full and empty.
- III. Double Meaning:
 - g) as a name and as a thing,
 - h) metaphorical and literal,
 - i) true double meaning (play on words),
 - j) *double entendre*,
 - k) double meaning with allusion. (Freud 2003, 31)

² In their work on science and humor, Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot construct a mathematical formula to explain the laughable: “Humor = Salience (State + Trait) x Incongruity + Resolution.” (Chapman et al. 1996, xiv)

throughout the essay as Bergson actively recruits laughter as the stern guardian of a particular model of the human being as self-contained, socially productive, and affectively consistent. Bergson strategically omits other forms of laughter—the disjunctive spasms or contagious wails that may disrupt the social, dissolve the individual, or suspend consciousness—so he may figure laughter as a jolly policeman dedicated to corroborating rather than corroding the individual.³ “We have,” says Bergson, “regarded laughter as first and foremost a means of correction” (Bergson 2012, 69).

Bergson’s treatment of laughter and resultant theory of humor served as both herald and model for the emergence of humor studies as a discipline in the twentieth century. Bergson himself courts this codification when, in the opening pages of *Laughter*, he describes his observations as having “less bearing on the actually comic than on the field within which it must be sought” (Bergson 2012, 1). Still inchoate at the time of Bergson’s writing, this field would be carefully constructed in the ensuing years by a series of scholars who assembled the various philosophical scraps and short physiological essays written on laughter and humor (“from Aristotle downwards”) into an easily traversable site of knowledge. Three theories of humor would come to

³ The phrase “jolly policeman” is borrowed from an essay written by C.W. Wallis titled “Why Do We Laugh?” (1922) which explicitly invokes and extends Bergson’s disciplinarian metaphor, “If scorn is the lash, laughter is the jolly policeman who keeps the social traffic going after the approved manner, whose power inheres not in itself, but lies in the tribal standard which it bodies forth” (Wallis 1922, 344).

dominate, and so organize and legitimize, the field—the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. As with Bergson’s theory, each strand serves to reinforce a model of subjectivity based in rational self-containment. Superiority—I laugh because you have failed, and I am not you. Incongruity-Resolution—my laughter is the cry of victory at detecting and resolving an incongruity that threatened my Weltanschauung. Relief—I laugh because in a moment of danger I consolidated myself; I remain untouched and unharmed.⁴

Following Bergson, scholars of humor studies took to politely admitting the intellectual impasse of laughter before redirecting our attention elsewhere. C.W. Kimmens’ *The Springs of Laughter* (1928) provides one of the first examples of this critical maneuver. Mimicking Bergson, Kimmens begins with a rueful confession of the “hopeless task [...] to secure anything approaching a common principle” of laughter, before launching into three chapter-length summaries of each dominant theory of

⁴ The superiority theory is derived from a remark made by Thomas Hobbes in his *Human Nature* (1650) in which he describes laughter as the “sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others” (Morreall 1987, 20). The incongruity-resolution theory originated in a few sentences from *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), in which Immanuel Kant describes laughter as “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Morreall 1987, 47). Developed by Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and others, the incongruity-resolution theory argues that humor arises out of uncertainty (finding mechanical rigidity when one was expecting living pliability, for example) and that laughter is a victorious cry that accompanies the resolution of this apparent flaw in rationality. Wallis, in “Why Do We Laugh?” puts it this way: “no one understands a joke by laughing at it; he laughs at it because he understands it.” (Wallis 1922, 343). The relief theory is in many ways a physiological and psychological counterpart to the incongruity-resolution theory. First articulated by Herbert Spencer and taken up later by Freud, it states that laughter arises in the overcoming of a moment of fear or aggravation, it is a therapeutic safety valve, relieving accumulated tensions.

humor (Kimmens 1928, 1). By the latter half of the twentieth-century this model had become standard fare. A slew of disciplinary handbooks on humor studies appear in the 1970s and 1980s, each implementing its own version of Bergson's prefatory sleight of hand that rendered laughter synonymous with the laughable and so evacuated from discussion any forms of laughter that do not abide by the rational rules of humor.⁵ The last and most complete of such handbooks, entitled *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987), culminates with an essay by Roger Scruton misleadingly titled "Laughter," which begins with a disclaimer that explicitly disavows the philosophical value of laughter in itself. "It is not laughter," asserts Scruton, "but laughter at or about something that interests the philosopher" (Scruton 1987, 157). In keeping with the political agenda of humor studies, Scruton casts laughter aside to concentrate on the aesthetic category of "amusement," which he identifies as "a mode of reflective attention" that proves our status as "rational beings" (Scruton 1987, 170-171).

⁵ "The idea of a *field* of humor research coalesces around the humor conferences started in Wales in 1976 by Anthony Chapman and Hugh Foot [...] The first conference was followed by others, in 1979 (Los Angeles), 1982 (Washington, D.C.), 1984 (Tel Aviv), and 1985 (Cork, Ireland). Also, in 1982, Don and Alleen Nilsen started the World Humor and Irony Membership (WHIM) which held annual meetings at the University of Arizona [and] provided the first periodical humor research publication. In 1987, the International Society of Humor Studies (ISHS) was created. [...] A French publication, *Humoresques*, also was started in 1988 and is still active. [...] The 1980s saw the publication of the first disciplinary syntheses: John Morreall's 1983 *Taking Laughter Seriously*; Avner Ziv's 1984 *Personality and Sense of Humor*; Mahadev Apte's 1985 *Humor and Laughter*." (Attardo 2014, xxxi).

In The Shadow of the Asylum

At the same time that humor studies was working to expel the irrational, unaccountable qualities of laughter from its ranks, a model of “pathological laughter” emerged in medical journals. In 1894, the French physician E.W. Brissaud published an article titled “Spasmodic laughing and crying” in which he discussed convulsive laughter as a physiological symptom of cerebral palsy. Less than a decade later another Frenchman, Charles Féré, published a diagnosis of *fou rire prodromique*, a rare phenomenon in which a brainstem stroke is preceded by a sudden burst of laughter (Wali 1993, 239). Tasked with naming this unique strain of laughter, Féré ignored its association with neurological apoplexy and borrowed instead from the language of mental illness to dub the involuntary spasm *fou rire* or “crazy laughter.” Retranslated into the more politically palatable “pathological laughter,” Féré’s *fou rire* has been imported into hundreds of other medical studies as a catch-all symptom for a wide range of nervous and mental diseases, from pseudobulbar palsy to psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia and hysteria, and is today recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a “disorder of affect” (Wortzel et al. 2008).

The gelastic seizure that accompanies *fou rire prodromique* is described as “a paroxysmal, uncontrollable fit of laughter, lasting for minutes to an hour, during which there is no full preservation of consciousness and, critically, no corresponding sense of

mirth" (Moore and Puri 2014, 173). This rare form of apoplectic laughter became the model for a more sweeping general definition of pathological laughter. In a review of the literature, Donald Black offers the most complete medical definition of the subject. "Pathological laughter" Black summarizes, "occurs when laughter is not proportionate to the emotional stimulus and so is inappropriate, unrestrained, or uncontrollable (forced); alternatively it may exist when laughter is dissociated from any recognizable stimulus" (Black 1982, 67).

This diagnostic description of pathological laughter perfectly inverts and so compliments Bergson's normative model of laughter. Bergsonian laughter is dutifully deployed to correct a humorous "absentmindedness" in the name of the social, it is that "happy policeman" who "performs with mathematical regulatory [its function] of bringing back to complete self-consciousness a certain self-admiration which is almost automatic, and thus obtaining the greatest possible sociality of its characters" (Bergson 2012, 60). In contrast, pathological laughter is detached from a "sense" of mirth or, in Black's freighted language, is "disassociated" from a humorous stimulus. Even worse, it signals a temporary abeyance of consciousness, a moment of laughing suspension that calls into question the very category of the subject. The punishment for this momentary circumvention of subjectivity is a diagnosis that maps the tenor of the laugh onto the psyche of the laugher. It is the *laugher* who is "inappropriate, unrestrained, and

uncontrollable”; it is the laugher who is dissociative and in need of treatment. In this way, pathological laughter, literally *laughing without humor*, is recoded as a sign of mental dysfunction or social deviance that justified increased institutional surveillance, and in other more extreme cases, incarceration.

Thusly bound by their shared perception of what a human being should look, act, and sound like, humor studies and the clinic concatenated into a single disciplinary apparatus that worked to control and contain the anti-cognitive properties of laughter. Humor studies emphasized the connection between an intelligent “sense” of humor and the well-balanced, socially obedient individual. Meanwhile, the medical profession hygienically siphoned off and segregated spluttering forms of uncontrollable laughter in the medical mold of pathological laughter. The emergence of a corresponding model of “normal laughter” in medical dictionaries signaled the completion of the disciplinary normalization of laughter. Black offers a broad, vague definition of “meaningful, that is, normal laughter” as “a unique, ubiquitous human behavior that results from a variety of emotional states” (Black 1982, 67). Elsewhere, less equivocal codifications of normal laughter were published that explicitly functioned to interpellate a healthily “integrated” subject. Typical in this regard is a 1999 article titled “Pathologic Laughter,” which constructs a model of normal laughter that consecrates the bond between laughter and humor whilst implicitly valuing an emotionally rational subject. Normal

laughter, the authors suggest, “is associated with an emotional feeling of mirth” and “is an integral part of [an individual’s] personality” (Berkovic and Andermann 1999, 360).

Passionate Philosophy or, Reading Otherwise

It is not necessary to jailbreak laughter from these confined institutional spaces. For there exists another story, a fugitive narrative that runs parallel to the careful classifications imposed by humor studies and ratified in medical dictionaries. This story is harder to read precisely because it eludes the confines of the disciplinary handbook, preferring instead to scatter itself as so many fragments across so many texts. It too finds its origins in Bergson’s book, or more precisely, in one man’s experience reading it. In 1920, the twenty-three year old medievalist Georges Bataille skim-read *Laughter* in the British Library before meeting the author for the first time. Provoked, perhaps, by Bergson’s prefatory bait and switch, Bataille surmised that “*Laughter*, like the philosopher himself, was a disappointment” (Surya 2002, 36). Bataille accused Bergson and other “philosophical theorists of laughter” of collapsing the distinction between laughter and humor. “It is one thing to know how to make someone laugh,” writes Bataille, “and something else to understand laughter” (Bataille 2001, 134).

This encounter in the British Library activated Bataille’s own philosophy, which was founded on his intellectual attraction to that “something else,”

This little book impassioned me for reasons other than the contents it develops. What impassioned me at the time was the possibility of reflecting on laughter, the possibility of making laughter the object of a reflection. (Bataille 2001, 138-139)

While the investigation of humor lends itself to stable systems, tight taxonomies, and general formulae, the effusive experience of laughter serves as key to an alternate epistemological mode which Bataille would later call the “unfinished system of nonknowledge” (Bataille 2001, 136). Bataille describes non-knowledge as the unassimilable excess of thought that cannot be accommodated or accounted for by our existing systems of knowledge. We recognize non-knowledge through our own disquiet; it is “that which results from every proposition when we are looking to go to the fundamental depths of its content, and which makes us uneasy” (Bataille 2001, 112). For Bataille, philosophy’s “failure” to adequately define or explain laughter is proof that it resides in the domain of non-knowledge; it is, he says, an “insoluble problem” (Bataille 2001, 134-5). To laugh, then, is to corporeally experience the sudden transgression and dissolution of knowability. Caught in the passionate spasm of laughter, the torquing body triggers a paroxysm of consciousness that permits a glimpse of the entirely-other. “In sum,” writes Bataille, “it makes us laugh to pass very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which each thing is well qualified, in which each thing is given in its stability, generally in a stable order, to a world in which our assurance is suddenly overthrown” (Bataille 2001, 135). Laughter is sonic confirmation

that we have tipped over reason's edge, and now reside, albeit momentarily, in the teeming chaos of unreason where ordered schemas of thought do not hold.

Getting away from knowledge is not the same as escaping thought, however. Laughter opens a fissure in our given epistemological structures to provide a temporary space in which we may practice *thinking otherwise*.⁶ In the latter half of the twentieth-century, Bataille's laughter will infect Michel Foucault, another French philosopher of unreason. In interviews, Foucault repeatedly acknowledges his intellectual debt to Bataille, whose privileging of personal experience as a means of "wrenching the subject from itself" laid the foundation for Foucault's own project of de-subjectivation (Foucault 1994b, 241). In a description of Bataille's project, Foucault was careful to emphasize the productive possibilities inherent in this act of self-dissolution. "Calling the subject in question," he explained, "meant that one would have to experience something leading to its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else" (Foucault 1994b, 247).

⁶ This phrase is borrowed from Michel de Certeau's short essay, "The Laugh of Michel Foucault" (1986), in which de Certeau writes about the philosophically activating power of laughter in Foucault's writing: "Something that exceeds the thinkable and opens the possibility of "thinking otherwise" bursts in through comical, incongruous, or paradoxical half-openings of discourse. The philosopher, overtaken by laughter, seized by an irony of things equivalent to an illumination, is not the author but the witness of these flashes traversing and transgressing the gridding of discourses effected by established systems of reason" (de Certeau 1986, 194).

One such decomposition and conversion occurs in the preface of *The Order of Things* (1966), in which Foucault famously credits the birth of the book to a “shattering” laughter that accompanied his reading of Jorge Luis Borges’ short story, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (1942):

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between Same and Other. (Foucault 1994, xv)

The anonymous laughter that seizes Foucault is an agent of destruction. It shatters, breaks up, and threatens to collapse the modes of classification and categorization that constitute the existing order of things. As the laughter persists, however, it generates a passage into an alternate, “unthinkable space” where new modes of thought can take root:

The passage from Borges kept me laughing a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off. Perhaps because there arose in its wake the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry [...] in such a state, things are ‘laid’, ‘placed’, ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all. (Foucault 1994, xvii)

In the wake of the laughter arises that peculiar sense of unease that Bataille had marked as the affective sign that one is entering the unmapped territories of non-knowledge. What Foucault discovers beyond the brink of laughter is not disorder, exactly, because disorder depends on the continued presence of order to be recognizable as such. Nor is this Bataille's dank and fertile chaos, it is too clean and too angular for that. This is not order or disorder, but a kind of sublime *preorder* that invites its visitor to imagine a radically different set of terms by which to arrange and assemble "things." Foucault testifies to his revelation of this impossible realm with the fervor of the recently converted, inviting his reader to envision this space, as if in picturing its inhuman dimensions, its glittering possibilities, and its incomprehensible vistas, we too will be transformed.

This "unthinkable space," birthed into presence by Foucault's laughter, is triggered by his reading of Borges' fictional taxonomy of animals.⁷ Borges' impossible inventory sets off an unexpected laughter in Foucault, which he writes up as philosophy. In his essay "The Laugh of Michel Foucault" (1986), Michel de Certeau

⁷ The passage, which Foucault cites in full, reads thusly: "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." Foucault explains that Borges' mode of classification is impossible not because of its content, its mythical sirens and "fabulous" animals, but because of its form. "What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought," explains Foucault, "is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories to all the others" (Foucault 1994, xv, xvi).

reminds us that Foucault considered his own body of work to be a collection of incomplete “stories,” and suggests that laughter was not only an object of study for Foucault, but also a “philosophical signature” that accounted for his idiosyncratic aesthetic style (de Certeau 1986, 194). For Bataille, Bergson’s book provoked a similarly “impassioned” reading experience that spurred him to investigate laughter’s philosophical possibilities, not in analytic discourse but in the short fictional novella *L’Histoire de L’Oeil* (1928).

Bataille and Foucault’s literary encounters with laughter help to reveal complicated relationships among fiction, laughter, and the philosophy of unreason that are galvanized in the passionate act of reading. This convergence finds its precedent in Friedrich Nietzsche, the first philosopher of laughter without humor and intellectual predecessor to both Bataille and Foucault. Nietzsche, too, is interested in laughter as an extreme experiential state that flings its host into distant territories where wisdom runs wild. He writes most extensively on laughter in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1891), a fictional biography whose eponymous character, a self-acclaimed “prophet of laughter,” endows laughter with the destructive power to overthrow the values and virtues that organize and restrict Western thought, and in so doing enact an affirmative transformation of human beings into something entirely-other for which the oft-misunderstood term “Übermensch” serves as placeholder (Nietzsche 1982, 211). In the

short essay “Nomadic Thought” (1973) Gilles Deleuze suggests that Nietzsche’s laughing abdication from conventional philosophical discourse constituted a “counter-philosophy” that impelled its audience to become impassioned, to *read otherwise*,

Whoever reads Nietzsche without laughing, and laughing heartily and often and sometimes hysterically, is almost not reading Nietzsche at all. This is true not only for Nietzsche but for all the authors who comprise the same horizon of our counter-culture. What shows us our own decadence and degeneracy is the way we feel the need to read in them anguish, solitude, guilt, the drama of communication, the whole tragedy of interiority. Even Max Brod tells us how the audience would laugh hysterically when Kafka used to read *The Trial*. And Beckett, I mean, it is difficult not to laugh when you read him, moving from one joyful moment to the next. Laughter, not the signifier. What springs from great books is schizo-laughter or revolutionary joy, not the anguish of our pathetic narcissism, not the terror of our guilt. (Deleuze 2004, 257-258)

In this suggestive passage, Deleuze summons a vision of the revolutionary writer as an alchemist who has discovered a secret means of passing laughter *through* a text. The most complicated observation of the passage appears, fittingly enough, in a sentence fragment—“Laughter, not the signifier”—which reads as a deliberately oblique answer to the unspoken question: how does one *write* laughter? The mechanical flatness of the literary shorthand “ha-ha” reveals the paucity of language in representing laughter, and humor studies’ rueful prefatory admissions of incompleteness suggest the impossibility of philosophically “knowing” laughter. Both “ha-ha” and humor studies’ handbooks share the aim of locking laughter into a recognizable, readable, and reasonable format.

In contrast, Nietzsche and his countercultural acolytes designed ways of *transferring* laughter through literature, which is used as a passageway, instead of a depository.

To write laughter as a philosophical potentiality rather than a discrete action, Nietzsche must borrow from the tools of literature rather than defer to a “despotic” philosophical discourse (Deleuze 2004, 259). Writing within the imaginative space of fiction, Nietzsche is able to describe how this inner experience feels, speculate upon what kind of philosophical vistas it may generate, and incite in the reader a shared sensory impression of the laughing experience. In one particularly evocative passage, Zarathustra teaches his disciples to “laugh at their great masters of virtue and saints and poets and redeemers” and describes his own laughter as a wild, poetic passion that passes through him as a creative force,

My wise longing cried and laughed thus out of me—born in the mountains, verily, a wild wisdom—my great, broad-winged longing! And often it swept me away and up and far, in the middle of my laughter; and I flew, quivering, an arrow, through sun-drunken delight, away into distant futures which no dream had yet seen, into hotter souths than artists ever dreamed of, where gods in their dangers are ashamed of all clothes—to speak in parables and to limp and stammer like poets; and verily, I am ashamed that I must still be a poet.
(Nietzsche 1982, 309)

Seized by laughter, Zarathustra is “swept away” and transformed into an “arrow” that is launched into distant realms. No longer a fixed point in space and time, he becomes a pure, impersonal passage. Nietzsche transfers this state of passage to the reader aesthetically. The rhythmic pulse of accumulative threes—“away and up and far” and “I

flew, quivering, an arrow” and “to speak and to limp and to stammer” — is a poetic quickening that asks the reader to use the conjunction or comma as a pirouetting block from which one may fling oneself into the next image.

According to Deleuze, it is precisely this compulsion to *move* that triggers the material spasm of laughter in the reader: “it is difficult not to laugh when you read [Beckett], moving from one joyful moment to the next” (Deleuze 2004, 258). In this way, aesthetics is the tool and literature the site by which laughter may be materially transmitted, still living, from writer to reader. Thus, while the analytic “why” of humor studies (now tell me, *why* did *you* laugh?) lends itself to perfunctory lists and common formulae that freeze and fix identity into that overdetermined “I”; the two perpetually elusive “whats” of laughter (what is it and what can it do?) must be registered aesthetically, in poetic stammers and sweeping parables.

The mere act of wrenching laughter free from humor to make visible its contagious, involuntary properties requires creative intervention. Martin Armstrong’s short book *Laughing: An Essay* (1928) is an early theoretical attempt to consider laughter in itself as a subversive affective event. In the prelude, Armstrong uses the literary device of cognitive estrangement to imagine laughter as it would appear to an alien

hailing from the fictional planet Canicula.⁸ Our unnamed visitor arrives on Earth with the intellectual mission of assembling a “neat thesis” regarding the human species (Armstrong 1928, 3). Traversing the streets of London, the Caniculan is pleased to detect in mankind an “evolution, order struggling out of disorder, a will to tidiness working before his very eyes” (Armstrong 1928, 3). Charmed by this primitive “will to order,” the alien begins to pen a favorable review of human civilization, a thesis it promptly abandons after witnessing an outbreak of contagious laughter in a restaurant:

He turned his head to discover that a handsome, well-dressed woman, sharing a table with a very smart young man, was in the act of throwing back her head and opening her mouth. Then the young man opposite her did the same, and together they began to produce a series of incoherent and shocking noises. Other tables which were within sight of the catastrophe took up the cry—a strange, spasmodic barking, horrible and repulsive in the mouths of civilized creatures. The sound spread, increased; volley was added to volley; quackings, hoots, barkings, cluckings, swelled the chorus. Madness was filling the restaurant [...] The horrible truth burst upon him. The pursuit of order and reason which had so stirred his enthusiasm was no more than a thin veneer. (Armstrong 1928, 5-6)

Armstrong’s use of the alien perspective, a classic conceit of science fiction, helps to foreground the spasmodic strangeness of laughter as a physical act. The alien assumes a diagnostic role we recognize from humor studies, pathologizing the bout of contagious

⁸ Armstrong’s use of this literary conceit is neither idiosyncratic nor outdated. The same science fictional strategy is used by the developmental neuroscientist Robert Provine in his popular book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (2000). In the opening chapter, Provine asks that his readers conduct a thought experiment: “How would a visiting extraterrestrial describe a group of laughing human beings to its relatives back home? What would the alien visitor make of these large, featherless bipeds emitting paroxysms of sound from a toothy vent in their faces?” (Provine 2000, 6).

laughter as a “madness” that rends the “thin veneer” of human “order and reason” to reveal the brutish dis-order that lies beneath.

Aghast by the sudden collapse of rationality, Armstrong’s alien flees the scene, “rushing in horror” from the restaurant to return to his well kempt home planet (Armstrong 1928, 7). We recognize this rattled, reactive response from the literature of humor studies, however, we have been taught an alternate strategy by the philosophers of unreason—Nietzsche, Bataille, and Foucault—who testify that those who can stand to remain in a state of laughing unease will witness new philosophical possibilities rise out of the dust of reason. And indeed, if one pays attention to the *laughter* in the scene another path is illuminated that passes through rather than away from the text. The moment the woman and man’s laughter meet and mingle together into “incoherent and shocking noises,” individual human beings recede from view, or at least are reduced to anonymous “mouths” occupied by the “spreading sound” of laughter. The commandeering of the narrative by the promiscuous movements of an unmanned laughter functions as a literary gestalt: we find ourselves paying attention to the dynamic spaces between people, rather than to the people themselves. This reorientation of vision creates for the reader the conditions of possibility to imagine a different model of existence that is not grounded in the psychically centered subject, but is born instead in emergent affective events that do not correspond to a fixed structure of feeling

(superiority, relief, surprise) but nevertheless connect bodies and create communities along shared lines of transmission.

There is, then, a band of philosophers who draw on literary techniques to creatively figure laughter without humor in their writings. It perhaps seems counter-intuitive that these materialist philosophers should want to pinion the meaty burst of laughter to the page, however it is precisely because the experience of laughter is always in excess of representation that it serves as provocateur for a new type of writing, reading, and thinking. The incommensurability of laughter, its literal unthinkability, forces a fissure in the text that allows the writer's experience of laughter to pass through and provoke in the reader the "revolutionary joy" that Deleuze associates with "great books" (Deleuze, 2004, 258). These European philosophers pillage the toolbox of literature to summon laughter as an implement for thinking otherwise. On American soil, this transaction is reversed, as poets, novelists, and filmmakers invoke philosophically fecund forms of humorless laughter and play out their socio-political consequences within the imaginative framework of the text.

The "unintelligible discharge" of laughter, then, causes philosophy and literature to intersect (Bataille 2013e, 87). The latter portion of this chapter puts into conversation the philosophical laughter of French feminist and deconstructionist Hélène Cixous and three literary portraits of a specifically female laughter that narratively disturb,

shatter, suspend, and potentially transform an explicitly male “order of things.” In her book *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz shows that the philosophical opposition between mind/body, in which the mind is lauded as producer of order and knowledge and the body denigrated as a source of irrational disruption, has historically been correlated with the distinction between male/female. The history of Western reason, Grosz surmises, is the history of misogyny:

Philosophy has always considered itself a discipline concerned primarily or exclusively with ideas, concepts, reason, judgment—that is, with terms clearly framed by the concept of the mind, terms which marginalize or exclude considerations of the body [...] As a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body. (Grosz 1994, 4)

Working from pieces by T.S. Eliot, Margaret Atwood, and Steven Millhauser, we shall encounter three bursts of female laughter that hold the promise (or threat, depending on the speaker) of corporeally shattering laws of reason that are, according to the logic of each episode, constructed, implemented, and embodied by men. Reason and reasonability (“be reasonable!”) are made concrete in architectures of confinement that contain these women: the repressive gentility of restaurant etiquette in the Eliot poem, the misogynistic totalitarian theocracy that structures Offred’s world in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), and the sexual restrictiveness of American suburbia in Millhauser’s “Dangerous Laughter” (2006), respectively.

In each of these three literary portraitures, laughter does not signify a discernable feeling but is figured as an unintelligible affective event that overwhelms and undoes the emotional coherence of the laughing individual. The untethering of the subject is laced with the prospect of death and (increasingly) the promise of a different conception of “life” that is free from the (increasingly) constrictive contours of reason and reasonability. “Increasingly,” because the route I have chosen to plot between Eliot and Millhauser produces a particular trajectory that sees the development of laughter as a base not only for dismantling, but also for productively rethinking fundamental ontological and epistemological presumptions that order Western philosophy. Other such readerly routes are available; indeed, the erratic nature of laughter as it bursts in literature *requires* that the reader become cartographer, using different eruptions of laughter as beacons with which to illuminate affective passages between texts. What follows is a readerly mapping of the relations—the doublings and divergences—between three bursts of female laughter as they erupt across the face of American literature.

Hysteria

Published in 1915, T.S. Eliot’s short prose poem “Hysteria” serves as a useful literary counterpart to the pathologization of humorless laughter in medical dictionaries during the same period. Eliot invokes a strain of “unreasonable” laughter so he may

contain and neutralize its will to disorder within the confines of the poetic line. This disciplinary process is explicitly gendered according to those correlational binaries mapped by Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*. The male speaker is figured as a bastion of rational consciousness whose bodily and psychological integrity is under attack by a cavernously corporeal female laughter that threatens to consume him,

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: 'If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden...' I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end. (*Catholic Anthology* 1915, 16)

This fight between a laughing female unreason and a meticulous male rationality, however, is fixed from the start, not least because Eliot orchestrates his poem so that the woman's laughter can only arrive on the page after being filtered through the medium of her male companion's perspective.

I have argued that the broad clinical definition of "pathological laughter" served to confine and so obscure the productive, differential aspects of humorless laughter. In a similar way, the unassigned diagnostic stamp of Eliot's title prevents the reader from analyzing the laughter present in the poem by enlisting her in a prolonged search to identify (and so classify) *who* or *what* in the poem is hysteric. Almost without exception,

critical readings of the poem begin with this question: Does the “Hysteria” of the title refer to the woman’s violent laughter or the man’s nightmarish fantasy of engulfment?⁹ This diagnostic approach, too, is fixed. In the end, it does not matter who is hysteric; either way it is the man’s internal emotional state that stands at the center of such readings. Monika Faltejskova makes this point in her book on gender and modernism, observing, “while the title is chosen to reflect female hysteria as its topic, the poem actually concerns the male speaker’s hysterical reaction to what he perceives as the voraciously engulfing female body” (Faltejskova, 2010).

The recurrence of the verb “engulf” in critical work on “Hysteria” helps to expose the poem’s gravitational pull away from the impersonal event of laughter and toward male feeling. Instead of investigating the affective intricacies of the woman’s laughter in its own terms, critics interest themselves with only one function of laughter: its “engulfing” effect as it is perceived by and pertains to the male speaker. Laughter is reduced to a plot device that creates the conditions of possibility for the man to reassert and recapitulate his poetic and psychological integrity. Martin Scofield, for example, argues that the concentrated detachment of the prose is a reaction against “the threat of

⁹ In some readings, the waiter’s “trembling hands” are cited as objective proof of the hysteric quality of the female laughter (Bush 1991, 28), however, in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Susan Stewart compromises this third party witness by labelling the waiter as a hysteric: “it is the elderly waiter who shows the primary symptom of hysteria—his insistent repetitions thwarting all sense of purpose or direction” (Stewart 2002, 24).

being engulfed in the hysteria" (Scofield 67, 1988). Similarly, Carol Christ has suggested that the speaker keeps from "being engulfed by the woman" by stilling the world around him into precise poetic images (Christ 1991 28). Poet and critic Craig Raine argues that being "engulfed by the female companion's hysterical laughter" creates a particular form of male suffering that is the subject of the poem, which is "in fact, about one of the most powerful emotions known to man—embarrassment" (Raine 2006, 60).

Critical reflections on the theme of hysteric engulfment cannot help but sort the action of the poem into the neatly oppositional pairs we have come to regard with suspicion: the hysteric is either the man or the woman, male reason is either engulfed or escapes engulfment, the poem either maintains its hold on order or collapses into disorder. In her book *Deviant Modernism* (1998), Colleen Lamos attempts to detach herself from this mode of investigation to argue that the axis upon which the poem turns is not the discerning male consciousness but the woman's tooth-studded mouth, "the *vagina dentata* revealed by her laughter is the terrifying center of the poem" (Lamos 1998, 83). Lamos interest, however, lies not in the "involving" laughter but in "the engulfing mouth of the laughing woman," which, she argues, "serves as a weapon; her oral aggressivity is the mark of her overwhelming sexual energy" (Lamos 1998, 84). Lamos' use of that same tricky verb betrays her commitment to an oppositional model of identity. To engulf or to be engulfed is barely a question; either way, difference is

disappeared in the final, fatal absorption of the one into the other. The poem of engulfment can only ever be an abyss, never a passage.

Putting these oppositional categories and diagnostic pursuits aside, let us start again, from the beginning. The poem begins with a laugh, or rather, laughter forces the poem into beginning; the woman's laughter is already well underway from the opening line. The late arrival of the poem to the scene is an early indication that "Hysteria" will feint away from describing or dwelling within the act of laughter, but it also helps to protect the unforeseeability and unknowability of laughter. Although we can guess from the male speaker's anxiety that the woman's laughter erupted without clear cause, the poem's late start prevents us from *knowing* anything of its origins. Jean-Luc Nancy, in a description of a similarly unannounced female laugh from a poem by Baudelaire, pushes on the possibilities of this state of unknowing:

No one knows why the woman is laughing, or at whom or what [...] It could be irony, mockery, derision, amusement, gaiety, drunkenness, nervous exhaustion after the cruel dance...It could be all of these things at once—or none of them. Laughter burst without presenting or representing its reasons or intentions.
(Nancy 1993, 384)

For Nancy, Baudelaire's refusal (or inability) to attach cause or intention to the woman's laughter prompts the speculative reader to produce a panoply of possible events, experiences, affective states, and personal feelings that may account for her eruption. It is the reader who becomes an engine of difference, generating an unauthorized array of

combinable causes that can be neither confirmed nor denied by the poem or its author. The diagnostic label of Eliot's title assigns a clinical origin to the laughter and so deflects these speculative energies, however the possibility to *read otherwise* exists for us as surely as it exists for Nancy reading Baudelaire.

What, then, does laughter *do* in and to the poem? Laughter appears explicitly only in the first half of the opening line, which is of a very different tenor to the latter portion of the poem. The first breath, "As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it," is the only moment of suppleness in a poem otherwise concerned with the rigid maintenance and management of the boundaries between bodies and selves. The tone is not yet one of horror, but of a curiosity that borders on tenderness. The speaker, whose gender is yet to be specified, bends toward the laughter which seeks not to devour but to "involve" [to *enfold*] him. His identity is compromised, but sweetly, as he becomes temporarily entangled and "part of" the woman's laughter. This moment of intimacy is abruptly extinguished by the speaker's horrified glimpse of the woman's sharp teeth which he associates with the violence of war, "until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad drill." The abyssal mouth replaces the laughing passage, and a surreal battle between the woman's devouring body and the man's resilient consciousness ensues. Laughter is no longer available as an unfolding affective event in which the man may take part (and

become partial), but is instead forced back into the woman's body as solitary spasms—rippling inner musculature and shaking breasts—that the man works to still by sheer force of will.

"Hysteria" is a punitive poem. The laughter that laps at the edge of both the poetic line and the speaker's well-guarded subjectivity in the opening frames of the poem breaches the "slash" that works to hygienically separate (and hierarchically organize) the binary poles that structure Western thought: male/female, mind/body, reason/unreason, order/disorder, unity/partiality. Lured but for a moment into the intimate shared space of laughter, the speaker reacts with violence, mapping the laughter onto the woman's body, which he proceeds to parcel into neatly surgical sections—the throat, the inner musculature, the breasts. This artful dissection of the body defuses the promiscuous, connective power of laughter and restores command to the male speaker's psychical interiority, "I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end." Eliot's poem imprisons female laughter: the title is the doctor's diagnosis tacked to the front of the cell door, and the neat finality of that closing word, "end," is the sound of the key turning in its lock.

The Rhythm That Laughs You

In a series of essays published in the mid-1970s, French feminist Hélène Cixous formulated her theoretical concept of *écriture féminine* and its antithetical partner, “masculine writing.” Cixous posits that a feminine (non-patriarchal) writing would inscribe the female body into the language, form, and structure of the text.¹⁰ Such writing—open, desirous, unpredictable, and brazenly corporeal—would create “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous 1976, 879). Consistently throughout her work, Cixous associates *écriture féminine* with a particular form of eruptive laughter that serves as both a means of breaking up and a model for breaking out of a repressive, phallogentric order. The “open and bewildering prospect” of *écriture féminine*, asserts Cixous, “goes hand in hand with a certain kind of laughter” (Cixous 1981, 54). In “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Cixous instructs her readers to wield laughter as a weapon “to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, the break up the “truth” with laughter” (Cixous 1976, 888). The next year, Cixous published an essay titled “Castration or Decapitation?” (1976) in which she identifies *écriture féminine* as a fleshly “outpouring” that “can’t be predicted, isn’t predictable, isn’t knowable and is therefore very

¹⁰ Elaine Showalter describes Cixous’s theoretical project in these terms, “the concept of *écriture féminine* [is] the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text” (Showalter 1981, 185).

disturbing” (Cixous 1981, 53). The essay culminates with an invocation of a laughter that literalizes these unforeseeable bodily torrents, a “laughter that breaks out, overflows” (Cixous 1981, 54).

Eliot invokes the unforeseen corporeal burst of female laughter only to trap it within the tight confines of his writing. The poem’s obsession with clinical origins and strict narrative closure marks it as an example of masculine writing according to Cixous’s model,

A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we’ve learned to read books that basically pose the word “end.” [...] These are texts that work on the beginning but not on the origin. [...] The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn’t haunt a feminine unconscious. (Cixous 1981, 53)

Eliot’s poem does not “basically pose the word ‘end,’” it *literally* deploys the word as its last note. Having been hurried into the act of writing by an insouciant laughter, the male speaker deposits the final word—“end”—as proof of his renewed control over the poem. The processual, mobile character of the first words (“As she laughed”), is stilled by the irrefutable finality of the “end.” The literalness of this poetic manoeuver—the word “end” signaling the end of the poem—is a conqueror’s flourish that signals the reinstatement of an alignment between the male speaker, his artwork, and his afternoon.

A line of stark contrast can be drawn between Eliot’s triumphant terminus and the halting last lines of a different literary instantiation of eruptive female laughter.

There is a scene in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which Offred, eponymous handmaid to the totalitarian theocracy that now governs America, is overwhelmed by the sudden need to laugh. Spasms wrack her body. She crams her hands into her mouth, she fears she will vomit, she imagines she is giving birth. Finally, Offred crawls into a cupboard in an effort to "compose" herself. In the wake of her laughing fit, Offred lies prone across the cupboard's threshold and listens to the movement of blood through her body: "All I can hear now is the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening." We listen with Offred to the repeated "opening and closing" that serves as a rhythmic transcription of the body's pulse. Cixous tells us that "there's *tactility* in the feminine text, there's touch, and this touch passes through the ear," and indeed, the repeated pulsation of "opening and closing" surreptitiously lulls the reader into synchronizing her breathing to its tempo (Cixous 1981, 54). It is this sensory and sensual writing of the body that Cixous describes as *écriture féminine*.

In a 1981 essay, Elaine Showalter described Cixous's *écriture féminine* as a "Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice" (Showalter 1981, 185). This is an observation, not an accusation; from the opening line of "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous speaks in the speculative and aspirational future tense: "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*" (Cixous 1976, 875). Cixous's utopia finds its dystopian

antithesis made manifest in The Republic of Gilead, the androcentric dictatorship that has overthrown the U.S. government in Atwood's novel. The male founders of Gilead, too, acknowledge the power of bodies and writing, and place intensive prohibitions on both. Women are classified and sorted according to their function—Wife, Aunt, Handmaid, Martha, Econowife—and as a handmaid, the “breeder” of the household, Offred's assignment is the most bodily of them all. She refers to herself as a “national resource,” a “two-legged womb,” whose breeding capabilities saves her from being labelled an “Unwoman” and consigned to a brutal laborious life in the colonies (Atwood 1996, 146) One is not born, but denominated a woman. Offred's body is stamped with an identity tattoo, cloaked in unwieldy government-issued robes, and is required to spread its legs monthly. The possibility of suicide hangs in the wings of the novel as the only act of autonomous bodily expression left to women, but Offred chooses subjugated life, “I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power” (Atwood 1996, 298).

Language, too, is strictly policed. The revised Gileadean Bible, which is distributed as a compact disc and read, of course, in a man's voice, teaches its listeners a new dictate, “blessed are the silent” (Atwood 1996, 100), and one of the founders of the new regime admits that “our big mistake was teaching [women] to read. We won't do

that again" (Atwood 1996, 320). In public, Offred communicates in state sanctioned phrases such as "may the Lord be with you," and "Under his Eye," but in private she conducts covert conversations with female revolutionaries ("amputated speech," Offred tells us) and, perhaps even more clandestinely, she hoards words in her mind for private contemplation: "I feel like the word *shatter*," "I think of the word *relish*," "I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*" (Atwood 1996, 113, 293, 120). Sometimes, though, words are simply lost. Thinking about the Commander whose name she has been forced to take, Offred is incapable of ascribing a word to her feelings and jounces instead between the cumbersome poles of love and hate, "I ought to feel hatred for this man," Offred tells us, "I know I ought to feel it, but it isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love" (Atwood 1996, 68).

In a regime that polices bodies and supervises affects with such fanatical fervor, the convulsive event of laughter registers as an act of rebellious subversion. Offred's laughter erupts precisely halfway through the novel, bisecting the work as a bodily intermission:

I stand up, in the dark, start to unbutton. Then I hear something, inside my body. I've broken, something has cracked, that must be it. Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face. Without warning: I wasn't thinking about here or there or anything. If I let the noise get out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it, someone is bound to hear, and then there will be hurrying footsteps and commands and who knows? Judgment: emotion inappropriate to the occasion. The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria. And then a needle, a pill. It could be fateful. (Atwood 1996, 156)

The noise which is not yet laughter is utterly disconnected from any intelligible emotional source. "I wasn't thinking about here or there or anything," Offred assures us. Instead of attempting to locate a reason for the swelling noise, Offred attunes her senses to her body. Listening closely, she guesses that the noise emerges out of an aperture somewhere "inside" her body, or perhaps this broken place is "in her face," she cannot be certain. Her uncertainty regarding the location of the laughter extends to the exact nature of the noise. In the first instance, she is only able to describe it as a vague, unsettling presence—"something"—that she associates with a break or crack in her body.

Listening closer, Offred fretfully describes this "something" as an insurgent "noise" that will become laughter in the moment it makes contact with air. This alchemy never comes to pass, however, as Offred contorts and convulses her body in efforts to keep her internal corporeal upheavals from becoming public. The laughter only ever remains a potentiality; the noise is never, in fact, a *noise* but only ever the impending *threat of noise* that Offred quashes out of fear of being diagnosed as hysteric. This whole episode, then, suggests a silence that Hélène Cixous famously associates with hysteria: "Silence: silence is the mark of the hysteric. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through" (Cixous 1981, 49). To save herself from being

permanently silenced by doctors (that fateful needle, that fatal pill), Offred struggles to silence herself, an arduous process that threatens to “push” her to that deadly point of “choking,”

I cram both hands over my mouth as if I’m about to be sick, drop to my knees, the laughter boiling like lava in my throat. I crawl into the cupboard, draw up my knees, I’ll choke on it. My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I’ll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die with laughter. I stifle it in the folds of the hanging cloak, clench my eyes, from which tears are squeezing. Try to compose myself. (Atwood 1996, 156)

In “Castration or Decapitation?” Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as “an outpouring...which can appear in private or elementary texts as a fantasy of blood, of menstrual flow, etc., but which I prefer to see as vomiting, as “throwing up,” “disgorging”” (Cixous 1981, 54). Atwood figures Offred’s almost-laughter as an ambiguous flow that threatens to pour forth from the eruptive passageway of her mouth as laughter, lava, vomit, or a newborn. Vitally, though, this “disgorging” never comes to pass: Offred fights to contain and defuse this excessive expenditure of laughter—“too loud, too much of it”—and succeeds. Although Offred retains control over her laughter, Atwood does not. For an outpouring *does* occur; not in Offred’s body, but in the body of the text. The fitful pulse of the section mimics the voracious rush of laughter. As Offred lies on the cupboard floor, the reader is catapulted from verb to verb, which multiply and mutate at an accelerating pace: to cram, to be sick, to drop to the ground, to boil like

lava, to crawl into a cupboard, to draw up one's knees, to choke, to hold back, shake, heave, burst, clench, squeeze, stifle, to compose oneself or to die, laughing.

After the threat of laughter has passed, Offred strives to "compose" herself. Previously, she had relied on those carefully hoarded words, remembered from the pre-Gilead days, to ballast such attempts at self-composition; "I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*," she tells us, "These are the kind of litanies I use to compose myself" (Atwood 1996, 120). After this convulsive moment in the cupboard, however, this old language fails her,

After a while it passes, like an epileptic fit. Here I am in the closet. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I can't see it in the dark but I trace the tiny scratched writing with the ends of my fingers, as if it's a code in Braille. It sounds in my head now less like a prayer, more like a command; but to do what? Useless to me in any case, an ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost. Why did she write it, why did she bother? There's no way out of here. (Atwood 1996, 156)

Weeks earlier, when Offred first discovered the Latinate phrase etched on the cupboard floor by her predecessor, she read it as a "taboo message" that allowed her to "commune" with its now-deceased female author (Atwood 1996, 62). Now, returning from the brink of laughter, Offred reads differently, putting her fingertips in contact with the words to read through touch. This tactile reading creates a new interpretation—the etching, written in a language popularly imagined as masculine, imperial, dead; and referencing an in-joke shared by the Commander and some of the "older boys" at his school—is no longer the site for female communication but of male camaraderie and

commandment.¹¹ Offred's bodily convulsions held the promise of a new language, an *écriture féminine* that becomes available to us in Atwood's outpouring of prose, but not to Offred, self-silenced and secreted away in the cupboard. Offred turns away from the "useless" words and redirects her attention to her body as a site for the potential composition of a new language that is feminine, open, alive, "I lie on the floor, breathing too fast, then slower, evening out my breathing, as in the exercises, for giving birth. All I can hear now is the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening" (Atwood 1996, 154).

Dangerous Laughter

For both the male philosophers of unreason and the feminist deconstructionists, the power of laughter lies in its ability to fling its host into new, unbounded realms where familiar epistemological structures and social orders do not hold.¹² In her essay

¹¹ Joseph Farrell identifies these popular assumptions about Latin in order to write against them in his book *Latin Language and Latin Culture: From Ancient to Modern Times* (2001). Such ideas "include the idea of the "dead" language; the closely related idea of the "classical" language; the strong association between Latinity and male speech [...] and the relationship between the language itself and a multitude of social institutions, religious and secular, at different times, in different places" (Farrell 2001, xi).

¹² Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva also invoke the image of an eruptive laughter as it pertains to the potential liberation of the female body and female writing. Irigaray, in her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1977) issues repeated invitations for her listener to move into a space of female mutuality and care by way of laughter, "Go on, laugh," she urges the reader. However, it should be noted that Irigaray was wary about wholly attaching her vision of female liberation to the non-signifying cry of laughter, which held the capacity to recapitulate misogynistic views of the woman as voluptuous—but speechless—flesh, "(If you roar with laughter always everywhere, we will never talk to each other)" (Irigaray 1980, 72, 71). In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva cites laughter as a visceral, "public feature" of abjection. Kristeva ends her treatise with an "apocalyptic laughter" that attends to the political potential inherent in such a dispossession, "With a knowledge undermined by forgetfulness and laughter, an abject knowledge, he is, she is preparing to go

“Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” (1975), Cixous appropriates the Nietzschean image of the laughing subject as arrow (“I flew, quivering, an arrow”) in her description of the “wonderful hysteric” as an untamed “poetic body” that must be “loosed like an arrow away from all of men’s history, from biblicocapitalist society” (Cixous 1996, 95).¹³ In both Eliot’s poem and Atwood’s novel, the arrow of female laughter is strung but never wholly loosed. In “Hysteria,” the diffusive event of the woman’s laughter is promptly mapped back onto her body, which is literally composed and poetically dissected by the male speaker. Fearful of being subjected to a similar process of diagnosis, domination, and dismemberment, Offred stifles her own laughter before it can reach vocalization. In each case, then, the threat of a hysteric diagnosis prevents female laughter from quitting the bow of the body, of the text and of the woman, respectively.

Steven Millhauser’s short story “Dangerous Laughter” (2006) provides a literary account of female laughter let loose. Our narrator, whose gender remains unspecified for

through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed” (Kristeva 1982, 210).

¹³ Cixous uses the same arrow imagery in “The Laugh of the Medusa” to describe more generally the revolutionary process by which patriarchal order may be overcome, “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self.” (Cixous 1976, 878).

the entirety of the story, recalls the events of one “perilous summer” that began with the spontaneous springing up of clandestine “laugh parlors” amongst the adolescent residents of a suburban community and ended with the death of a girl, Clara Schuler, who had so perfected the art of dangerous laughter that she steps permanently out of her body and into “the farthest and most questionable regions of laughter, where laughter no longer bore any relation to earthly things and, sufficient to itself, soared above the world to flourish in the void. There,” explains the narrator, “you were no longer yourself, you were no longer anything” (Millhauser 2008, 75, 77, 91). The next day, the local paper reports that Clara died of natural causes—a ruptured blood vessel—but the town’s teenagers know the dark, disturbing truth, “Clara Schuler had died of laughter” (Millhauser 2008, 91).

With its cramped attic spaces, secret orders, and transgressive desires, “Dangerous Laughter” borrows tropes and motifs from gothic horror. The protagonist narrates his story from the first-person collective pronoun “we,” a literary nod to “A Rose For Emily” (1930), William Faulkner’s short story that famously relates a reclusive elderly woman’s gruesome secret to the reader from the group perspective of her neighbors.¹⁴ Like Faulkner’s Southern Gothic story, “Dangerous Laughter” is concerned

¹⁴ The first person plural has been employed for similar purposes in Jeffrey Eugenides’ suburban gothic novel *The Virgin Suicides* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

with the dark rumors and illicit passions that constitute the secret texture of small-town American life. Despite this gothic tinge, Millhauser's story is aligned most closely to the genre of supernatural horror. Recent critical work by Eugene Thacker, Graham Harman and others have helped to map an important philosophical distinction between these two generic strains. As a literary form, gothic horror introduces a transgressive, monstrous element into the narrative as the negative affirmation of an existing order. In *After Life* (2010), Eugene Thacker describes this conservative agenda, "Monsters are always *monstrum*, that which demonstrates, which testifies, and which inadvertently affirms the biological norm or political law" (Thacker 2010, 23). In contrast, supernatural horror is interested not in reinforcing order and form by depicting disorder and the deformed, but in finding ways to commune with radical alterity: the formless, unclassifiable, and literally "unthinkable" spaces that fall beyond of the given laws of science, nature, and logic.¹⁵ In a 2003 interview, Millhauser admits his interest in these unthinkable spaces, which he describes as "the place where the familiar begins to turn strange. When things cease to be themselves, when they begin to turn into something else, which has no name—that is a region I'm always drawn to" (Millhauser 2003, 79).

¹⁵ H.P. Lovecraft's non-fiction essays about supernatural horror and weird fiction include some of the first and finest definitions of the genre: "I choose weird stories because they suit my inclinations best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis" (Lovecraft 2006, xix)

In “Dangerous Laughter,” laughter serves as the gatekeeper to these formless domains that exist beyond the extremities of thought. The narrator repeatedly acknowledges this fact, “we understood that our laughter, as it erupted from us in unseemly spasms, was part of the kingdom of forbidden things” (Millhauser 2008, 78). In many ways, “Dangerous Laughter” can be read as a literary echo and extrapolation of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, in which a shattering laughter revealed to him that “impossible” space teeming with a “wild profusion of existing things” (Foucault 1994, xv).¹⁶ Foucault’s laughter was provoked by Borges’ “monstrous” taxonomy which arranged words besides one another in impossible patterns; Borges’ writing is “disturbing, probably because [it] secretly undermines language,” he explains (Foucault 1994, xviii). Similarly, Millhauser’s laugh parlors begin as a word-game that deliberately unhinges words from their meaning, “A word, any word, uttered in a certain solemn tone, could be compelled to reveal its inner stupidity” (Millhauser 2008, 76). While both instances of laughter are triggered by this apparent breakdown of the linguistic order, it is the laughter itself that transports the subject into the philosophically fecund domain of the “unthinkable.” Millhauser’s narrator understands this too,

¹⁶ Foucault’s philosophical entanglement with the “impossible” is made literary (and material) by its transposition into a supernatural horror story. In his book *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), Graham Harman makes a useful claim that it is in the imaginary spaces of supernatural horror that philosophical questions about the “unthinkable” can be materially staged and productively engaged with.

What drew us wasn't so much the hidden absurdity of words, which we'd always suspected, as the sharp heaves and gasps of laughter itself. Deep in our inner dark, we had discovered a startling power. We became fanatics of laughter, devotees of eruption, as if these upheavals were something we hadn't known before, something that would take us where we needed to go. (Millhauser 2008, 76)

During these early stages of the laugh parlors, the teenagers locate the horizon of intelligibility in their own corporeal and psychological depths. Laughter allows a retraction inwards toward that "inner dark" which in turn produces a "thrilling," "tingling" bodily sensation that is charged with the erotic (Millhauser 2008, 77). The narrator admits this "kinship" between laughter and sex, and includes lascivious descriptions of bucking hips, creaking beds, and "strange and suggestive" bodily movements that are freighted with sexual desire (Millhauser 78, 2008). The teenagers soon replace the word-game with the "art" of tickling as the chief provocateur of a laughter whose primary aim is to achieve a "state of explosive release" (Millhauser 2008, 76). After one such "deep, painful, releasing" session of tickling, the narrator describes the laughing sensation as a "descent into the darkness of my own body, where laughter lay like lava, waiting for a fissure to form that would release it like liquid fire" (Millhauser 2008, 79). Millhauser's coding of laughter as a darkly erotic, eruptive corporeality contains explicit echoes of Atwood's descriptions of Offred's laughter in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as "boiling like lava" out of a secret aperture in the unmappable depths of her body (Atwood 1985, 156).

However, the female laughter that is the organizing center of “Dangerous Laughter” is of a very different character from this orgasmic release of a subterranean bodily tension. The narrator describes Clara Schuler as a quiet, motionless girl whose physical attributes shivered between generic codes; “she was difficult to picture clearly,” the narrator remembers “a little pale, her hair dark in some elusive shade between brown and black” (Millhauser 2008, 80). This representational elusiveness extends to her laughter. The narrator had depended on sexual euphemism as a means of describing the “dangerous laughter” of the laugh parlors—robust, full-bodied thrashings that culminate in explosive release—but Clara’s laughter is of a different tenor. The narrator acknowledges this tonal shift, admitting that “Clara Schuler seemed to pass beyond the easy suggestiveness of moving bodies and to enter new and more ambiguous realms” (Millhauser 2008, 83). The first prolonged description of her laughter borrows from the language of the supernatural in its attempt to transmit its nuances to the reader:

She stood so motionless that she seemed to be holding her breath; perhaps she was; and you could feel something building in her, as in a child about to cry; her neck stiff; the tendons visible; two vertical lines between her eyebrows; then a kind of mild trembling in her neck and arms, a veiled shudder, an inner rippling, and through her body, still rigid but in the grip of a force, you could sense a presence, rising, expanding, until, with a painful gasp, with a jerk of her shoulders, she gave way to a cry or scream of laughter—laughter that continued to well up in her, to shake her as if she were possessed by a demon, until her cheeks were wet, her hair wild in her face, her chest heaving, her fingers clutching at her arms and head—and still the laughter came, hurling her about making her gulp and gasp as if in terror, her mouth stretched back over her teeth, her eyes squeezed shut, her hands pressed against her ribs as if to keep

herself from cracking apart. And then it would stop. Abruptly, mysteriously, it was over. She stood there, pale—exhausted—panting. Her eyes, wide open, saw nothing. Slowly she came back to herself. (Millhauser 2008, 82)

No tickling is required to initiate Clara's laughter; instead, she commences an intricate and solitary process of her own. The narrator cannot discern the inner mechanics of Clara's method ("she seemed" to be holding her breath; *perhaps* she was"), and must settle with an observatory list of physical effects. As a ferocious laughter begins to unfurl from Clara's body, the narrator is forced to further hedge his or her language. Clara is "*kind of* trembling" and the noise itself cannot be pegged: it is a "cry *or* a scream."

The ambiguity of the source and timbre of Clara's laughter is amplified further by its oddly brusque termination. Until Clara, the laughter sessions culminated with the same, easily recognizable orgasmic denouement. Clara's laughter, in contrast, does not resolve in any obvious manner, but simply ends, "abruptly, mysteriously." Her blank eyes are an indication that in her laughter she "let herself go." This is not the sensory ecstasy felt by her peers, but a more philosophic letting go; the total desertion of her self. This movement beyond the "natural" explains the narrator's dependence on images of demonic possession, unmitigated terror, and later, the séance, as means of representing Clara's laughter. The established arc of the laugh parlor laughter—the sexualized stimulation of the body, a sinking inward to an "inner dark" followed by a cathartic climax—ultimately reinforced the shape and consistency of the given subject. Clara's

laughter, in contrast, is formless and subjectless. It “wrench[es] her out of shape” and jettisons her subjectivity before hurling her (a “creature”) into those “questionable regions” that “no longer bore any relation to earthly things” (Millhauser 2008, 90, 91).

Although Clara’s commitment to laughter results in her death, “Dangerous Laughter” does not issue the same kind of punitive closure as the Eliot poem. The narrator’s early suggestion that Clara’s “idea of happiness would be to dissolve gradually, leaving behind a small puddle” reaches forward through the text to inflect our reading of the final scene (Millhauser 2008, 80). The narrator describes Clara’s final bout of laughter not as a suicidal act that culminates in death (we do not witness Clara’s death, only hear rumors of it in the local news), but as a virtuoso performance that provides passage into a diffuse realm where the rigid structures of subjectivity melt away.

She had passed so far beyond herself that there was almost nothing left [...] It was as if she were inviting me to follow her to the farthest and most questionable regions of laughter, where laughter no longer bore any relation to earthly things and, sufficient to itself, soared above the world to flourish in the void. There, you were no longer yourself—you were no longer anything. (Millhauser 2008, 90-91)

Clara needs her shaking, spasmodic body to access these strange and nameless territories, but once “in flight” she must leave it behind: she is Nietzsche’s arrow, a transitional being caught between the earth and the void (Millhauser 2008, 91). Clara’s

ascent, her “soaring above the world,” is in marked contrast to her peers’ laughing descent “deep into our inner dark” (Millhauser 2008, 76).

Ultimately, then, this is a story not of death, but of diffusion and disappearance. Clara’s laughter hangs around her old home like a ghost. Months later, the narrator stops in the dirt driveway of the Schuler house and describes suddenly “[feeling] myself burst into a sharp laugh. I looked around uneasily and began walking away” (Millhauser 2008, 92). Struck with that laughing unease that both Foucault and Bataille hail as the affective signal of one’s transition into the realm of the unthinkable, the narrator reflexively retreats into the safe spaces of normalcy and order, attributing the abrupt burst of laughter to a biographically logical, affectively reasonable and cognizable feeling of grief. “No my laughter was all right. It was a salute to Clara Schuler, an acknowledgement of her great gift. In her own way, she was complete” (Millhauser 2008, 92). Returning home by way of familiar geographies, the narrator describes with clarity the minutia of the lazy Sunday afternoon, from the color of the lumberjack shirt worn by a girl raking leaves to an elongated narration of a basketball’s slow drop through a hoop. This careful collection of details is interrupted by a discrete and distant noise that refuses to disclose its origins, although the narrator takes an educated guess at its source, “Somewhere, I heard a burst of laughter. I nodded in the

direction of Clara Schuler's neighborhood and continued down the street" (Millhauser 2008, 93).

Read together as a cluster, these three literary portraiture generate a host of conceivable intellectual trajectories; we may say that, like Foucault's laughter, they stand as "fragments of a large number of possible orders" (Foucault 1994, xvii). For all three texts, laughter without humor is "an invitation to call into question the category of the subject, its supremacy, its foundational function" (Foucault 1994b, 247). However, each text puts different stylistic and narrative constraints on this invitation. Eliot uses the sharp edges of the poetic line to imprison the unruly burst of laughter in the trembling body of the woman, and redirects our attention toward the careful maintenance of his male speaker's psychological interiority. Atwood's narrative descriptions of laughter sketch a portrait of an alternate state of being that is grounded in process, mobility, and flow. However, she also stifles the laughter in Offred's heaving body, proving Hélène Cixous's claim that learning to emulate the movements of the (beautiful, laughing) female body in textual form can only ever be the "springboard for subversive thought" (Cixous 1976, 879).

If Eliot's laughter is a shackled threat and Atwood's a lapsed promise; it is only Millhauser who lets the laughter out and gives it the narrative room to practice its violent, potentially productive effects on its host. Not coincidentally, Millhauser's story

is also the only text that delves into laughter without mention of the diagnostic tag of hysteria. Untethered from such classificatory constraints, the laughter that overwhelms Clara decomposes her subjectivity, propels her into flight, and pitches her into an unearthly “void” into which neither the unnamed narrator nor a unified self can follow. The reader, however, may be able to pursue Clara. For what leaps forth from “Dangerous Laughter” is not a pre-digested description of the internal structure of Clara’s laughter that we can read and know, but an impersonal *feeling* of indiscernibility that Millhauser conveys through narrative style and tone. Cloaked in ambiguity, Clara’s laughter provokes in the reader that palpable unease and irresolution that signals, according to our philosophers of unreason, passage into the intellectually inaccessible domain of non-knowledge.

Chapter Two. Ecstatic Laughter and Humour Noir

“We have the sense of a hierarchy whose highest degree would be assured to the man with an integral possession of humor.”

André Breton, “Preface,” *Anthology of Black Humor*.

“Laughter casts a glance, charged with the mortal violence of being, into the void of life.”
Georges Bataille, “The Labyrinth.”

In March 1929, with Surrealism fracturing under his increasingly autocratic leadership, André Breton issued a series of written invitations to an “obligatory meeting” at which he intended to consolidate any dissident voices under a unifying politics of “joint action.”¹ Georges Bataille delivered his famous rejection—“Too many fucking idealists!”—in epistolary form, but the crude plosive pleasure of speaking the profanity laced words aloud reflects their author’s commitment to the violent excesses of base materialism, which championed bodily excretions such as blood, urine, faeces, and, above all, laughter, as a means of disconcerting the “beautiful images” of Bretonian idealism (Breton 1969, 37). Bataille’s missive signaled the end of the two men’s fraught friendship and instigated the disunion of the Surrealist movement, which could no

¹ The content of Breton’s letter, as well as Bataille’s reply, can be found in Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) 316.

longer stretch to house both Breton's intransigent idealism and Bataille's gleefully heterogeneous materialism.

The official document of this divide was Breton's "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" which was published in the twelfth and final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* on December 15, 1929. Intransigent in tone, the Second Manifesto contained a series of personalized purges against those Breton believed had strayed from the "exacting standards" of his Surrealism (Breton 1969b, 135). Names were named, but Breton's vitriol was reserved for Bataille, whose commitment to filth—both rot and erotica—signaled to Breton his "obnoxious return to old anti-dialectical materialism" (Breton 1969b, 183). Bataille replied swiftly and in kind. Precisely one month later, he participated in the writing and publication of the anti-Breton pamphlet *Un Cadavre* (1930), which featured as its frontispiece a death portrait of Breton, complete with an epigraph, penned by Bataille, "Here lies Breton the ox, the old aesthete and false revolutionary with the head of Christ" (Surya 2002, 133). Bataille also contributed the final essay to the collection, which reads as a rallying cry of dissent, "I here invite anyone who still feels that *above all* he has a spurt of blood in the throat, to spit with me in the face of André Breton, at the clown with closed eyes" (Surya 2002, 135). Bataille's rendering of Breton as a cadaverous clown gestures to a major casualty in the

development of Surrealism, a casualty that Bataille, given his commitment to bodily delirium, was the first to identify: the death of laughter.

Laughter held a privileged place in Breton's first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), which unlike its austere and authoritarian successor, was founded on the rejection of any structure that sought to classify, control, or contain thought. "Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable," writes Breton, quoting Barrès (Breton 1969, 9). The antidote to this stultification of the writer's imagination, argued Breton, was the cultivation of a series of poetic techniques that were "dictated by the thought" alone, and so bypassed "any control exercised by reason" (Breton 1969, 26). Breton urges his reader to experiment with methods of psychic automatism—automatic writing, cut-ups, exquisite corpse games—that loosened the writer's grip on his own imagination. Such experiments produced "Surrealist images," which Breton described as the unpredictable, unclassifiable, and oddly impersonal phrases that show up in the writer's conscious mind like an insistent stranger "knocking at the window" (Breton 1969, 21). Breton associated the Surrealist image with laughter: it becomes recognizable to the reader by its "strong comical effect" and its capacity to "provoke laughter" (Breton 1969, 23, 38).²

² "The countless kinds of Surrealist images would require a classification which I do not intend to make today. To group them according to their particular affinities would lead me far afield; what I basically want to mention is their common virtue. For me, their greatest virtue, I must confess, is the one that is arbitrary to

In the Second Manifesto, Breton wields laughter for very different purposes. The book edition of *The Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930) included a footnote that Breton appended following the publication of *Un Cadavre* earlier that year. In it, Breton issues a threat to the twelve signers of the pamphlet. "I am thirty four years old," Breton announces, "and more than ever I am of the opinion that my thought is capable of lashing like a burst of laughter those who never had a thought in the first place and those who, having once had one, have sold it" (Breton 1969b, 137). This is not laughter itself but its abstraction into a hard, derisive mode of thought that is "like" laughter. For those who had subscribed to the experimental principles of the first Manifesto, Breton's substitution of an uncomprehending laughing experience with a calculated "capable" thought registered as a troubling detour. Anais Nin wrote that Breton "betrayed what I suspected in Surrealism, the part of it that is conscious, premeditated and an intellectual technique" (Polizzotti 1995, 447). Henry Miller confirmed "the Surrealists are too conscious of what they are doing," and worried that their "desire to posit an ism, to

the highest degree, the one that takes the longest time to translate into practical language, either because it contains an immense amount of seeming contradiction or because one of its terms is strangely concealed; or because, presenting itself as something sensational, it seems to end weakly (because it suddenly closes the angle of its compass), or because it derives itself from a ridiculous *formal* justification, or because it is of a hallucinatory kind, or because it very naturally gives to the abstract the mask of the concrete, or the opposite, of because it implies the negation of some elementary physical property, or because it provokes laughter" (Breton 1969, 38).

isolate the germ and cultivate it, is a bad sign" (Miller 1961, 181). Critics agreed. In his introduction to Maurice Nadeau's *History of Surrealism* (1944), Richard Shattuck accused Breton of gradually stripping the "love and laughter" from Surrealism, "It is the massive, stentorian style of Breton that has deflected attention from the delight [Surrealists] took in the bizarre inconsistencies of life" (Shattuck 1973, 26). Elsewhere, Clifford Browder has attested to Breton's unsmiling stoicism by demarcating the difference between laughter and humor, "while not unsusceptible to humor, Breton was too much the *mage* to laugh readily or seek to provoke laughter in others" (Browder 1967, 153).

The mutation in Breton's laughter therefore signaled an important shift in the aims of his Surrealism. The first Manifesto embraced incomprehensible images, a loss of psychological control, and the proliferation of incongruities without resolution; Breton championed writing that demonstrated an "extreme degree of immediate absurdity, the quality of [which], upon closer scrutiny, being to give way to everything admissible, everything legitimate in the world" (Breton 1969, 24). The Second Manifesto, however, placed the "control of ideas" at the center of Surrealism's aesthetic practices, whose aim was nothing less than the absolute synthesis of reality in the sublime quarters of the poetic mind (Breton 1969b, 144). In perhaps his most famous formulation of Surrealism's revised goals, Breton stated that,

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a *certain point of the mind* at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of *finding and fixing this point*. (Breton 1969b, 123-124)

The expulsion of laughter and its playmates from Surrealism—those “bizarre inconsistencies” and “immediate absurdities”— corresponded with Breton’s growing interest in the theorization of a particular strain of laughless humor that he assembled from writings by Hegel and Freud.³ This strain, which Breton would later codify as “humour noir,” upheld the principles of aesthetic fixity, dialectical resolution, and intellectual mastery that now stood at the center of his Surrealism.

In a series of essays written in the wake of the Second Manifesto, Georges Bataille openly critiqued Surrealism’s principles as aiding and abetting a “servile idealism” that squeamishly handled the “base vulgarity” of life only so it could transfigure it, through poetry, into incandescent and well-formed “pearls of wisdom” (Bataille 1985, 41). Bataille describes the poetic image as a “celestial vault” that stifles

³ Breton’s humour noir was also partially influenced by Jacques Vaché, a Parisian dandy whom Breton admired as an embodiment of Surrealist principles before his drug-related death in 1919. Vaché nurtured a concept of “umor” that he described in a 1917 letter to Breton as “the sensation of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything” (Polizzotti 1995, 41-42). Anti-sentimental to the point of being without affect, umor was a smirking acknowledgement of the emotional and spiritual barrenness of everyday life. The savage nihilism of Vaché’s umor has been identified as an important precursor to the theater of the absurd (Polizzotti, 1995, 41). However, unlike absurdist humor, which ordinarily contains vaudeville-tinged moments of risible slapstick, umor blankly refused to include the communal eruption of laughter in its ranks. It instead marked the individual’s solitary retreat from physicality and communality.

and entombs the dynamic process of life—its inexorable will toward degradation, decay, and decomposition—within its well-defined aesthetic borders (Bataille 1985, 41).

Ultimately, Bataille tells us, Surrealism is a sham. The “sur” of its name falsely advertised an interest in plunging into that which is base, low, and depraved, but in reality Surrealism was always looking upward, towards the heavens. Surrealism’s promise of achieving “spiritual elevation” is an empty one, argues Bataille, because the movement had abandoned laughter for language. Bataille locates the central fraudulence of Breton’s Surrealism in its “astonishing solemnity,” which “consists precisely of acting and even thinking as if they had attained without laughter the violent spiritual elevation that is only the empty rumblings of their words” (Bataille 1985, 40).

While Breton was engaged in the poetic pursuit of sublime synthesis, Bataille courted the violent burst of laughter as a means of inciting an ecstatic “inner experience.” A lapsed Catholic, Bataille did not conceive of ecstasy in a religious sense, but used the word according to its original meaning, as per the Greek, to “stand outside oneself.” Bataillean ecstasy is an absolute identity with the impersonal flow of life and the total forgetting of self and other.⁴ Bataille proffers laughter—a material spasm full of

⁴ This formulation is borrowed from Milan Kundera, another aficionado of laughter, who in *Testaments Betrayed* (1995) offered a nuanced definition of ecstatic experience: “to be ‘outside oneself,’ however, does not mean outside the present moment, like a dreamer escaping into the past or the future. Just the opposite: ecstasy is the absolute identity with the present instant, total forgetting of past and future” (Kundera 1995,

sound and spit—as the preferred means of inciting ecstatic experience because the defenestration of the subject into the abyss of non-knowledge is first and foremost a bodily experience: ecstasy is convulsion.⁵ As humour noir embodies Breton’s idealism, ecstatic laughter embodies the philosophical principles of Bataille’s base materialism: the abandonment of transcendent idealism in favor of material excess, the rejection of objective language in favor of a chaotic untethering of subjectivity, and a renunciation of “total comprehension” in favor of plunging into the ungraspable domain of non-knowledge (Breton 1969b, 124).

This chapter dallies at the rift between humour noir and ecstatic laughter, the poles of which at times take on other guises: the personal rivalry between Breton and Bataille, the philosophical positions of idealism and base materialism, and the psychic practices of Freudian psychoanalysis and Jamesian mysticism. Recruiting humour noir as a sparring partner, I trace the history of ecstatic laughter—from its roots in ancient theology, through Jamesian mysticism, its secularization under the tutelage of Georges Bataille, and its intersection with the experimental practices of psychedelic art in the 1950s and 60s—to posit it as a valuable means of achieving a pre-subjective, impersonal

85). For Kundera’s theory of laughter see *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

⁵ In his book about Bataille, Nikolaj Lubecker uses the words “convulsive” and “ecstatic” as synonyms (Lubecker 2009).

experience that moves the laughter to an ineffable domain that lies beyond the individual subject's field of vision. However, I argue that this expansive experience suffers a catastrophic deflation the moment it is required to call upon the tools of humour noir – ego, intellect, language – for its representation. The latter section of this chapter will consider the psychedelic art of Henri Michaux, who as a practitioner of both Surrealist humour noir and ecstatic mysticism functions as a case study of this philosophical rift, to ask whether ecstatic laughter can articulate its own mode of politics and communication.

André Breton and Humour Noir

On March 29 1935, Breton delivered a lecture in Prague in which he identified the Hegelian concept of “objective humor” as a valuable tool in achieving the “final resolution” of “interior reality and exterior reality” which was the “supreme aim of Surrealism” (Breton 1978, 116). Breton paraphrases Hegel's *Aesthetics* to describe the components of this dialectic as, “the force that made the accidents of the outer world a matter of interest on the one hand, and on the other hand the force that made the caprices of personality a matter of interest” (Breton 1969c, 266). This struggle, Breton tells his audience, “ends in the triumph of objective humor, which is their dialectical resolution” (Breton 1969c, 266). Breton would invoke Hegel's objective humor once again in his editorial preface to *L'Humour Noir* (1940), an anthology of forty-five darkly

comic fragments that marked his first sustained attempt to codify a concept of humour noir. In his short formulation, Breton commended Hegel for “raising” humor, presumably from the base level of the body to the clean intellectual plains of the mind. Breton writes, “Hegel pushed humor into a decisive step in the domain of knowledge when it was raised to the concept of objective humor” (Breton 1993, 14).

Hegel’s brief and somewhat cryptic conceptualization of subjective and objective humor was a last minute addition to his *Aesthetics*. There, he described subjective humor as the narcissistic withdrawal of the writer into his own subjectivity, a recession that divorced the art-work from reality and produced “the most confused, disorderly jumbling of topics related only in the [writer’s] own subjective imagination” (Hegel 1998, 601). Objective humor, in contrast, is the aesthetic effect of attaining an “intimate penetration” of subject and object (Breton 1993, 14). The things of external reality (“the accidents of the outer world”) are drawn into the writer’s imagination (“the caprices of personality”) where they are carefully turned over and examined but never utterly absorbed by the writer’s subjectivity.⁶ Speaking of Goethe’s *West-ostlich Divan*, Hegel describes this process:

⁶ Hegel’s notion of objective humor as a strategy of intellectual apprehension is related to Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of laughter as a means of bringing an object into the sphere of knowledge in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981): “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

Here love is transferred wholly into the imagination, its movement, happiness, and bliss. In general, in similar productions of this kind we have before us no subjective longing, no being in love, no desire, but a pure delight in the topics, an inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination, a harmless play, a freedom in toying alike with rhyme and ingenious meters—and with all this a depth of feeling and cheerfulness of the inwardly self-moving heart which through the serenity of the outward shape lift the soul high above all painful entanglements in the restrictions of the real world. (Hegel 1998, 610-611)

Laughter has no place in the practice of objective humor. This is an intellectual endeavor—a triumph of the imagination which elevates the individual “high above” the surges of sentiment that constitute reality. Elsewhere, Hegel described laughter as a bodily aberration that belonged to the field of anthropology rather than the higher echelons of philosophy. It was only when the “vulgar peals of side-splitting laughter of an empty-headed or uneducated person [evolved] into the gentle smile of the noble soul” that we can consider it as “something originating in the free will” and therefore open to philosophical quandary (Rutter 2010, 77, n33).

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 of it an object 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. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment—both scientific and artistic—and into the hands of free experimental fantasy” (Bakhtin 1981, 23).

Hegel's "objective humor" therefore produces not only the dialectical synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity, but also functions to protect the humorist from the affective buffetings of reality. The same language of anti-sentimentalism, intellectual triumph, and self-preservation is used by Freud in his work on humor. In 1905, Freud published *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, in which he applied his model of dreams as articulated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) to jokes. Freud analyzes a whole series of jokes to conclude that "the processes of condensation (with or without substitute-formation), displacement, representation by absurdity or by the opposite, indirect representation, etc., which we have found taking part in the creation of jokes, all show a far-reaching agreement with the processes of the "dream-work" (Freud 2002, 154). Freud used these similarities to argue that both dreams and jokes serve the same basic psychical purpose: they dress up our repressed, unconscious desires in non-threatening forms (a dream, a joke) which can then be expelled without anxiety. As Hegel imbued objective humor with the ability to save the subject from sentiment, so Freud argues that the key function of humor is to preserve our emotional energies, suggesting that all "humorous pleasure [comes] from savings in expenditure on feeling" (Freud 2002, 226). The psyche, exhausted by its perpetual repression of its base desires, sublimates and expels these impulses as cruel or crude jokes. As such, Freud posits laughter as signaling an affective *saving* rather than an affective *expenditure*: our laughter

is not an excessive and unreasonable bodily gesture, but a psychically approved action that makes economic sense.

In this way, Freud's analysis of humor, like Hegel's objective humor and Breton's humour noir, waylays an imminent affective eruption (of laughter, sentiment, desire) by transmuting it into an aesthetic form: a lewd pun, a poetic image, or an acerbic quip. In his formulation of humour noir, Breton borrowed heavily from Freud's short essay "On Humour" (1928) which included a seminal example of gallows humor that sees a condemned man craft a joke from his imminent death by hanging,

To take a very crude example: when the criminal who is being led to the gallows on a Monday observes, 'Well, this is a good beginning to the week', he himself is creating the humour; the process works itself out in relation to himself and evidently it affords him a certain satisfaction. (Freud 1928, 1)

Deployed in a moment of calamity, the carefully composed witticism transposes the criminal's surge of suffering into a hard, internal satisfaction. Private pleasure wins out over public pain. Breton used this example to issue a fundamental principle of humour noir as "pre-eminently the mortal enemy of sentimentality with its air of being perpetually at bay" (Breton 1993, 17). The refusal of sentiment was linked, for both Freud and his acolyte Breton, to a triumph of the ego:

Humour has not only something liberating, analogous to that of wit and of the comic but also something sublime and elevated [...] The sublime evidently derives from the triumph of narcissism, from the invulnerability of the ego which affirms itself victoriously. The ego refuses to let itself be broken into, to let suffering impose external reality on it. It refuses to admit that the shocks of the

exterior world can touch it, much more, it shows that they can even become for it the sources of pleasure. (Freud, cited in Breton 1993, 16)

Breton cited this section in full in his short preface before defining humour noir as a “superior revolt of the mind” that served to protect the ego against the affective shocks of reality (Breton 1993, 14). This triumph of subjectivity is registered by Hegel, Freud, and Breton as a moment of *sublimity* in which the subject is lifted, elevated, or raised above the teeming mess of reality, and simultaneously spans (and so dialectically resolves) the “chasm of contradiction” that so terrified Breton (Caws 2008, 185).

Georges Bataille and Ecstatic Laughter

In his Second Manifesto, Breton described Surrealism as a “tiny foot bridge over the abyss” (Breton 1969b, 146). Five years later, he used the same language to identify objective humor as one such “bridge [thrown] over the abyss” that gapes between contradictions (Breton 1969c, 278). Breton regarded the abyss with a barely concealed horror, and dedicated his life to designing aesthetic exercises that would provide the subject safe passage far above its unkempt regions. Humour noir, that tight plait of Hegel and Freud, was one such tool. In contrast, Georges Bataille spent his life experimenting with forms of “inner experience” — intoxication, eroticism, sacrifice, laughter — that would plunge him into those same abyssal depths. But to Bataille, “the abyss separating *you* from *me*” is not a deathly void, but a vibrant space of passage that

is pregnant with “precarious possibilities” for communication (Bataille 2001, 283).⁷ While Breton sought to find and fix that “certain point in the mind” where the “I” would hold court over reality, Bataille solicited the bodily paroxysm of laughter as compelling proof that our “will to arrest being is damned” (Bataille 1988, 91). For “life is never situated at a particular point,” Bataille writes in *Inner Experience* (1943), “it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or a sort of streaming of electricity” (Bataille 1988, 94).

For Bataille, philosophy begins not from the cold heights of Breton’s bridge, but with the defenestration of the philosopher into the dynamic, material flow of life. The visceral overflow of laughter is Bataille’s preferred method of accessing these abyssal passageways where knowledge, the ego, and the dialectic break down. Reading laterally across his oeuvre, laughter returns in different guises, each time violently undermining the ontology of lack that grounds, through Freudian psychology and capitalism, modern life. Laughter functions as a literalization of the messy materiality, contagious communicability, and ecstatic evisceration that constitutes his philosophy of base materialism. In Bataille’s pornographic fiction, laughter leaks from mouths with an orgasmic materiality. His most famous erotic work, *L’histoire l’oeil* (1928), contains an

⁷ Elsewhere, Bataille refers to this same space more succinctly as “the abyss of possibilities” (Bataille 1988, 103).

orgy scene in which laughter mixes with vomit, semen, urine and blood in a festival of poly-directional desire: “A young girl was throwing up, and all of us had exploded in such wild fits of laughter at some point or other that we had wet our clothes, an armchair, or the floor” (Bataille 1977, 17). In his later sociological formulation of a “general economy” that operates according to overflow and expenditure rather than lack and accumulation, laughter is offered as a powerful example of wasteful consumption: in laughter we thoughtlessly spend calories without return (Bataille 2007). Elsewhere, in his wartime diary *Guilty* (1943), Bataille speaks of laughter as the only available mode of freedom in a world that otherwise demands systemic servitude, “In laughter, concern is lifted: the frame that ordered action bursts” (Bataille 2011, 85).

Bataille credited an ecstatic laughter with his inauguration into philosophy. In this prolonged autobiographical aside, taken from *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille dates his epiphanic experience with the abyss of non-knowledge to 1928, just a year before his split from Surrealism:

Fifteen years ago (perhaps a bit more), I returned from I don't know where, late in the night [...] I was extremely young then, chaotic and full of empty intoxications: a round of unseemly, vertiginous ideas, but ideas already full of anxieties, rigorous and crucifying, ran through my mind. In this shipwreck of reason, anguish, the solitary fall from grace, cowardice, bad faith profited: the festivity started up again a little further on. What is certain is that this freedom, at the same time as the “impossible” which I had run up against, burst in my head. A space constellated with laughter opened its dark abyss before me. At the crossing of the rue du Four, I became in this “Nothingness” unknown— suddenly... I negated these gray walls which enclosed me, I rushed into a sort of

rapture. I laughed divinely: the umbrella, having descended upon my head, covered me (I expressly covered myself with this black shroud). I laughed as perhaps one had never laughed: the extreme depth of each thing opened itself up—laid bare, as if I were dead.

I don't know if I stopped, in the middle of the street—concealing my transport under an umbrella. Perhaps I jumped (no doubt that's just an illusion): I was illuminated convulsively; I laughed, I imagine, while running. (Bataille 1988, 34).

The laughter that overwhelms Bataille reveals to him the inky depths of a “dark abyss” in which dialectical pairings such as being and non-being, life and death, knowledge and non-knowledge, and reason and unreason are fluidified and run together. In the early stages of the experience, Bataille retains hold of the first person perspective, but just barely, as the “I” is pummeled between and transformed by action verbs. The hyper-motility of the passage linguistically registers the spasmodic nature of laughter. In his work on sensation, Deleuze describes the spasm as a “movement in-place” that is evidence of “the entire body trying to escape, to flow out of itself” (Deleuze 2003, 41, xi). Subjectivity recedes as the body strains away from its structural containment and toward a free passage of material flow. In Deleuze’s words, “it is not I who attempt to escape from my body, it is the body that attempts to escape from itself by means of...in short, a spasm” (Deleuze 2003, 15). Bataille’s laugh-spasm is an example of this spasmodic movement in-place, both physically, as the body churns athletically but covers no distance, and mentally, as the “I” is finally dissolved so that the experiencing consciousness may flow freely into uncharted inner territories. As Bataille’s laughter

overwhelms him he can no longer gauge the difference between inner movement and outer movement: did he stop, in the middle of street? Did he jump, or laugh, or run?

It is this will to internal motility that marks Bataille's experience as mystic in the tradition of William James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James lists the four identifying features of mystic experience: ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and the passivity of the subject. The laughter that echoes along Rue de Four shares these qualities. Laughter renders Bataille passive: he is buffeted and maimed by its force. It bursts his head, encloses him, thrusts him into rapture, and toys with his life, "it is," he says, "as if I were dead" (Bataille 1988, 34). The ineffability of the experience is evidenced by Bataille's faltering language. The stuttering repetition of "laughed" hitches the narrative flow, verbal hedges such as "sort of," "perhaps," and "as if" reveal the paucity of language in documenting the experience, and the use of various suspension points, particularly dashes and ellipses, rend literal holes in Bataille's report. Despite this inarticulateness, however, a noetic quality remains. Bataille is "illuminated" as the "extreme depth of each thing opened itself up" to him (Bataille 1988, 34).

Bataille himself identified this and other illuminating inner experiences as "mystic," although he is careful note the atheological nature of his brand of mysticism,

By inner experience I understand that which one usually calls mystical experience: states of ecstasy, rapture, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of confessional experience, to which one has to adhere up to now, than of an

experience laid bare, free of attachments, even of origin, of any confession whatsoever. (Bataille 1988, 3)

There can be no confession here, where there is no ego to divulge its secrets and no disciplinary theological structure to judge them. Indeed, the Rue de Four episode can be read as a conversion narrative in which laughter bursts Bataille's Catholic "frame of order" in favor of an atheological mysticism. The anecdote pivots on a nomenclatural hinge as the punitive dogma of Christianity—"crucifixion," "bad faith," a "fall from grace"—gives way to a voracious inrush of affective "rapture" and a concurrent outburst of generally "divine" laughter that prompts a convulsive illumination.

Repeatedly across his works, Bataille insisted that accessing this kind of "bare" ecstasy is a bodily endeavor: a muscular mysticism. In her provocative book, *Syncope: A Philosophy of Rapture* (1990), Catherine Clément gives us another name for this muscular dalliance with the ineffable impossible—"syncope." Etymologically related to syncopation, the syncope is an athletic moment of sudden suspension, dissonance, or unanticipated delay—of breathing, movement, thought, self, or consciousness. Examples include a swoon, an asthma attack, a hallucinatory apparition, a yogi retention of breath, an orgasm, a stumbling pirouette and of course, a laugh. Clément elaborates on the political usefulness of the syncope, which she claims as a form of mutiny. "The world in which I have lived until now idolizes power and force, muscle and health, vigor and lucidity. Syncope opens onto a universe of weakness and tricks; it leads to new

rebellions" (Clément 1994, 20). Unsurprisingly, Clément's partner in rebellion is Georges Bataille and his unruly laughter, which she describes beautifully, "laughter, but only as long as it is in bursts, unrelenting, an insatiable fire, until consciousness is extinguished. Uncontrollable laughter exhausts consciousness and makes it more tractable, more open to entering other landscapes" (Clément 1994, 7). Too often medicalized (and feminized) as a lapse that must be remedied by way of smelling salts or the enforcement of stricter social prohibitions, Clément argues that the syncope offers a rare chance to bypass the reason-obsessed ego and occupy alternate, non-subjectivized plains.

Clément admires Bataille because he refuses to wring desire out of philosophy. "Systems of thought are similar," Clément says, "they make use of all the twistings of the mind to expel something from it. But what? What is this water that has to be got out? Desire, impulse, tremor, spasm, affect—which dampness disturbs the philosopher?" (Clément 1994, 50). Although he never uses the word, Bataille's work is soaked in affect. His writings hook usefully into recent work in affect theory which presents affect as an unintentional, impersonal, and ultimately ungraspable "wave" that washes over and erodes the borders of a subject, thrusting her temporarily into a desubjectivized realm of pure movement and sensation.⁸ Compare these two passages, the first Bataille's

⁸ In affect studies, tidal metaphors are often invoked to convey the impersonal and imperceptible nature of affect. Such language of "waves" tends to note the contagious transmission of affect, which often causes authors to make a detour into a discussion of laughter. See, for example, Cynthia and Julie Willett's piece on

description of an inner experience, the second Brian Massumi's description of an affective experience:

Certainly, when I began to envisage the possibility of furthest descent within the sphere of laughter, the first effect was the feeling that everything offered by dogma was decomposed and swept away in a sort of deliquescent tide. I felt then that it was, after all, wholly possible to maintain faith and its related behavior, but that the tide of laughter which swept over me, made of my faith a game—a game in which I might continue to believe, but which was transcended, nonetheless, by the dynamics of the game which was given me in laughter. (Bataille 1986, 94)

He is no one, nowhere, in darkness. He is in an in-between space composed of accumulated movements bled into one another and folding in upon the body [...] He is in the space of the duration of an ungraspable event. The feeling of the event washes through him (or that in-between of space and time), a wave or vibration that crests in the spoken lines. (Massumi 2002, 57)

The interstitial darkness of Bataille's abyss, pregnant with feeling and studded with laughter, is kin to this pre-personal field of affective sensation that Massumi credits with offering the key to a radically different model of sociality that is "'prior to' the separating out of individuals" (Massumi 2002, 9). It is precisely this ontological potential that Bataille sees embedded in the torrential rush of laughter that convulses the self-contained individual and so "reduces him to the impersonal state of a living substance: he escapes himself and thereby opens himself to the other." (Bataille 2011, 129).

Xenophobia and Affect in which they argue that "affects can also spread like a physical contagion across thousands of miles via waves of energy transmission. Whole epidemics of panic, fear, and even laughter can unfurl through these imperceptible waves" (Willet et. al 2014, 94).

Nitrous Oxide Philosophy

Many of Bataille's grounding concepts about non-knowledge, self-annihilation, and formlessness, including his conceptualization of life as a stream or continuum into which the ego is necessarily dissolved, recall the teachings of Buddhism. Ecstatic laughter finds its roots here: the figure of Budai, commonly referred to as "the laughing Buddha," evidences the centrality of ego-deflating laughter to Buddhism. In *Zen and the Brain* (1998), an exhaustive study of the intersection between meditation and neurology, James L. Austin describes the relationship between laughter and Buddhist enlightenment:

Laughter occurs whenever the insights of kensho overturn the old *I-Me-Mine*. The new domain is unexpected. It has inconceivable dimensions. So when laughter bubbles out of a pervasive, ongoing, comic spirit, it signifies something akin to that abrupt giving way of boundaries, that melting undifferentiation of barriers, that release of all tensions which *is* Zen awakening. (Austin 1998, 415)

That "inconceivable" and "undifferentiated" space that Austin identifies in religious terms as "Zen awakening" is the same domain that Bataille renames the abyss of non-knowledge. Bataille was familiar with Buddhism, and applauded yoga for its manual pursuit of ecstatic experience, although as a base materialist he could not abide the logic of transcendence that undergirded the practice. As such, he plotted an amendment to their technique, musing that "it would be pleasant if some manual existed, stripping the yogis' methods of their moral or metaphysical beliefs" (Bataille 2004, 78).

Bataille serves as an important lynchpin that illuminates the connections between Eastern religion, process philosophy, and affect theory. His work secularizes Buddhist mysticism into a theory of life as a dynamic material flow of affective surges that are always in excess of the individual. Reading Bataille's work, the individual appears pallid and small, a tight space that must be demolished. "It is possible that I want to be everything, to enclose everything," Bataille speculates, but "in this case I would enclose in order to stream out, to flow out, to lose myself" (Bataille 2014, 226). We remember Bataille's notion of the "stream"—the free passage of communication between experiencing consciousnesses—from his description of life in *Inner Experience* (1943),

Life is never situated at a particular point: it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or like a sort of streaming of electricity. Thus, there where you would like to grasp your timeless substance, you encounter only a slipping, only the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements. (Bataille 1988, 94)

Here and elsewhere, Bataille's language resonates with that of William James, who poached his most famous term "stream of consciousness" [*viññāna-sota*] from Buddhist scripture to advocate for a model of subjectivity-as-flow that rivalled Freud's tripartite psychological structure. In a 1909 letter, James voiced his distaste for Freud, describing him as "a man obsessed with fixed ideas" (Villiers 2008, 19). James not only rejected Freud's model of subjectivity, he also rankled against his methods. In that same letter he condemned the linguistic symbolism that fuelled dream-work (and, implicitly, joke-

work) as a “most dangerous method” because it presumed to externalize, objectively decode, and fix subjective desires (Hale 1971, 19).

As with Bataille, James was attracted to mystic experience because it promised to provide access to a dynamic, material space of uncoded difference in which Freud’s fixed ego and the clean lines of Hegel’s absolute idealism come undone. For James, the “ideal” and the “ego” are well-manicured lies—synecdoches of life that obscure the heterogeneous difference that is the true texture of reality. “The ideal,” James writes,

is a mere EXTRACT from the actual, marked by its deliverance from all contact with this diseased, inferior, and excrementitious stuff. [There are] elements of the universe with may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those other elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident—so much “dirt,” as it were, and matter out of place. (James 2009, 79-80)

The putrefying materiality of James’ language here—disease, excrement, dirt—recalls Bataille’s “excremental philosophy,” which invokes the messy transmissibility of bodily fluids to counteract the pristine practices of Hegelian idealism (Breton 1969b, 185). One bodily transmission in particular would unite James and Bataille in their quest for mystic experience: laughter. For James achieved ecstasy only once, by way of a nitrous-oxide induced laughter that overwhelmed his senses. In the final essay written before his death, James credited a short pamphlet about laughing gas—*The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874) by Benjamin Paul Blood—with introducing him to nitrous oxide and laughter as means of achieving mystic experience, admitting “I

forget how it fell into my hands, but it fascinated me so “weirdly” that I am conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of my thinking ever since” (James 1911, 373).

James’ only account of personal ecstatic experience can be found appended to a previously published essay about Hegel titled “On Some Hegelisms” (1882). In this essay, James reports that his ecstatic experience was accompanied by

the conviction that Hegelism was true after all [...] that every opposition, among whatsoever things, vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based; that all contradictions, so-called, are but differences; that all differences are of degree; that all degrees are of a common kind; that unbroken continuity is the essence of being; and that we are literally in the midst of an infinite, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain. (James 1937, 295)

James’ initial concurrence with Hegelian synthesis is derailed in the second half of the clause, which does not report a reconciliation as per Hegel’s (and Breton’s) fantasy, but instead claims that opposites vanish into the chaotic messiness of a differential reality; the teeming “real matter” of which is so often “cast out” in favor of neatly abridged or idealized conceptualizations of the world.⁹ The intellectual ecstasy of achieving transcendental synthesis is succeeded by the realization of an infinite and incalculable reality. When we are told we are “literally in the midst of an infinite” the literalness of this infinite is a vital clue that for James, mystic experience and the dirt that it kicks up are material in nature.

⁹ This is a paraphrase of James’ claim that systemization “is a monstrous abridgement of life, which, like all abridgement is got by the absolute loss and casting out of real matter” (James 1956, 69-70).

It is the material act of laughter that differentiates James's floods of opposites from Hegel's drive to synthesis. In the same piece, James transcribes a few sentences written whilst under the influence of nitrous oxide:

Reconciliation of opposites; sober, drunk, all the same!
Good and evil reconciled in a laugh!
it escapes, it escapes!
But ---
What escapes, WHAT escapes? (James 1937, 295)

At first, it appears as if laughter is in the service of the dialectic. Good and evil, perhaps the most fundamental of human binaries, are apparently reconciled. But this synthesis is achieved not through the neatly calculated progression of dialectical thought, but through an irrational burst of laughter that performs a dangerously acrobatic suspension of meaning, narrative, and self. As Derrida has said, "laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death" (Derrida 1980, 256). Here, reconciliation is not a finalized synthesis that fortifies reason, but the production of a tumultuous field in which the fixed positional poles of opposition are suddenly overrun by a thousand other posts that proliferate with such fervor that binaries can no longer be identified. James lists the torrential stream of opposites that swarmed through his mind and on the page during his laughing experience:

God and devil, good and evil, life and death, I and thou, sober and drunk, matter and form, black and white, quantity and quality, shiver of ecstasy and shudder

of horror, vomiting and swallowing, inspiration and expiration, fate and reason, great and small, extent and intent, joke and earnest, tragic and comic, and fifty other contrasts figure in these pages. (James 1937, 296)

The mutation of “reconciliation” from synthesis to proliferation occurs within James’ own writing. His thought refuses to end with simple resolution; instead it opens out onto an expansive plain in which the undefined “it” escapes. Let us consider more closely the latter half of James’ rumination:

Good and evil reconciled in a laugh!
it escapes, it escapes!
But ---
What escapes, WHAT escapes? (James 1937, 295)

What indeed? Does the “it” refer to the laugh itself, which pumps uncontrollably from James’ diaphragm, escaping his body as sound and spit? Is “it” the newly reconciled good-evil hybrid which is perhaps too monstrous to be born as firm, observable fact? This undefined “it” careens through the body as laughter, perpetually escaping across a new, unknown territory that exists beyond reconciliation. Rather than fixing or synthesizing meaning, nitrous oxide reconciliation is therefore a gateway through which this mutable, undefined “it” is released. The acute transition from a Hegelian platform of dialectical synthesis to the mystic experience of ecstatic abandon is the life-blood of the anaesthetic revelation. James explains that Blood’s *Anaesthetic Revelation* was a “stepping-stone of [his] thinking” precisely because of this elegant transition: “it begins with dialectical reasoning,” James tells the reader, “but it ends in a trumpet-blast of

oracular mysticism, straight from the insight wrought by anaesthetics" (James 1911, 373).

The nitrous oxide note that James appended to his "On Some Hegelisms" (1882) is one such trumpet blast of post-Hegelian mysticism. James explicitly narrates the laughing passage from Hegelism to mysticism:

the identification of contradictories [under nitrous oxide intoxication], so far from being the self-developing process which Hegel supposes, is really a self-consuming process, passing from the less to the more abstract, and terminating either in a laugh at the ultimate nothingness, or in a mood of vertiginous amazement at a meaningless infinity. (James 1937, 298)

Rather than fortifying the individual, this encounter with contradiction or difference burns away the self until all that remains is a "laugh" or a "mood." What we are witnessing is a mutation of dialectical thought, which no longer finds its consummation in the pruned synthesis of opposites, but in an ecstatic overflow of infinite multiplicities. This is what Jacques Derrida means when he names Bataille's laughter a "Hegelianism without reserve" and proffers it as the scion of an impossible philosophy that is always in excess of language and logic (Derrida 1980). Derrida goes on to explain that "a certain burst of laughter exceeds [Hegelianism] and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of "experience" which makes Hegelian discourse dislocate *itself*" (Derrida 1980, 253).

The ability to perform this philosophical dislocation is precisely what is at stake in the extrication of ecstatic laughter from the clever witticisms of humour noir. In the last passage of his final essay, William James ventriloquizes Blood, “we are the first to burst in this silent sea. Philosophy must pass from words, that reproduce but ancient elements, to life itself, that gives the integrally new” (James 1911, 410). Language must be surpassed by a vibrant attenuation to the infinite proliferations of *life itself*. We have given a variety of names to these non-lingual bursts of material consciousness or “life itself” which occupy what Derrida called “the extreme point of experience”: Catherine Clément’s swooning syncopes, George Bataille’s explosive inner experiences, and William James’ nitrous-oxide laced mystic experiences. At the heart of each rendition of life itself is ecstatic laughter, which provokes but also embodies the philosophical principles of mystic experience: the renunciation of dialectical synthesis and transcendent idealism, a suspicion of reason and language as enervating and enslaving experiential life, and the transgressive dissolution of the bounded self in the “silent sea” of life itself.

It is the *silence* of this sea that is of concern as we move into the final section of this chapter. The paradox: if ecstatic experience dislocates discourse beyond repair, how may we recount and so usefully occupy the contours of this new philosophical terrain? The material experience of laughter is wet and noisy, but once placed on the page its

delirious disorder evaporates in the precision of linguistic meaning. After making much of the expansive materiality of mystic experience, William James describes the intellectual isolation that results from the experience: “the incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else” (James 1902, 220). Here, we find ourselves dangerously close to Breton’s black humorist, who seeks exile from the messy social in the securely barricaded ego. Elsewhere, Catherine Clément worries that despite the meaty materiality of the syncope, the inability to narrate the impossible travel narrative of inner experience produces a philosophical *negativity* or *absence*: “ecstasy reveals how impossible it is for language to domesticate it in a given order: ineffable, it refuses to be said. It can be spoken of, often, only in counterpoint, in the negative, saying what it is not, and that it is not what it shows – a god, God, the void, nothing” (Clément 1994, 12).

Clément and Bataille both describe laughter as propelling the disintegrating ego well beyond the carefully mapped (and so well policed) territory of modern subjectivity and into distant landscapes, from which it returns with neither the wherewithal nor the vocabulary to file a report. The lure of this impossible travel narrative was shared by André Breton, who in a 1944 press release expressed Surrealist interest in “the huge indeterminate area over which the protectorate of reason does not extend” (Polizzotti 1995, 209). However, Breton’s interest in this landscape was not as a mystic philosopher,

but as a conquering artist. Writing in Nazi-occupied Paris, Maurice Nadeau published *The History of Surrealism* in 1944, the same year as Breton's press release. Nadeau's history contains an implicit critique of what he saw as Breton's ill-timed desire for occupation, conquest and control:

The movement was envisaged by its founders not as a new artistic school, but as a means of knowledge, a discovery of continents which had not yet been systematically explored: the unconscious, the marvelous, the dream, madness, hallucinatory states—in short...the other side of the logical décor. The final goal remained the reconciliation of two hitherto warring realms: man and the world. (Nadeau 2000, 80)

Breton enters these alternate psychical continents with the colonist's thirst for expansion. These new territories will be relentlessly tilled for knowledge, which once accumulated will be exported back to the imperial headquarters of the conscious mind. Again, we are reminded of Freud's phraseology; specifically, his 1926 observation that the sexual desires of a woman is a "dark continent for psychology" ripe for conquest (Freud 1959, 38).¹⁰

By "conquest," Freud and Breton both mean the building of a linguistic code by which enigmatic experience may be translated into a readable discourse. Language is a sprung trap designed to capture that which lies outside signification: Freud's linguistic

¹⁰ In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) Hélène Cixous's vibrant critique of this very phrase (and Freud's model of phallogentric lack more generally) ends with a call for a revolutionary laughter as she encourages women "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter." (Cixous 1976, 888).

chain of association and Breton's Exquisite Corpse game both. Here is Breton: "Silence, so that I may pass where no one has ever passed. Silence! After you, my beautiful language!" (Breton 1999, 15). This desire to linguistically render and so possess the unintelligible explains Breton and Freud's shared desire to explain the violent, inexplicable burst of laughter according to the social codes of humor. In *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille offers his own rumination on the word "silence" to explain how words abolish experience, "the word silence is still a sound," he tells us, 'to speak is in itself to imagine knowing" (Bataille 1988, 13). He extends this paradox to make a distinction between the silent "voyage" of inner experience and the blustering wordiness of philosophical discourse:

Discourse, if it wishes to, can blow like a gale wind. The difference between inner experience and philosophy resides principally in this: that in experience, what is stated is nothing, if not a means and even, as much as a means, an obstacle; what counts is no longer the statement of wind, but the wind. (Bataille 1988, 13)

The crux of Bataille's metaphor is this: how can we return from inner experience without bending ourselves to the wind of discourse and letting it propel us home, back to the same shores? How transform that "silent, elusive, ungraspable" inner experience into a communal and communicative new philosophy without genuflecting to the symbolically freighted "law of language"? In short: is it possible to report on the philosophical capacities of ecstatic laughter without resorting to the tools of humour noir?

Henri Michaux and Transreality

To consider this problem, I look to the work of Henri Michaux, who as a Surrealist poet and psychedelic mystic straddles the rift between humour noir and ecstatic laughter. Like Bataille, Michaux produced a hugely eclectic body of work that includes surreal poetry, plays, art criticism, philosophical aphorisms, drug writing, psychedelic art, watercolors, Chinese calligraphy, and Indian ink drawings. At heart, Michaux was a travel writer, although to classify him as such would require libraries and bookstores to radically rethink the genre.¹¹ Michaux wrote poetic postcards home from real, fictional, and psychic countries. The chaotic interior landscapes revealed to him by his self-experimentation with mescaline allowed him to consider his drug writing as ‘ludicrous’ travel narratives; “what I saw there,” says Michaux, “even when it was ludicrous, still counts, is still more real and unforgettable for me than all the countries that I have wandered through” (Michaux 1975, 62). Michaux’s art is impelled by his desire to move beyond—beyond the self, language, knowledge—to reach a dynamic philosophical plain upon which being may roam freely.

¹¹ There is a whole host of critical work on Michaux’s travel narratives. See L. Edson “The Fantastic Travel Adventures of Henri Michaux,” *Scope of the Fantastic: Theory, Technique, Major Authors* eds. R.A. Collins and H.D. Pearce (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984): 215-220; Peter Broome, *Henri Michaux* (London: Athlone Press, 1977); Malcolm Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

Of course, as both Bataille and James would attest, launching oneself into the abyss is easier than returning to coherence. Perhaps, though, Michaux did not plan to come home. In an essay from 1972, he disassociated himself from those who had attempted to report back on surreality, claiming instead that he was “aspiring toward a greater *transreality*, wanting to live there forever” (Michaux 2001, 77). He is not an ethnographic eye-witness nor a conquering colonist, but a nomadic wanderer of this new territory, propelled by an impulse for movement which he dated back to his early years: “When I was a child,” remembers Michaux, “I engaged in daydreaming, never, so far as I remember, was I a prince and not very often a conqueror, but I was extraordinary in movements” (Michaux, 2000, 8). Octavio Paz, celebrated author and Michaux enthusiast, suspected that Michaux never intended to translate his experiences into expressive discourse, but was instead on the search for an alternative means of making artistically present the wordless chaos of non-knowledge: “Perhaps Michaux has never tried to express anything. All his efforts have been directed at reaching that zone, by definition indescribable and incommunicable, in which meanings disappear,” Paz reflects, “and the distance between the object and the conscience that contemplates it melt away in the face of the overwhelming presence, the only thing that really exists” (Paz 1973, 79).

Writing retrospectively, Paz has the luxury of understanding Michaux's diverse works in terms of their collective final destination: that ineffable zone of non-knowledge in which meanings disappear. However, a panoramic view of Michaux criticism hints at a hairline crack in his oeuvre, a crack that maps onto that familiar rift between laughter and humor. One camp of literary critics focus on Michaux's earlier work—his strange, grotesque poetry and the blackly humorous Plume stories—to position him alongside his Surrealist contemporaries. These critics, as we shall see, read Michaux's laughter and humor as brutal and brutalizing forces wielded by the sadistic subject as it struggles to raise itself above the traumas of reality. As his work developed, however, Michaux's quick poetic wit mutated into a more basic obsession with visionary *speed*. His growing preference for palpable, kinetic experience over legible, linear expression drew him away from poetry and toward the visual mediums of painting, calligraphy, cinema, and the inner flurry of images provoked by psychoactive drugs. The second camp of Michaux readers focused on the philosophical dimensions of these later experimentations. Deleuze and Guattari laud this later Michaux as a champion of deterritorialization, a philosopher of "infinite speed" whose experimentation with mescaline allowed him to "[establish] admirable and minute protocols of experience" that revealed the self to be embroiled in a perpetual act of becoming.¹² It is after

¹² Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 36. Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 283. It is also interesting to note that a painting

experimenting with LSD that Michaux voiced his most Deleuzian revelation: identity is difference, and thought is dense, molecular, and material, “everything in thought is somehow molecular. Tiny particles that appear and disappear. Particles in perpetual associations, dissociations, reassociations, swifter than swift, almost instantaneous” (Michaux, 1974, 13).

Even in his early poems, Michaux insisted on the dense presence of the world, thus diverging from the abstract aestheticism that marked Breton’s Surrealism. Michaux, for his own part, refused to officially cleave to Surrealism, despite the “school’s attempt to claim him” as part of their movement (Ellman 1948, 36). In 1925 he published an article in the journal *Le Disque Vert* in which he rejected psychic automatism for its mechanical, disincarnate nature, echoing Bataille’s critique of Breton when he deemed Surrealism to be “as monotonous as a clown” (Jenny 2000, 188). In his editor’s introduction to *Darkness Moves* (1994), David Ball narrates Michaux’s preference for artistic freedom and poetic density over automatic technique and aestheticized abstraction:

Michaux’s strangeness has led him to be classified with the Surrealists (some critics feel they have to put him somewhere), but he never used their techniques: no *cadaver exquis*, no free associations, no abstractly formulated attempt to

by Henri Michaux is used as the front cover image for Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* (1994).

destroy tradition and logic. A sentence like Breton's 'The color of fabulous salvations darkens even the slightest death-rattle: a calm of relative sighs' could never have been written by Michaux, who tried to render his dangerous, magical world as clearly and concretely as possible. (Ball 1994, ix).

Having just testified to Michaux's absolute separation from Surrealism and its abstract techniques, Ball goes on to pen a subsection titled "Humor and Terror," in which he presents Michaux's early poems as exemplary of Surrealist humour noir. "The essence of what the Surrealists called *humour noir*," explains Ball, "is surely what happens when we read [Michaux's early poetry]" (Ball 1994, xix). The sado-violence of Michaux's poetry, in which heads and arms are routinely ripped off and cast aside, and the nightmarish absurdity of the Plume stories, which tend to end in Kafkaesque confrontations with inexplicable authorities, are delivered with a deadpan atonality that for Ball recalls the arch affectlessness and self-preservation of the black humorist; they are efforts to ensure "the self's survival against aggressively hostile forces" (Ball 1994, xviii).

Michaux himself called his violently humorous poems "exorcisms" that were designed "to shake off overpowering influence...to ward off the surrounding powers of the hostile world" (Ball 1994, 84). The presentation of the poem as a gun turret leveled against reality has been repeated in Michaux criticism as compelling proof that his poetry offers examples of straight humour noir. Critic Peter Broome describes Michaux's humor as "a private Resistance movement," before adding, "the explosion of laughter, thrown in the face of reality, is the liberation of the spirit of the prisoner and the

guarantee of its invulnerability" (Broome 1977, 104). It is difficult not to hear the echo of Breton here: Broome's "private resistance" is a reiteration of Breton's "superior revolt of the mind" as laughter and humor are mobilized against reality by the ego in its quest for "invulnerability." Richard Ellman corroborates this connection in his assertion that Michaux's "principal weapon is humor, sometimes subtle and delicate, sometimes ferocious as Swift's, but always tending to assert equilibrium" (Ellman 1948, 37). Ellman's imaginary equilibrium recalls Hegel's objective humor, which sought to balance subjectivity and objectivity with such careful precision that dialectical resolution would be achieved.

These readings of Michaux's humor as straight humour noir fail to recognize that his "exorcisms" are not always successful. These "failed" exorcisms are perhaps better understood as *inverted exorcisms*: the ego does not triumphantly exorcise reality, but instead reality overwhelms and jettisons the ego. These inverted exorcisms are recognizable by the destabilizing laughter that interrupts the poetic ritual of humorously "casting off" reality. Here is a section from a poem titled "Clown" (1939):

Drained of the abscess of being somebody, I will
drink again of nourishing space.
[...]
Clown, destroying in laughter, in grotesqueness,
in guffawing, the meaning that contrary to all
indications I had developed about my own importance.

I will dive. (Michaux 1968, 233-235)

Here, the clown figure is transfigured. No longer a sign of monotonous automatism, the clown is equipped with the disruptive guffaw of laughter, which has the power to destroy being and then create, from this “drained abscess,” an access point into which the philosopher-poet can dive. We hear an echo of William James’ mystic experience here, his caveat that “we must be willing to forget conventionalities, and dive below the smooth and lying official conversational surface” (James 2009, 80). Far from being bolstered by laughter, here Michaux’s ego is emptied out and his being subsequently renewed; the poem maps a move away from the tight lines of language and into a vast, unmapped space into which the ego plunges away from itself.

A similar disruption of being by laughter occurs in “Immense Voice,” a poem from 1945:

I laugh, I laugh all alone in another
in another
in another, secretly
I laugh, I have a laughing gun
my body gunned
I, I have, I am
elsewhere
elsewhere
elsewhere!¹³

¹³ Cited in Broome 1977, 104. Translation my own.

Peter Broome has interpreted Michaux's "laughing gun" as a weapon wielded in the name of Bretonian self-preservation; it is "a somber gun detonated by fear and frustration, not aiming back at the Germans but projecting his spirit out of their grasp and keeping it intact" (Broome 1977, 104). I would trouble the "intactness" of Michaux's spirit in this moment. What we see is not the crystallization of being, but its foundering. The private solitariness of the laugh, that which is "all alone," is exploded outwards and into "another," a dissemination that reverberates in triplicate: "in another/in another/in another." The rhythmic repetition reads as a multiplying mantra of dissemination that again recalls William James' intoxicated "it escapes/it escapes." The laughing gun does indeed project Michaux outwards into an unnamed "elsewhere," but it does so at the expense of the coherence and intactness of the ego, which stutters along the pathway of elementary grammar: "I, I have, I am." Language breaks apart into its basic components and is finally released forth, subjectless, into a jubilant, exclamatory elsewhere.

The overrunning of language by laughter reflected a more general move by Michaux away from linguistic attempts to capture and render intelligible the teeming activity of the world. Language does not take into account, insisted Michaux, the fact that "the world is in fact heavy, thick, encumbering" (Michaux 2001, 77). In *Emergences/Resurgences* (1972), a late rumination on the "deconditioning" power of painting, Michaux explains his distaste for the pernicious unwieldiness of language:

I would gladly make signs, but a sign is also a stop sign. And at this juncture there is still something I desire above all else. A continuum. A murmur without end, like life itself – which continues us, above and beyond quality. Impossible to draw as if this continuum did not exist. This is what needs to be bodied forth. (Michaux 2001, 11).

As with Bataille, James, and Clément before him, Michaux mobilizes laughter in his pursuit of “life itself”: the wordless, infinite “continuum” that escapes the cuffs of language and must instead be materially “bodied forth.”

Michaux’s laughter and James’ nitrous oxide notations share several qualities: the disintegration and multiplication of the ego, the splintering of language, and the rhythmic pulsations of expression that reveal the existence of an immense, rarely perceived spatial dimension.¹⁴ The psychedelic flavor of Michaux’s laughter is prescient. In 1956, just over a decade after the writing of “Immense Voice,” the tee-totaling Michaux experimented with mescaline for the first time (Ball 1994, xxx). Collectively referred to as the Mescaline cycle, Michaux documented his psychedelic experiences in four books: *Miserable Miracle* (1956), *Infinite Turbulence* (1957), *Light Through the Darkness* (1961), and *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the countless minor ones* (1966).¹⁵ As with

¹⁴ The rapid report of Michaux’s laughing gun recalls another drug-induced laugh: the abrupt machine-gun patter of a hashish-addled Walter Benjamin, which he describes as “SUDDEN LAUGHTER, repeated short bursts of laughter.” Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006) 73.

¹⁵ Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2002); Henri Michaux, *Infinite Turbulence* (London, Calder and Boyers, 1975). Henri Michaux, *Light Through Darkness* (New York: The Orion Press, 1963). Henri Michaux, *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the countless minor ones* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974). These works will be cited parenthetically in the text by the following acronyms: MM, IT, LTD, MO.

William James' nitrous oxide experience, Michaux's poetic and pictorial account of his mescaline trips read as personal forays into Bataillean inner experience. The drug paralyzes language, causing words to fray and fail; experience is reformatted according to a different rhythm, whereby "everything came in snatches, very small snatches, isolated words, bits of sentences" (MM, 83). The fragmentation of language is accompanied by a fragmentation of being as the self finds itself awash in a flood of other selves. Michaux describes mescaline as an "infinity machine," that through proliferation causes the obliteration of thought and of subjectivity. In one encounter, Michaux describes the violent inner vertigo caused by the drug:

More than anything else Mescaline demolished some of my effectual barriers, the ones that make me myself and not one of the others among my possible "me's." It took me weeks and weeks to reconstruct them and to shut myself inside them again. (MM, 82)

And, as we have come to anticipate, the swollen obliteration of the self is coterminous with an unquenchable laughter that seizes the user. Michaux associates this drug-induced laughter with a "rumpling" of being, "His being – this is what he feels – his being is rumpled. He hears what sounds like smothered wild laughter" (MO, 78). The ego-driven exorcism has been supplanted by a different practice: a being-crumpling laughter that transfigures the drug-user into a conduit for the infinite. "Laughter," says Michaux, loosens the self's grip on reality, it "enables the subject to abandon positions of too great constraint" (LTD, 13). In *Miserable Miracle* laughter literally announces the

departure of Michaux's experience from reality as his hallucinations begin: "I fall asleep...and suddenly I am awakened by noisy bursts of laughter: children throwing snowballs at each other in my dream. But what laughter! Apparently right in my room, and the little boys so distinct!" (MM 101). In his later experimentations, Michaux offers a more general portrait of laughter's role as the 'announcer' of the psychedelic experience:

There is a call of the infinite, enormous, all-invading. Why? How? As the wall closes in and recedes rhythmically, and your arm seems to lengthen periodically, there are also gales of unquenchable laughter, which mean nothing either. (LTD, 6-7)

Michaux describes the tenor of the laughter as a kind of meaty facsimile of the inner workings of mescaline; it is "intense, born of tenuous vibrations, a laugh that is 'in the know,' that grasps the infinite subtleties of an infinitely absurd world" (MM 97). Here, as in all of Michaux's representations of psychedelic laughter, the laugh is a separate, living entity that is divorced from the user. It is "born" not of the subject's psychic apparatus, but of mescaline vibrations. It possesses its own secret consciousness that Michaux describes with a barely concealed paranoia: it is "in the know." While "your arm" may still belong to a psychologically discrete *you*, the "gales" and "waves" of laughter belong to the expansive "abyss," which Michaux repeatedly refers to as a blustering natural landscape: a typhoon, a torrent, an ocean. Laughter is the strong-man of the mescaline "infinity machine": it is the physical process that executes the ego-loss

fundamental to psychedelic experience. The laughter gushes over the ego; “if the wave is strong, the thought is constantly disturbed, falls apart, is obliterated” (LTD, 13).

Again and again in his mescaline cycle, Michaux describes psychedelic laughter as a terrifyingly alien force that defenestrates the ego into abyssal oblivion. This is the dark reflection of William James’ ecstatic plunge into the dynamic continuum of ‘life itself’. In *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Michaux solemnly diagnoses his own horror at confronting the abyss: “it was agonizing because I resisted,” he says. (MM, 126) The primary dictate of Bataille’s inner experience has been violated—in order to experience the abyss as a psychical window rather than a psychical prison one must release one’s grip on the “I” and find a means of *communicating* beyond language and beyond the ego. This communication, says Bataille, “only takes place between two people who risk themselves, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness” (Bataille 1992, 21). To give oneself over blindly to laughter – an *unsmothered* laughter – is to take this lacerating risk that abolishes not only the “I” but its twin fortifications: reason and language. The escalating panic that Michaux feels in the wake of his unquenchable laughter is proof that he has failed to risk himself fully. Consider this passage from *Miserable Miracle*:

Then suddenly, though nothing has struck him as any different, *he laughs*. At what? Why? No visible reason for laughing. What he wanted was visions, but for that – he doesn’t know it yet – he will have to wait for hours. Again he laughs. Again for no reason. I (to get back to the only witness I have to go by), I, “in

ambush," kept watch inside myself because of this laugh, this laugh without a cause. (MM, 96)

The sudden onslaught of laughter jolts the narrative from first to third person as Michaux is thrust from himself. The hidden origins and irrationality of the laughter is repeatedly noted in a halting, dispersed rhythm—"no reason" "no visible reason" "no reason"—that reads as a perverse version of the flowing "elsewhere/elsewhere/elsewhere" triplicate found in "Immense Voice." However, here the "laugh without a cause" is so troubling to Michaux that he laboriously retrieves his ego, the ever-watchful 'I', from the precipice-edge of the abyss and sets it to work as a surveillance system. The compulsion to command the ego to lie in ambush and "keep watch" over laughter without humor is precisely why Michaux cannot achieve ecstatic communication beyond self-dissolution.

Michaux's oeuvre is a literary instantiation of the schism between mystic laughter and humour noir. The cross-contamination of laughter and humor in his work indicates his inability to separate out and keep distinct the two impulses. His carefully crafted humour noir poems are infested suddenly by a destabilizing laughter, which unravels the text's linguistic dexterity to thrust the dissolving ego into a wordless "elsewhere." Conversely, in his drug-writing, the ontological havoc wreaked by an inexplicable laughter is stemmed by Michaux's sudden, strenuous hold on his ego and on language, which he describes as the "bridge I was forced to build" (MM 134).

Confronted with Michaux's humour noir poems, *Darkness Moves* editor David Ball cannot help but slip into the muddy waters of contradiction: Michaux is both hostile and deferential to language, Michaux seeks to both preserve and dissolve the self, Michaux both is and is not a Surrealist. In his drug-writing, the gulf between laughter and language materializes in two different figures who share narrative agency: Michaux-as-doctor and Michaux-as-patient. During one mescaline trip, the latter is terrified by the non-verbal murmur of life that floods his senses. He describes the experience as a brutal assault against both himself and linguistic form: he is "attacked" by a mass of "deformed" and disjunctive noises that sound like "voices strangely coupled with barks or jungle howls" (LTD, 59). Doctor-Michaux offers his diagnosis: "a Gargantuan laughter, which I was unable to achieve, might have liberated me" (LTD, 58). Sober, Michaux is aware that his horror at submitting to a liberating laughter is a symptom of his unhealthy reliance on language, the clean lines of which are tampered with and deformed by the reentrance of the syncope: the haptic messiness of sound and spit.

By the last installment of his mescaline cycle, *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the countless minor ones* (1966), Michaux had become accustomed to the jolts and jitters dealt by the drug, and can experience mystic experience without horror. Rather than compartmentalizing the "I" as unimpeachable writer and witness, Michaux allows the

drug to co-write his experience, which results in the deformation and overrunning of language by laughter and noisy difference:

The writing continues in this fashion, “supervised” by the [drug]. Not only by one. It is now a sort of murmur, a multiple murmur, as though from a group of several who might intercede, who intercede among the words, between one word and another, between one idea and its opposite, and interrupt, and interfere, and grumble and object, and mock, and disapprove, and jeer, and say ‘perhaps’ and ‘perhaps not’ and ‘not at all,’ and reconsider, and do not tolerate, and argue, and dissent, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and hop around, and clatter about, keep clattering, meanly, increasingly, continually, incredibly. (MO, 77)

A changing of the guard: the surveillance system of the “I” is succeeded by the lax supervision of the drug itself. This passage witnesses the rejuvenation of the “multiple murmur” of life itself. Non-verbal sounds sprout between words and derail the dialectic: these interrupters are not only sonic but physical as we engage in both laughter and hopping. The “I” disappears beneath a torrent of verbs and, no longer fearful of the wave of dissolution, the triplicate repetition we recognize from James’ mystic experience once again becomes functional; tellingly, it reverberates as a peal of laughter: “and laugh, and laugh, and laugh.” The sentence itself extends to such a dramatic degree that its sense unravels and it becomes a pulse of pure, sinuous energy constructed solely of adverbs.

Instead of crafting discrete sentences, Michaux and his mescalinian co-author multiply conjunctions to pile words upon words—and laugh and laugh and laugh—which gives the passage a lumpy texture. Riddled with the potholes of laughter, this

sentence is almost an image; and it is the closest Michaux ever gets to documenting the meaty, visceral experience of mystic laughter. Towards the end of his life, Michaux gravitated toward painting as his sole mode of artistic expression as he sought to create a new, gestural alphabet unmoored from existing structures of language. Michaux refused to title his paintings, but many of them feature blotchy, barely distinct faces with mouths cracked wide. On paper, the orifice is necessarily mute and so ambiguous: it is a laugh, it is a scream, it is a yawn. This is, of course, the final identifying feature of ecstatic laughter and inner experience: neither can make it to the page without recourse to that writerly “I” which mutes and so mutates its most fundamental qualities. It is precisely this untranslatability that Bataille lauds as laughter’s greatest strength, because it liberates “life” from systemic discourses that seek to control and contain desire.¹⁶ We must always “refuse the intellectual translation of this laugh,” Bataille tells us (Irwin 2002, 33). Finding a way to engage with the philosophical parameters and possibilities of the face-splitting, sonorous burst of laughter ultimately requires the development of a reading practice that learns, following Bataille and James, to dive beneath the language of a text in perpetual pursuit of the lacerating experience that prompted it.

¹⁶ In *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille discusses the treachery of language in obfuscating experience, “That sand into which we bury ourselves in order not to see, is formed of words [...] it is true that words, their labyrinths, the exhausting immensity of their ‘possibles,’ in short their treachery, have something of quicksand about them.” (Bataille 1988, 14).

Chapter Three.

Desires in Motion: Grotesque Laughter in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*.

Weeks before the publication of his final novel, *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West penned a letter to Edmund Wilson in which he identified an apparent defect in his own writing. "There must be something wrong with my kind of comic writing," he writes, "no warm chuckles and no hearty guffaws, maybe, and distinctly 'bad-hat.' The wrong tone, as they used to say" (West 1997, 792). The punitive language—there *must* be something *wrong*—inflects West's statement with an air of confessional guilt. But what laws has he broken? Wilson was quick to issue a remedy to his California-dwelling friend, encouraging him to "get out of that ghastly place," as if Hollywood itself was responsible for West's malfunctioning comedy (Dardis 1976, 174). In the years that followed *Locust's* publication, critics have taken West's "bad-hat" comedy as a diagnostic challenge. As Wilson encourages West to "get out" of the delirious streets of Hollywood, so critics supply various comic models as means of rationalizing and so "getting out" of the inexplicable, manic laughter that litters West's novels. The critical attempt to make sense of West's off-key comedy has the added bonus of positioning,

and so fixing, West's notoriously slippery oeuvre in relation to a robust comic tradition.¹⁷

A cursory glance at West's novels reveals his stringent separation of laughter and humor. Jokes repeatedly fall flat, and laughter erupts unprovoked as a series of miserable coughs, painful wails, and monotone barks. Rather than attributing a humorous cause to the laughter in *The Day of the Locust*, I honor this rift to consider Westian laughter as a violent and irrational spasm that has the capacity to "crack up" the self-contained individual. On a larger scale, this attentiveness to West's laughter, as opposed to his humor, preserves the self-identified slipperiness of his novels, which operate themselves as precarious sites that tremble in the gaps between literary periods and theoretical schools.¹⁸ To best examine laughter as it moves through *Locust's* landscapes, I approach West's world in terms of movement and sensation, terms borrowed from Brian Massumi's iteration of affect theory, to argue that there are two basic affective speeds at which events emerge and people interact, and that these two speeds correspond to two different strains of laughter that occupy the novel (Massumi

¹⁷ See, for example, Norman Podhoretz, "Nathanael West: A Particular Type of Joking," *Nathanael West: Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Jay Martin (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971) 154-160; James F. Light, "Varieties of Satire in the Art of Nathanael West," *Studies in American Humor* 2 (1975): 45-59; Jay Martin, "Nathanael West's Burlesque Comedy," in *Critical Essays on Nathanael West* ed. Ben Siegel (New York: Hall 1994), 161-168.

¹⁸ In the same letter to Wilson, West goes on to admit that "somehow or other I seem to have slipped in between all the 'schools.'" (West 1997, 793).

2002). The first is “self-reflexive laughter,” a rigid “ha-ha” that fixes the laughing person as a mono-affective general type and in so doing camouflages him among the crowds of caricatures that inhabit West’s Hollywood. The second is what I term “grotesque” laughter—an affective overflow that dismantles subjectivity into a series of ontologically unstable performances. I argue that while this precarity has positive potential in crafting a new basis for personhood, Westian laughter ultimately fails to generate new models of subjectivity or sociality and registers instead as a terrifying dispossession of sense and self.

The Affective Dimensions of The Day of the Locust

In 1984, Fredric Jameson published his influential codification of the aesthetic and political features of postmodernism in which he proffered a diagnosis of postmodern culture as suffering from “a problem of expression” associated with a troubling “waning of affect” (Jameson 1991, 10). For Jameson, the postmodernist’s abdication from “expression and feelings or emotion” permitted “not merely a liberation from anxiety but from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a subject present to do the feeling” (Jameson 1991, 15). In the 1990s, Jameson’s model was eagerly taken up by literary critics, who used it as a litmus test to reveal a text’s postmodern proclivities. West’s *The Day of the Locust* was one such text. Critics used Jameson’s taxonomy to induct the novel as an important landmark in the passage of

American literature from modernism to postmodernism.¹⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry, the dreaded mass-media machine that manufactured sameness with a ruthless repetitiveness that fatally damaged individual difference, was dog-eared as the villain of the piece, and careful work went into detailing the deluge of images, copies, set-pieces, and simulations that constitute the consumerist fabric of *Locust's* world.²⁰ Jonathan Veitch's attentive commentary is a well-executed example of such postmodernist readings of West,

The world literally begins to dissolve under this new ethos [of conspicuous consumption] until nothing is left but costumes, performances, actors. In West's hands, Vine Street—and by extension, society itself—has become a masquerade in which social relations are invisible, society itself unreadable. The yachting caps, Tyrolean hats, and bandannas are thus more than mere fancy dress, they herald the emergence of an entirely new social order with a grammar of its own. Whether one chooses to describe that order in terms of a masquerade (as West does), a spectacle (as Debord does), a simulacrum (as Baudrillard does), or simply as postmodernism, the problem is essentially the same. It is impossible to know how to interpret this world, much less act in it—or better yet, on it. (Veitch 1997, 134)

¹⁹ The critical consensus was that while West's depiction of L.A. as a desolate, culturally arid space overrun by simulation marks the landscape of *The Day of the Locust* as postmodern, the filtering of events through the organizing consciousness of painter and protagonist Tod Hackett proved the continued (albeit depleted) existence of the modernist individual. "Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* incorporates elements of both cultural theories, thus marking the transformation of the Hollywood genre from its modernist to its postmodernist form" (Weissenborn 1998, 43); "What keeps *The Day of the Locust* from becoming indistinguishable from a postmodern text is its awareness, anchored by the point-of-view character Tod, of a lost existential alternative to Faye Greener's mode of being as lexical playground" (Meindl 1996, 184).

²⁰ See, for example, Ulrike Weissenborn, *Just Making Pictures: Hollywood Writers, the Frankfurt School, and Film Theory* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1998); Jonathan Raban, "A Surfeit of Commodities: The Novels of Nathanael West," in *American Fiction 1914 to 1945* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 375-388.

Following Jameson, Veitch identifies a correlation between the dissolution of cultural depth in West's novel and a "problem" in his characters' ability to interpret this newly flattened social terrain. Slotting Jameson's theoretical frame over *The Day of the Locust* tends to produce similar readings of the novel as a no-exit world populated by characters that are listless, politically passive (unable to "act on" the world), and, as at least one critic has suggested, schizophrenic.²¹ Thus *The Day of the Locust* was advertised by critics as depicting the death rattle of modernist interiority; a literary echo of Jameson's own mournful announcement of "the death of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" in postmodern culture (Jameson 1991, 15).

In recent years, West Studies has once again flourished amidst the burgeoning theoretical field of affect theory, which has caused a reassessment of the supposed affectlessness of postmodern fiction.²² In *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), Brian Massumi rejects Jameson's thesis in a brisk aside, "Fredric Jameson notwithstanding, belief has waned for many, but not affect," which, as he explains in a footnote, "has become pervasive rather than having waned" (Massumi 2002, 27, 260n). The next year, Rei Terada began her book *Feeling in Theory* (2003) with an explicit invocation and prompt

²¹ See Diane Hoeveler, "This Cosmic Pawnshop we Call Life; Nathanael West, Bergson, Capitalism, and Schizophrenia. *Studies in Short Fiction* 33.3 (Summer 1996): 411-422.

²² A similar trajectory is underway in modernist studies. Justus Nieland, in his editor's introduction to a special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, asks us to override our critical assumptions of the "arch and unfeeling formalism" of modernism, and advocates in its place a reassessment of modernism's affective nuances; specifically, its laughter (Nieland 2006, 80).

overturning of Jameson's claim, arguing that while postmodernism may be subject-less, it is most definitely not affectless. "Poststructuralism is *directly* concerned with emotion," suggests Terada, "In order for this to be, emotion will have to be non-subjective" (Terada 2003, 3). Eugenie Brinkema, in her recent work *The Forms of the Affects* (2014) archly acknowledges the intellectual winning out of affect theory over Jameson's thesis, "Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect?" she queries, "Must one even begin an argument anymore by refuting Fredric Jameson's infamous description of the "waning of affect" in postmodernity?" (Brinkema 2014, 10). These critical castigations of Jameson share the same point of contention: it is not his model of postmodernity that is the problem, per se, but the theory of the emotions that grounds his study. The chief casualty of postmodernity, Jameson tells us, is the emotionally legible, affectively consistent, and ego-centered individual for which his essay is an elegy. Affect theory begins with the claim that affect was always already subjectless: it does not originate in the subject, but rather passes through it as a tumultuous state of uncoded feeling. We are not grounded by affect, but overwhelmed by it.²³ Affect theory therefore teaches the literary critic to

²³ Affect theory is not yet a coherent, organized field of study, and its terms tend to shift from author to author. Following Brian Massumi, I use "affect" to mean an amorphous wave of uncoded feeling that is without ideology, meaning, or intention and *cannot be named* – it is a purely experiential state. The moment that this affective state is categorized and so named according to a familiar spectrum of emotions (happiness, sadness, fear etc.) then it registers as an "emotion." I use "sentiment" to refer to a coded affect (it

drag her gaze from the internal modulations of the bounded subject and look elsewhere to locate and examine the movements and effects of affect within a text.

West's best recent critics have taken an affective approach to his writings. Such readings are not attempts to disavow West's interest in detailing the damaging effects of mass culture. However, rather than setting out to sift out and save the last vestiges of the "real" or the "subject" from the mounting clutter of an ersatz society, they turn their attention to the billowing waves of feeling that help to contour the very texture of West's social worlds. Jonathan Greenberg, in his essay "Nathanael West and the Mystery of Feeling" (2006), argues that, far from being affectively moribund, West's work "explicitly thematizes the problem of feeling" by staging a confrontation between the cold aloofness of satire and involuntary public displays of sentiment. "The push and pull of this ambivalence," Greenberg suggests, "constitutes the dynamic heart of [West's] fiction" (Greenberg 2006, 590). Although he is interested in the ambiguous affective terrain that West opens up between the "private, ironic, aesthetic" mode of satire and the "public, sincere, and ethical-political" displays of sentiment in his work,

can be identified and named: boredom, horror, joy, for example) that does not originate in the emotional depths of the human individual but *outside the subject* as an impersonal, public surge of feeling, for example, the pulse of unmanned panic that motivates a crowd to crush forwards; sentiment is an unmanned emotion. Throughout, I use the word "feeling" as a base term—uncoded feeling is affect and coded personal feeling is emotion, coded impersonal feeling is sentiment.

Greenberg ultimately locates the affirmative power of West's novels in what he takes to be their reinscription of feeling back on to the emotionally coherent, aesthetically expressive individual. Looking to *The Day of the Locust*, Greenberg suggests that "sentiment reemerges in the novel in the form of the grotesque [aesthetic as practiced by painter and protagonist Tod Hackett]" which elicits specific emotional responses such as compassion and revulsion and so "affirms the importance of feeling that satire negates" (Greenberg 2006, 591).

While Greenberg eventually opts for a winning out of subjective emotion over uncoded public affect or satiric aloofness, critic Justus Nieland is willing to dwell more fully within the affective ambivalences of West's novels. In a nuanced reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), Nieland reads the many "moments of emotional uncertainty, interruption, or incompleteness" in West's earlier novel as subtle attacks against a particular model of "community [as] founded on identity and cemented by sympathy" (Nieland 2006, 213). While Greenberg uses the discrete individual as a crucible within which the affective "problems" of West's world can be resolved, Nieland is interested in examining the affective glitches of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. He argues that West's use of deadpan and slapstick help to radically depersonalize feeling to reveal strains of "an affect that eludes "type," which he persuasively argues "explodes the logic of a "typical" human nature" and "gesture[s] toward the less coercive imperatives of a community yet

to come" (Nieland 2006, 218). The echo of Agamben's "coming community" is intentional here, as Nieland attempts to build out of West's affective stallings an "alternative, atypical public without qualities" (Nieland 2008, 217) that mirrors Agamben's own Spinoza-inflected vision of "an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (Agamben 2001, 17).

Minor theories of laughter and joking are built into Greenberg and Nieland's larger theses regarding the affective possibilities of West's novels. For Greenberg, laughter and joking threaten the social and emotional dexterity of the individual; "the joke, the laugh, or the "involved comic rhetoric" [in *The Day of the Locust*] runs the risk of trapping its user in a jaded, ironic role, shutting off the capacity for experience" (Greenberg 2006, 599). Nieland, who sees critical potential in the abjuration of the Cartesian individual, executes a reversal of Greenberg's position. Laughter, he argues, does not create an affectless subject, but a subjectless experience of affect. Nieland argues that West's work "is most radical when it rejects the notion that affect does the emotional work of self-preservation, generating laughter instead from the self's undoing and ungrounding" (Nieland 2008, 213). In his "Editor's Introduction" to the 2006 special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, Nieland uses laughter in particular to disclose the work we do in translating and arresting uncoded, impersonal, and highly motile affects into a discrete emotion, "*Some body is affected*: the face twitches and then splits as sound spews

from the mouth. Later, this eruption will be registered as a titter or a chuckle, a cackle or a guffaw, but as laughter happens what matters most is its impingement on the body, the somatic fact of being moved" (Nieland 2006, 82). This process of personalization is first and foremost a linguistic (and so aesthetic) one: affective movement is caught in the bonds of a carefully selected noun.

Greenberg and Nieland's differing accounts of the function and form of Westian laughter are useful companions to the two affective states and their corresponding strains of laughter—self-reflexive laughter and grotesque laughter—that I see comprising the action of *The Day of the Locust*. The first affective state—a will to stillness—and its related notion of self-reflexive laughter, shares traits with Greenberg's model. For Greenberg, Westian laughter "traps" the subject in a clichéd "role" and so cordons off her ability to engage with and experience the world. I associate this type of laughter with the desire to aesthetically freeze any and all instances of precarity—whether it be ontological, epistemological, or affective—by fixing it as a general style, a caricatured expression, or a reproducible art-work. This aesthetic pinioning does not "trap" the subject and so fulfill a modernist fantasy of alienated inwardness, but rather asphyxiates the subject by cutting off its ability to respond to and participate in the affective activities that fuel West's novel.

The second affective state—a desire for motion—and its related notion of grotesque laughter, shares traits with Nieland’s model. The excess affective energies that the culture industry works to suppress and divert bubble to the novelistic surface of *The Day of the Locust* in moments of sudden affective instability and ontological precarity. Such overflows of desire find a companion in grotesque laughter—the multi-phonetic howl that overwhelms and disarticulates the subject. Grotesque laughter is kin to Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of the grotesque body, which he describes according to a logic of excess, process, and mutation, “It is not a closed completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits,” Bakhtin tells us (Bakhtin 1984, 26). As other critics have noted, the material flow that characterizes Bakhtin’s grotesque body dovetails with an ontology of becoming as articulated by Deleuze and others.²⁴ Drawing from a Deleuzian model of subjectivity, I argue that the affective dimensions of grotesque laughter offer a signpost to an alternative mode of being that, albeit nascent, eschews the Cartesian subject—that scion of psychoanalytic depth and Enlightenment rationality—in favor of an affective formlessness that bleeds over the sharp boundaries of the individual to reconstitute the social as a inconstant space of multiple and temporary affective attachments and encounters.

²⁴ See Simon R. Williams, “Bodily Dys-Order: Desire, Excess and the Transgression of Corporeal Boundaries,” *Body & Society*, no.4 (June 1998): 59-82; Sara Cohen Shabot, “The Grotesque Body: Fleshing Out of the Subject,” in *The Shock of the Other: Situating Alterities*, eds. Silke Horstkotte and Esther Peeren (New York: Rodopi Editions, 2007), 57-68.

Self-Reflexive Laughter and Aesthetic Fixity

The self-reflexive desire to arrest movement is most clearly associated with Tod Hackett, our protagonist and Ivy-League transplant into the mutable streets of Hollywood. Hackett, we learn, is an artist who seeks to capture the churning violence of the LA scene as oil on canvas. The earliest descriptions of Tod mark him as an advocate of stillness. Watching from his office window he waits for the commotion of the film crew below to pass before he leaves for the day. He opts for a streetcar home because “he was lazy and didn’t like to walk” (1).²⁵ Upon his return home he immediately “lays down on the bed” (4). Throughout the novel he is pulled from scene to scene by various external forces: a talent scout had “brought” him, passive and slab-like, to LA; he “wants to move” apartments but is struck by an “inertia” that is broken only by his accidental meeting of the dwarf Abe Kusich under the duress of whom Tod finally “allowed himself to be bullied and went [to new quarters]”; he always rides in the passenger seat of cars and is “pulled along” by women at parties (1, 5, 9, 13).

Tod’s physical passivity is juxtaposed with his near-fetishistic fascination for the frantic tempo of LA and its residents. He is infatuated with and produces multiple paintings of Faye Greener, an aspiring actress who has perfected a highly kinetic mode of seduction that is purely gestural. Her father, Harry Greener, captures Tod’s

²⁵ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York: Bantam Publishing, 1975). All other references to this text will be included parenthetically in the body of the chapter.

imagination with his frenetically slapstick salesman routine: “the old man was a clown and Tod had all the painter’s usual love of clowns” (20). In Homer Simpson, Tod excitedly finds the “exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die,” the people that Tod has come to Hollywood to paint (22). With his “unruly hands and fever eyes,” Homer is a passive conduit for the perpetual waves of vibratory tension that pulse through Los Angeles (22). From these brief sketches it is clear that Tod’s fascination is closely yoked to his artistic sensibilities. The canvas petrifies movement and neutralizes the violence that pulses beneath Faye’s seductive torques, Simpson’s trembling hands, and Harry’s hyper-motile pratfalls. Movement is arrested in a variety of art objects: the deeply engraved lines of “The Dancers” a lithograph Tod has produced depicting the Greeners and Abe, the frozen frame of the photographic “still” of Faye that Tod hoards in his apartment, and the purposeful brush-strokes of Tod’s ongoing masterpiece, the grotesque tableaux of an LA riot titled “The Burning of Los Angeles.”

This desire to aesthetically arrest movement has an affective corollary: a particular strain of laughter which, following Tyrus Miller, I have dubbed self-reflexive laughter. For Miller, the mirthless laughter that peppers the literature of late modernism “stiffens” the subject in a “zero degree of subjectivity” that allows for a minimal trace of the self to remain: “I laugh, therefore I (still) am” (Miller 1999, 58, 49). In this way, self-

reflexive laughter marks “the minimal spatial difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature: a difference that preserves the subject, however diminished, in situations of adversity” (Miller 1999, 51). West’s self-reflexive laughter shares some of the qualities identified by Miller. It is a violent, mirthless attempt to still subjectivity and so preserve a person from the contagious copying that comprises modern life. There is one vital difference, however. For Miller, the minimal self caught in the amber of self-reflexive laughter is the last bastion of authenticity left afloat amid an increasingly virulent culture of simulation. Miller’s formulation assumes that an authentic subject is available, albeit in a reduced form. This assumption spawns another: that the pure, given subject is desirable and to be fought for. The world of *Locust* denies the possibility of this model of subjectivity. West’s characters are all generalized types, a feature that has long been the hallmark of comedy. There is nothing singular or self-contained about Faye Greener the hyper-sexualized femme fatale, Earle Shoop the objectively handsome romantic foil, Harry Greener the ex-vaudeville clown, Abe Kusich the bad-tempered dwarf, or Homer Simpson the domesticated cuckold. Crucially, the parameters that confine them to stock roles are not the literary conventions of comedy, but the culture of simulation that structures their surroundings. Buckling under the weight of ever-proliferating images, the individual erodes and gives way to the caricature. The self-reflexive laughter that issues forth from the mouths of West’s

characters does indeed rigidify them into a reduced form. However, this reduction is not a distillation of individual difference but a final, fatal abbreviation into generality.

Within *Locust's* Hollywood then, the comic has fused with the commodity to limit the subject to the aesthetic confines of reproducible stock characters. In their famous essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer warn of this cooption of comedy and laughter by mass culture.

Laughter, which used to correspond to the rich affective state of "happiness" has been hollowed out and recruited by the culture industry to signal "fun," which they depict with rancor as the simulated shadow of happiness, a "medicinal bath" that submerges and suffocates the subject under its somatic surface (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 112).

This type of laughter is

the wrong kind, [which] overcomes fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared. It is the echo of power as something inescapable. Fun is a medicinal bath. The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it. It makes laughter the instrument of the fraud practiced on happiness [...] In the false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless totality. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 112)

The self-reflexive laughter that lies within the pages of *Locust* is not, as Miller would suggest, a defensive preservation of the last vestiges of a subject's authenticity, but the sound of an individual's final capitulation to the generalizing forces of commodification as her singularities are dissolved into a "worthless totality."

The first example of self-reflexive laughter in the novel belongs to Abe Kusich, the pugnacious dwarf bookie whom Tod meets in the hallways of his apartment complex:

He was on the way to his room late one night when he saw what he supposed was a pile of soiled laundry lying in front of the door across the hall from his own. Just as he was passing it, the bundle moved and made a peculiar noise. He struck a match, thinking it might be a dog wrapped in a blanket. When the light flared up, he saw it was a tiny man. The match went out and he hastily lit another. It was a male dwarf rolled up in a woman's bathrobe. (5)

This initial encounter with Abe further solidifies our impression of Tod as preoccupied with a certain kind of stillness, which here has ontological dimensions. He burns through two matches in his desperation to *see* Abe, that is, to (en)lighten the corridor so he can observe and subsequently fix Abe's uncertain status. Tod's reliance on vision, the sense historically associated with Enlightenment ideals of scientific observation and the sealed subject, confirms Tod's desire for fixity and containment. Teresa Brennan has argued that "sight is the sense that renders us discrete, while transmission breaches individual boundaries," a distinction we see dramatized here, as Tod directs his vision in an attempt to still Abe's breaching of ontological boundaries (Brennan 2004, 10).

Abe's weird proliferations, from discarded object, to animal, to unidentified form, to human individual of uncertain gender and unlikely stature, is an example of the

ontological precarity that charges the novel.²⁶ The culture industry spits out sameness at a manic rate, and marks difference as deviant. However, this mass move toward generality can subdue but not eradicate the kinetic energy of difference, which bubbles to the surface in these interstitial moments. The culture industry therefore produces both the self-protective impulse to freeze into a caricatured “type,” as well as the field of ontological precarity in which all identities and types teem together as potentialities. The novel is complicit in creating dark, interstitial passageways in which precarity is able to gestate, away from the bright lights of mass culture. The dark corridor is the polar opposite of the SunGold Market that Homer Simpson frequents, which is described as a

²⁶ Currently, the term “ontological precarity” is used mostly by a group of philosophers and critics interested in the many means by which neglected populations are made vulnerable under the logic of late capitalism. Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004) discusses how the post 9/11 modes of censorship worked not only to throttle dissenting voices, but also to establish “whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths” (Butler 2004, xx-xxi). Butler notes the elasticity of this potential for the sudden eradication of the political basis for being, “Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious” (Butler 2004, 250). Lauren Berlant has since argued that such imposed precarity does not only surface in times of war, but in the everyday lives of targeted populations. She introduces the phrase “slow death” to refer to “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. The general emphasis of the phrase is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (Berlant 2007, 754). Jasbir Puar has narrated a slippage in the term “ontological precarity” that moves us closer to my definition of the term. In a 2012 article, Jasbir Puar formulates precarity as “the ever-shifting “foldings” into and out of life and death that are bio-political population constructs, but also ontological assemblages of bodily debility and capacity, coming and going, rising and receding” (Puar 2012, 164). In my discussion of West’s novel, I use the term “ontological precarity” to refer to the moments in which individual people suddenly slip out of a recognizable model of human subjectivity to occupy, albeit momentarily, a whole range of subject-positions the ontological bases of which are perpetually changing. Ontological precarity therefore is a moment of inbetweenness that is not characterized by a suspension of being, but a proliferation of different forms of being.

“large, brilliantly lit place” where products are bathed in a carefully choreographed lightshow that “heightens the natural hues of the different foods. The oranges were bathed in red, the lemons in yellow, the fish in pale green, the steaks in rose, and the eggs in ivory” (32). Here, things are not only what they seem, but more so, thanks to the aesthetic intervention of management. Enhanced under studio lighting, the orange is transformed into the ideal, fixed image of Orange.

Tod, our very own aesthete, first registers Abe’s precarity as movement—the bundle *moves*. Even after identifying him as human, Tod cannot relax until Abe has met the proper aesthetic requirements of his “type.” In this case, it is a stylish hat that successfully ‘fixes’ Abe:

When the dwarf came out wearing his hat, Tod felt better. The little man’s hat fixed almost everything. That year, Tyrolean hats were being worn a great deal along Hollywood Boulevard and the dwarf’s was a fine specimen. It was the proper green color and had a high, conical crown. (6)

As his choice in headwear suggests, Abe is complicit in his own generalization as a type. He paints himself in broad, aesthetic strokes that are lifted from the fashionable products of mass culture. Abe’s language is riddled with mobster clichés that he poaches from various hard-boiled film-noirs of the era, “So you’re a wise guy, hah, a know-it-all,” he admonishes Tod (8). Indeed, Abe has fashioned himself as a comedic hybrid by borrowing from two of the most recognizable comedy acts of the 1930s: the Tyrolean hat is Chico Marx’s trademark, and the “wise-guy-eh” is one of Moe Howard’s most

beloved catchphrases. Abe traffics in the signs of popular comedy in order to exaggerate his particular “dwarf bookie” characteristics into comic generalities.

Given Abe’s predilection for self-caricature, it is not surprising that he is the first character to deploy self-reflexive laughter. At first, it appears that this is a “correct” laugh according to the principles of humor studies. Standing with Tod outside his lover’s apartment, Abe cracks a misogynistic joke at the expense of the resident, whom he describes as “a lollapalooza—all slut and a yard wide” before laughing at his own joke (6). But the subject of Abe’s joke and the direction of his laughter become ambiguous when, a few pages later, Tod reveals that “when he got to know [Abe] better, he discovered that Abe’s pugnacity is often a joke” that he “used on his friends” (9). We have been misled: when Abe “laughed at his own joke” he was laughing at himself-in-general, not the woman-in-particular. If the joke is the red herring of the scene, let us turn our attention to Abe’s laughter:

He laughed at his own joke, using a high-pitched cackle more dwarflike than anything that had come from him so far, then struggled to his feet and arranged the voluminous robe so that he could walk without tripping. (6)

Abe’s high-pitched cackle is voluntary: carefully selected and put to use in order to amplify his otherness, as a sound technician would select a particular strain of canned laughter to engineer a precise emotional response in his audience. Here, Abe is not preserving the last vestiges of his internal “self,” but strategically producing the surface

effect of “dwarfishness.” Abe’s laughter heralds his exit from the realm of precarity: the bundling formlessness of the robe is now bunched together and rearranged into a recognizable garment, and the interstitial corridor is left behind as Tod, finally reassured by Abe’s newly stable status as “dwarf,” invites him into his rooms. The fixing of Abe’s type corresponds to the neutralization of the literal threat of tripping—on the formless robe and in the lightless corridor. The possibility of a sudden, unpredictable lurching forward along an emergent line of motion has been assuaged.

Self-reflexive laughter thereby arrests ontological precarity, as Abe finally accords to a legitimate either/or identity formation: he is male, human, and a dwarf. Rather than risk occupying the dangerous but possibly liberating rifts between binary categories, Abe scrabbles onto familiar ground by locking himself in a self-made caricature. The generality of Abe’s laugh is matched by its repetitiousness. In a later scene, Tod arrives at Homer’s house to attend a cock-fight and from the surrounding darkness hears a disembodied, monotonous laugh, “Someone laughed, using only twin notes, ha-ha and ha-ha, over and over again” (100). We later learn that this laugh belongs to Abe who is, significantly enough, referred to not by name but by type: “The four short sounds, ha-ha and again ha-ha, distinct musical notes, were made by the dwarf” (112). Here, self-reflexive laughter not only makes a caricature of Abe by denoting his “dwarflikeness,” but goes further by making a caricature of laughter itself.

The “ha-ha” is a brutal mimicking and reduction of laughter into a mechanically reproducible score. In its second iteration, Abe’s “ha-ha” is no longer described by West as laughter. Freed from its contextual markers, the “ha-ha” stands alone as affectless noise that isolates and alienates Abe not only from his surrounding social environment, but also from his own affective capabilities.

But the “ha-ha” belongs to West, too. It is a knot in the text that jolts the reader from the smooth narrative surface to the inner mechanics of literary production by reminding us of the inherent formlessness and unrepresentability of laughter, albeit through negation. West’s typed “ha-ha” glitches the narrative to expose the mechanics not only of caricature, but also of language and the process of writing itself. The mechanical inelasticity of West’s “ha-ha” bores a hole into the novel through which the reader may spy the possibility of an affective pliability that gains its political power precisely because it cannot be written, generalized, or imitated but only experienced. Our sudden recognition of the “ha-ha” not as a laugh but as a reproducible and infinitely repeatable artistic technique thereby creates the conditions of possibility for our subsequent recognition of laughter as a formless, transmissible, and mutative affective pulse that operates beyond (and corrodes) the strict frame of the self-contained individual and the novel.

The encasement of laughter in the rigid shackles of “ha-ha” mirrors Tod’s encasement of ontological precarity and affective movement within the frames of his artworks. Tod participates in the stilling of Abe’s ontological trembling by making him the subject of a lithograph titled “The Dancers.” The true precarity of Abe—that bundle-dog-woman-dwarf—is replaced here by the aesthetic imitation of motion. “The Dancers” depicts an audience whose pinioning stare drives “Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout” (4). Abe’s slippage into possible dog form in the corridor is weakly simulated here as simile; Abe is not “becoming-trout” but is frozen in an image that is “like” a trout. And of course, this Abe is not spinning or leaping or twisting. He is as static as they come: a planographic surface rendered in wax and stone. Further damning is the fact that the lithograph is an art-form designed specifically to allow for the mass printing of identical images. The “dancing” Abe can be reproduced at will. Tod’s attempts to box the precarity of his surroundings within a fixed artistic frame also motivates his unfinished masterpiece, “The Burning of Los Angeles.” The painting cannot be completed because the subject-matter refuses to be contained. Tod admits that his painterly efforts have so far only managed to produce a proliferating, caricatural “series of cartoons” (65). Even more damning is the fact that the violent mob scene that Tod imagines will not be arrested on a canvas but realized in the novel’s culminating scene of violence—a film premiere

turned bloodbath in which individuals melt into a dangerously churning “pathological crowd” (Tate, 392). The explosion of Tod’s fixed, aesthetic ideal in the mutative, kinetic violence of the crowd marks the end of the possibility of art to represent and so contain difference.

Grotesque Laughter and the Burning of Los Angeles

The similitude between Tod’s incomplete “The Burning of Los Angeles” and the final mob scene acts as one of the few discernable narrative portals between the two affective states that I identify as motivating action in *The Day of the Locust*. The second state has been loosely defined as a desire for motion, or perhaps desires-in-motion. The culture industry issues an imperative that we arrest affective fluidity and instead channel all desire down a single strait toward the fixed, aesthetic “type.” The cacophony of the crowd is stilled in Tod’s grotesque representation, ontological precarity is pinioned as a caricatured expression, and the riotous, bodily overflow that is laughter disappears behind the mechanically wrought “ha-ha” which can be understood as the literary version of canned laughter, itself a powerful henchman of the culture industry’s demand for affective conformity. In West’s novel, however, affects refuse to remain frozen. As the aesthetic surface of Tod’s canvas gives way to the unpredictable, teeming body of the crowd, so the caricatured type explodes, through a sonically mutative laughter, into an uncontrollable frenzy of emergent affective positions.

The chief conduit for the transformation of caricatured type into grotesque laughter is Harry Greener, the ex-vaudeville performer who has repurposed his slapstick routine into a salesman technique. Cannier than Abe, Harry consciously recognizes that comedic caricature and self-reflexive laughter are a means of survival: he considers his clowning to be “his sole method of defense” because “most people, he had discovered, won’t go out of their way to punish a clown” (20). Sensitive to the cultural consciousness of the Depression era, Harry’s self-chosen caricature is a crude rendering of the destitute banker:

He used a set of elegant gestures to accent the comedy of his bent, hopeless figure and wore a special costume, dressing like a banker, a cheap, unconvincing, imitation banker. His outfit fooled no one, but then he didn’t intend it to fool anyone. His slyness was of a different sort. (20)

As with his “unconvincing” banker costume, Harry’s comic routine has been carefully designed to sternly demarcate the difference between real suffering and a comic aestheticization of pain. A review of a past performance praises Harry’s “gloriously funny” show of agony that would be “unbearable if it were not obviously make-believe” (21). Tod recognizes the comedic appeal of this hamming of emotion, “[Harry let out] a second-act curtain groan, so phony that Tod had to hide a smile” (119). Even hapless “dope” Homer Simpson recognizes Harry’s jerking slapstick-salesman routine as comedy, “Homer understood that this was to amuse, so he laughed” (35).

Harry's brand of clowning is functional because it adheres to the cardinal rule of comedy as articulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (c. 330 BC): the comic must render himself as a generalized aesthetic object rather than a particular affective subject, otherwise his show of agony would be, as Harry's reviewer notes, unbearable. Aristotle argued that comedy converts tragic material—horror, pain, and grief—into risible fodder by diffusing the specificity of events and characters and offering only the aesthetics of pain with the affective particularities of suffering removed. We laugh at “some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive” (Aristotle 1902, 21). Aesthetics replaces affects: ugliness replaces pain. In his famous study on laughter, published in 1900, Henri Bergson corroborates this formulation, claiming that “comedy gives us general types [and] is the ONLY one of all the arts that aims at the general” (Bergson 2012, 52). More than any other character in *Locust*, Harry has labored to reduce his affective palate to its most general, caricatured dimensions in an effort to turn himself into a consumable comic object. The lack of affective variety is inscribed on his face. He

had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with deep furrows between the eyes, across the forehead and on either side of the nose and mouth, plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning. Because of them, he could never express anything either subtly or exactly. They wouldn't permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree. (67)

Harry's caricatured clowning has disabled his ability to express affective nuance. Tod's description narrates this dispossession: "his" head becomes an eerily detached "it" that refuses to permit affect to mark its caricatured surface.

In describing Harry's transformation from affective subject to aesthetic object, Tod uses two telling descriptors that recall two historical modes of codifying affect as simplified aesthetic expression: "all face" and "mask." "Mask" invokes the exaggerated emotions depicted by the Melpomene and Thalia masks of ancient Greek theater. "All face" recalls a more modern and scientific understanding of the physiognomy or "look" of laughter as a frozen facial expression. This codification of affect has its roots in Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), which was famous for including Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne's photographs of faces as evidence for Darwin's larger claims as to the evolutionary origins of emotions. What is not widely known is that Darwin cropped the original photographs to render invisible the electrodes that Duchenne used to galvanize the face into a rigid expression long enough for a long exposure photograph to be taken. Christopher Turner discusses this disturbing medical practice: "using his electrical devices, Duchenne could 'fake' emotions in his subject, activating and fixing expressions without inflicting torture, as though he were, as he puts it, 'working with a still irritable cadaver.'" (Turner 2008, 70). This is not the spasm of laughter, then, but the mechanically wrought *look* of laughter, an

affectively barren facsimile that Darwin mobilized in his attempt to scientifically codify the aesthetics of human emotion. Duchenne's disturbing description of his subject as an "irritable cadaver" whose laughter is induced by galvanism is a gothic-tinged modern update of the generalizing comedy of caricature. Fused with modern technology, the "painless defect" that Aristotle identified as the germ of comedy becomes the anaesthetized grimace that allows for the standardization of affective expression. The face is twice frozen as an aesthetic surface: once by way of electroshock, and then again under the flash of a camera, a technology which Barthes famously said "transformed subject into object" (Barthes 1981, 13).

While it is true that Harry Greener, with his wind-up routines and frozen facial expressions, initially appears to fulfill the requirements of the aesthetic comic object, a little under a third of the way through the novel, as he is performing his slapstick salesman routine in Homer Simpson's living room, something goes wrong. Although Harry is adept at playing feeling, his aestheticization of affects here gives way to actual suffering, thus breaching the basic Aristotelean prerequisite for comedy:

Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. He jiggled, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed. (37)

Harry's comic skill—the transparency of his *acting* affective—has been revoked. This “snapping” is not as sudden as the previously quoted section suggests. Earlier in Harry's routine he stumbles where he did not intend to stumble; “a momentary indisposition,” he murmurs distractedly as he retreats to the couch (35). This slip-up opens a zone of affective indeterminacy in Harry's routine. He no longer knows “whether he is acting or sick” (35). In this moment of stumbling distraction the comedic act also loses its footing, and Homer's laughter evaporates.

The vanishing of Homer's laughter registers the disintegration of the “comic spirit” as formulated by Bergson. Bergson argues that the strategies of mimesis that constitute Aristotelian comedy—stereotyping, stock characters, caricature, repetition—have perniciously permeated modern life in the repetitive labor of industrial capitalism and the reproducibility of its commodity products. Modern comedy imitates the rigidity of automatism to make visible this troubling “deflection of life towards the mechanical,” and laughter serves as the all-important social corrective to this absentminded inelasticity, it is “social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events” (Bergson 2012, 31). For Bergson, versions of comic rigidity—the tic, the stumble, the stutter—are troubling symptoms of “separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, it is the sign of an eccentricity” (Bergson 2012, 7). Without a

universalizing laughter available to deliver the separatist individual back into the elastic field of humanity, we are left with undesirable “eccentricities” that threaten the very fabric of society. Harry’s thoughtless, laughless stumble is Bergson’s nightmare: a pliable human fatally “becoming-machine” without any hope of return. Of course, this is only a nightmare if you *want* to return: to the social as well as to your own mode of being. Bergson’s repeated reference to laughter as a “corrective” casts a punitive air over his model of comedy, the logic of which only holds if we assume that the problem with modern life is certain eccentrics refusing to accord to an otherwise well-functioning social structure. But what if the existing structures are not desirable? From another vantage point, we may reconsider Harry’s stumbles not as a threatening eccentricity to be corrected by a socially-minded laughter, but as an affective plasticity that fruitfully disturbs both the self-contained individual as well as a social that takes this bounded individual as its basic unit.

From an alternate angle, the comic inelasticities offered by Bergson as examples of “threatening eccentricity” — a clown becoming a ball, a sentence becoming a stutter, and a walk becoming a stumble — read as avatars of ontological precarity, pregnant with the possibility of an alternate sociality based on perpetual becoming rather than static being. Deleuze and Guattari teach us that the individual subject, obsessed with plumbing the depths of his Freudian ego-unconscious, creates a society in his image:

despotic, repressive, and defined by lack. They abdicate from this model of egoistic being to conceive of a radical politics of becoming that would produce a dynamic social field crowded and traversed by unchecked flows of uncoded affective desire. This decentralized desire frees the subject from the rigid confines of the ego to produce “a transpositional subject moving full circle, passing through all the states” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 88). Although the ontological precarity that slips into West’s world registers to his characters as a frightening shape-shifting, an unseemly stumble, or an involuntary mechanical movement, we must nevertheless consider its potential as a type of transpositionality. In *Cinema II: The Time Image* (1989), Deleuze explains becoming in terms of an automatic motor movement. With the best dancers, he says, there is a moment of uncertainty in which the trained movement of a skilled “I” gives way to an involuntary movement that has the capacity for the production of difference:

What counts is the way in which the dancer’s individual genius, his subjectivity, moves from a personal motility to a supra-personal element, to a movement of world that the dance will outline. This is the moment of truth where the dancer is still going but already a sleepwalker, who will be taken over by the movement which seems to summon him: this can be seen with Fred Astaire in the walk which imperceptibly becomes dance as well as with Kelly in the dance which seems to have its origin in the unevenness of the pavement. Between the motor step and the dance step there is something which Alain Masson calls a “degree zero,” like a hesitation, a discrepancy, a making late, a series of preparatory blunders or on the contrary a sudden birth. (Deleuze 2003c, 61)

According to Deleuze, there is an imperceptible moment in cinema in which Gene Kelly’s dance steps do not emanate from his own subjective skill, but instead originates

in the (literal) unevenness of the world. Here, Kelly is not showcasing but abdicating from his own personal genius to become pure, unbridled movement. This transition is made possible by a *stumble*: “a hesitation, a discrepancy, a making late, a series of preparatory blunders.” To lose one’s footing is to enter an indeterminate zone that requires the improvisation of a new type of motion and relation; it is an opening up, not a falling down.

Harry’s accidental stumble, I argue, is precisely this moment of depersonalized movement that breaches the well-policed distinction between his comically-acting-as-object and his tragically-suffering-as-subject. In place of this binary distinction between subject and object opens an affectively charged zone of indeterminacy in which each new movement creates a new type of being. A “gallant smile” gives Harry the aura of a stately gentleman; almost immediately he is rendered inanimate, as a “whistling sigh” escapes him “like air escaping from a toy balloon”; next, a mouth-wipe transforms him into a clichéd image of satiated masculinity, a “man with a big mustache who had just drunk a glass of foamy beer” (35). Imperceptibly, Harry’s actions exceed his command as he is suddenly enmeshed in a series of becomings: becoming-gallant, becoming-balloon, becoming-satiated. Harry’s “comic step” finally (fatally) gives way to pure “motor step” in an abrupt gushing forth of grotesque laughter.

Harry had his man where he wanted him. He began to practice a variety of laughs, all of them theatrical, like a musician tuning up before a concert. He finally found the right one and let himself go. It was a victim's laugh.

"Please stop," Homer said.

But Harry couldn't stop. He was really sick. The last block that held him poised over the runway of self-pity had been knocked away and he was sliding down the chute, gaining momentum all the time. He jumped to his feet and began doing Harry Greener, poor Harry, honest Harry, well-meaning, humble, deserving, a good husband, a model father, a faithful Christian, a loyal friend.

(36)

As with Kelly and Astaire's dancing, Harry's laughter begins as the virtuoso performance of the highly-trained craftsman. He appears to be a master of self-reflexive laughter, with access to a "variety" of laughs that represent different stock types, one of which is the "victim." However, Harry's artistic use of self-reflexive laughter abruptly mutates into the inchoate, involuntary flux of grotesque laughter, and, concurrently, his subjectivity is not fixed as a general type but evacuated altogether: he has "let himself go."

The disintegration of the fixed parameters of Harry's caricatured act of pain is described in terms of accelerating speed and hurtling motion: he is "sliding down the chute, gaining momentum all the time." We are crossing over into that second affective domain, heralded by grotesque laughter, which is defined by excess, process, and perpetual motion. The ontological possibilities of this grotesque laughter are here revealed by the non-specificity of West's language. We are told that "Harry couldn't

stop,” which we take to mean that he cannot curb his laughter, however the transition between performing a “type” of laughter and occupying “types” of self is left unmarked. When we picture the scene—Harry’s subjectivity manically unspooling into a series of subject-positions—we must add a sonic dimension in our imagination, even though the laughter refuses to subsist as a textual representation on the page. Vitally, the means by which Harry “does” variations of himself is not disclosed. We are told he “jumps up” but this is the only action-verb provided. It is very possible that there is zero space between Harry’s laughter and his ontological slippage. Harry’s self-repetition with a difference—poor Harry, honest Harry, well-meaning Harry, humble Harry, deserving Harry—may literally be being enacted by way of the precarious sonic configurations of his laughter.

Either way, Harry’s grotesque laughter both registers and provokes his ontological instability. This is an inversion of the incongruity-resolution theory that informs Bergson’s model of the comic: laughter does not *resolve* but instead *produces* ontological uncertainty. However, Harry does not experience his laughter as a positive liberation of subjectivity. Instead, becoming registers as the painful, perhaps fatal, restriction of Harry’s breathing as he begins “clutching his throat” and “gasp[ing] painfully for breath” (36-37). After his initial laughter leaves him pallid and exhausted, Harry asks for his daughter, Faye. A lifelong co-star in Harry’s bits and tricks, Faye

assumes that his condition is part of the show and dons the “tragic expression” of dotting daughter. Enraged and truly sick, Harry again bursts into laughter:

He didn't want to laugh, but a short bark escaped before he could stop it. He waited anxiously to see what would happen. When it didn't hurt, he laughed again. He kept on, timidly at first, then with growing assurance. He laughed with his eyes closed and the sweat pouring down his brow. (41)

This laughter is more clearly involuntary, from the accidental, animalistic “bark” to Harry's anxiously timed release of an inner reserve of laughter that cannot be destroyed but only temporarily quelled. Here, laughter takes on a physicality of its own: it is not that Harry cannot stop “himself” from laughing, but rather that he cannot stop the “it” of laughter. Harry's laughter registers on the page as a material flow that literally passes through his body first as pouring sweat and then more directly as a pouring noise: “Harry couldn't stop laughing now, He pressed his belly with his hands, but the noise poured out of him. It had begun to hurt again” (42).

Three times Harry is overwhelmed by a physically palpable flow of involuntary laughter that in each case provokes a painful ontological mutation. The first laugh provokes the dismantling of Harry's subjectivity into various types; the second is an accidental bark which signals an ontological twist into animality; and the third absorbs its affective coordinates to become unbridled “noise” which N. Katherine Hayles in a different context has recognized as the sudden creative stumble of informational pattern into randomness. The unaccountable randomness of noise, argues Hayles, should be

conceived of as “not simply the lack of a pattern but the creative ground from which a pattern can emerge” (Hayles 1999, 286). In this way, Harry’s laughter—or perhaps, more precisely, the laughter that passes through Harry—moves in degrees away from the self-contained human “I” and toward pure affective becoming.

The three stages of Harry’s laughter combine into a final grotesque laugh:

But Harry was only gathering strength for a final effort. He began again. This new laugh was not critical; it was horrible. When she was a child, he used to punish her with it. It was his masterpiece. There was a director who always called on him to give it when he was shooting a scene in an insane asylum or a haunted castle. It began with a sharp, metallic crackle, like burning sticks, then gradually increased in volume until it became a rapid bark, then fell away again to an obscene chuckle. After a slight pause, it climbed until it was the nicker of a horse, then still higher to become a machinelike screech. (42)

Originally Harry’s laughter is described an artistic “masterpiece” initially designed for the purposes of mass entertainment. However, as Harry leans into the sonic undulations of his laughter, the artistic “I” disappears beneath the elastic “it” of the laughter itself. As Harry’s laughter takes on various affective dimensions it is subtly disassociated from Harry himself: “it” has a life of its own. Harry is pushed out of the narrative as the laugh unfolds in a series of mutative stages so rapid it gives the impression of time-lapse footage. The laugh starts as a “sharp metallic crackle” that is reminiscent of the random static interference of a fixed radio signal. West swiftly bends this machine-noise into the elemental sound of “burning sticks” which again suggests the destruction of fixed forms with the ontological transformation of a stick into ash. The burning sticks increases in

intensity (volume) until it once again breaks form and becomes animalistic (a “rapid bark”) then dips in intensity to become salaciously human (an “obscene chuckle”) then rises again to become animalistic (a “nicker of a horse”) before rising even further to a “machine-like screech.” In all, the laugh undergoes six transformations: machine, inert nature, animal, human, animal, machine. It breaches the borders of the individual also, spilling out of Harry and passing through Faye, who “laughed, not willingly” in response to her father’s laughing attack (42).

In her book about the psychopathology of humor, Mikita Brottman argues that Harry’s grotesque laughter is symptomatic of his affective barrenness; it is “empty and apocalyptic and exposes the sterility of his consciousness” (Brottman 2012, 70). But the laugh itself is far from being an affective gap. Although Harry initiates the “stock” laugh to damage his relationship with Faye, this general laugh bursts out of “type” to become an engine of difference: it is a jostling mutative force that breaches ontological, bodily and affective borders. If self-reflexive laughter colludes with photography in its fixing of the affective subject as a readable object, then grotesque laughter colludes with cinema in its insistence on perpetual movement. It is telling that Harry’s grotesque laughter was originally conceived for cinema as a stock laugh designed for a film director. Finally identifiable only as pure “noise,” Harry’s laughter is precisely that polyamorous “affect that eludes type” that Justus Nieland positions at the heart of his reading of *Miss*

Lonelyhearts (Nieland 2004, 78). Grotesque laughter holds the capacity to unshackle affect from type and the individual from rigid structures of subjectivity, but the price of such freedom in West's novel is death. Harry becomes the medium for everything and so cannot *be* anything; or, in other words, Harry is all affects and no being. Harry experiences this loosening of his subjectivity with mortal terror; and West renders his laughter as symptomatic of a nameless sickness that will ultimately claim his life.

The connection between grotesque laughter, cinema and movement, and the fatal mutation of being is consolidated in the nightmarish mob scene with which West closes the novel. On the streets of Hollywood a recalcitrant crowd forms to witness the premiere of an unnamed film. Penned in by police, the crowd stands "facing the theater with their backs toward the gutter," all eyes fixed on the bright lights of Hollywood's dream machine (129). The crowd is bound together and spurred into action by laughter and other sharp sonic signals:

There was a continuous roar of catcalls, laughter and yells, pierced occasionally by a scream. The scream was usually followed by a sudden movement in the dense mass and part of it would surge forward wherever the police line was the weakest. As soon as that part was rammed back, the bulge would pop out somewhere else. (129)

The sonic differentiations between the catcall, laugh, yell, and scream are collapsed here, as the noise blends together to create a dull and unceasing "continuous roar." The crushing of difference is mirrored in the body of the crowd. The "dense mass" is

awarded its own pronoun, giving “it” status as a single entity, or as critic Julian Symons describes it, “a single monster” (Symons 1994, 103).

When stationary, the crowd may indeed pass as a single entity or a “dense mass.” However, when in motion the crowd reveals itself to be a vast assemblage of parts, each capable of its own type of movement and sociality. Certain “parts” “surge forward” and restructure the crowd in its wake. West uses a series of different metaphors of movement to describe the crowd not as a single, fixed structure but as a dynamic, multi-sectional sociality engaged in a perpetual state of becoming. First, it is described as a body of water with a “hacking cross-surf” that carries Tod as human flotsam; second, it is a rotating industrial machine that grinds its contents into a fine dust “like a grain between millstones”; finally, it is a convulsive organism that scuttles about on “churning legs and feet” and is riven by biological “spasms” (135). As Harry’s laughter alters intensities to pass through various temporary ontological configurations, so here the undulations in movement cause the crowd to fundamentally alter its basic structure: it is a tidal current, a torquing machine, and a spasmodic body. This capacity for difference on a macro-scale is replicated on the micro-scale of the individuals in the crowd. Under the grinding imperative of the crowd’s unauthored undulations, individuals are painfully concertinaed together to form not a single mass, but new, temporary assemblages that are forged along lines of desire. Jammed in the crowd, Tod

is momentarily conjoined to a “very skinny boy, wearing a Western Union cap [who] had his back wedged against his shoulder,” then to a girl whose legs are entangled with Tod’s and “moved with him every time he moved” (136).

This reading of *Locust’s* crowd as holding a powerful capacity for ontological disarray, bodily heterogeneity, and desirous becoming invites comparisons to Mikhail Bakhtin’s utopian notions of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin argued that the carnivalesque finds its basic socio-political coordinates in the contagion, physicality, and abruptness of laughter. First, the contagious transmissibility of laughter reflected the possibility for a universal, populist politics as it eroded the fastidiously policed borders of the Enlightenment individual. Second, the physical overflow of laughter redirected our attention from the abstract political concept of the individual or subject and returned us to the immanent, material possibilities of the body. Finally, the quick-fire burst of laughter reflected the temporary nature of the carnival: the “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” would evaporate upon the carnival’s end (Bakhtin 1984, 9). For Bakhtin, the perpetual coupling and uncoupling of partial bodies in a carnivalesque crowd provides us with the building blocks for an alternate type of sociality that would resemble “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 1984, 317).

However, and again like Harry's laughter, the crowd is unable to maintain or direct its multiphonic roar, partial assemblages, and ontological variability toward any positive process of becoming. The utopian tenor of Bakhtin's carnivalesque is unavailable here as the crowd's mutative and multidirectional energies fall inexorably into a lumbering arc toward violence, destruction and death. Its polyvocality dulls to a "continuous roar"; the mutability of its ontological make-up belies the fact that the crowd's single function is to crush; and the abrupt coupling of individuals takes place along the overtly libidinal vector of phallogentric violence.

Epilogue: The Siren Wail

The "machinelike screech" that is the culminating note of Harry's grotesque laughter finds a pallid echo in Tod's siren shriek that is the final sentence of the novel (42). Tod is plucked from the rioting crowd by police officers and lifted into a squad car:

The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could. (185)

While Harry "lets himself go" to allow grotesque laughter pass through his body as a highly mobile series of affective intensities and ontological positions, Tod executes a different version of letting go. He has been hanging on to a rail to avoid becoming part of the moving crowd and only relinquishes his hold when he is secured by a police officer, at which point "he let go of the rail and they hauled him up and over it" as a

dead weight (185). Throughout the novel, Tod has been reticent to move, a telling foible that here reaches its zenith as policemen physically lift and carry his prone body to the back of a car. Tod's laughter is similarly prone: it does not alter pitch, tempo, or position. We should also note that it is *his laughter* rather than the anonymous and promiscuous entity that overwhelms Harry. Although he cannot pinpoint the motivation for his laughter, it clearly adheres to the Bergsonian logic of the incongruity-resolution theory. Tod laughs in the moment that he distinguishes between his own voice and the wail of the siren; it is his triumphant identification and intellectual fixing of the difference between man and machine.

Tod's self-reflexive laughter is the enduring sound of *The Day of the Locust*. In contrast, neither Harry's grotesque laughter nor the crowd's grotesque body is given the space to survive. The flows that constitute the crowd literally cannot extend or emerge into difference; every time a surging "part was rammed back, the bulge would pop out somewhere else" (130). Similarly, the ontological fluidity of Harry's laughter is curtailed by his physical debilitation and death. West's grotesque laughter contains potentially subversive qualities: its loosening of the subject, its ontological elasticity, and its contagious lines of affective flight, for example. However, like the grotesque body of the crowd, grotesque laughter is barricaded in on all sides and can only emerge in momentary bulges before being forced back into the text. These bulging moments of

laughter approach unreadability: the formless mobility of grotesque laughter and the stereotyped “ha-ha” of self-reflexive laughter each exposes the paucity of language in capturing affective movement. It is in these material gestures of textual strain that West gets closest to staging the political possibilities of laughter.

Chapter Four.

Shattered Thought, Shattered Being: Atomic Laughter, American Black Humor, and Planetary Thinking.

“Laugh like a bomb.”
The Vorticist Manifesto.

“This is an explosion.”
Allen Ginsberg, “Laughing Gas.”

“Because an explosion is always a promise.”
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation.*

In 2002, a small Parisian gallery housed an art installation by Berlin-based photographer Andreas Müller-Pohle. The work, titled *Atomic Laughter*, consisted of eleven portrait photographs that tell, in sequence, the narrative of a laugh. With eyes squeezed shut, nose bunched and mouth stretched wide, the first five frames feature a man caught in the throes of laughter. The latter six stills show the suppression of the laugh as the man’s eyes open to fix steadily on the camera, his facial muscles firm into a resolute grimace, and his lips pull together to form the oval shape of speech. The subject of the artwork is President Harry Truman, the date of capture 6 August 1945. The slightly blurred black and white grain of the photographs hints at their provenance: they are frames of Truman’s televised announcement of the atomic attack on Hiroshima. As the artist notes, Truman was “probably not aware that the movie camera was already running” when he succumbed to laughter moments before embarking on his famous speech (Müller-Pohle 2013).

Given its immediate context, it is tempting to view Truman's laughter as damning proof of a bureaucratic lack of feeling—a dispassion bordering on sadism—that found its political form in the atomic attacks on Japan. Müller-Pohle, however, invites us to consider an alternate reading. In a 2003 lecture he explained, “it was not Truman who made the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the apparatus, to which he had given his face. Here, Truman—unintentionally—shows his “true” face” (Müller-Pohle 2013). According to Müller-Pohle, in this moment of unintentional laughter Truman deviates from his scripted role as politician to become an “involuntary artist” (Müller-Pohle 2013). Rooted in art and affect rather than science and statistics, Truman's impromptu laughter shatters the prevailing “political codes” of rationalism and scientism that produced both Cold War foreign policy and the hydrogen bomb. Müller-Pohle's use of the freighted word “true” drives this distinction home. Affective and so illegible, the “truth” of Truman's laughing face is of a very different species to the scientific logic that produced the atomic bomb.

Mounted on the gallery wall in a single, sequential line, the eleven photographs that comprise “Atomic Laughter” constitute an aesthetic arc that contains traces of both explosions: the facial eruption of the laugh and the steady-eyed announcement of an atomic detonation. The arresting intimacy between laughter and atomic violence was first forged in a whole subset of artistic and philosophical works in the post-war period.

In this chapter, I use Müller-Pohle's term "atomic laughter" to refer to this mutant strain of laughter that emerged in the wake of the physical and philosophical devastation wrought by the nuclear bombings. As its name suggests, atomic laughter shares genetic similarities to atomic violence: it is imagined by artists and philosophers as a shattering agent that has the ability to obliterate humanist discourses. When it comes time to put this atomic laughter on the page, writers instinctively call upon a nuclear vocabulary of explosion, shattering, and annihilation. Decimation is but the first feature of atomic laughter, however. As Müller-Pohle indicates, atomic laughter is also linked to artistic creation. The bomb is a scientific instrument that destroys bodies and flattens landscapes. By contrast, laughter is an artistic tool that annihilates philosophical structures and scrambles political codes so that it may speculatively build new structures and invent new codes.

As heirs to the philosophical work of Georges Bataille, it is perhaps not surprising that it is the French poststructuralists who explicitly pick up and credit atomic laughter as an artistic practice with the capacity to invoke in its subject the radically new. Michel Foucault, in his preface to *The Order of Things* (1966), endowed laughter with the revolutionary capacity to violently "shatter" thought:

This book first arose out of a passage of Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landscapes of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography. (Foucault 1994, xv)

Photographs of Hiroshima revealed to the international community the devastating atomic leveling of the cityscape. Foucault's topographical language obliquely recalls these images, but applies the leveling process to his imagination.¹ Nuclear survivors stepped out of the rubble to see that the "familiar landscapes" of their houses, neighborhoods, and cities had been razed to the ground. Foucault wrestles his attention from Borges' book to see that the "familiar landscapes" that constituted his self, his imagined community, and his epoch have been obliterated. Here, however, the shattering agent is also an agent of recuperation that fosters new modes of connection and creative action. The overrunning of the first person by the collective pronoun, the specular "I" becoming the speculative "our," is the larger lesson learned from Foucault's atomic laughter, which swells in the gaps between reading and writing (contemplation

¹ In a well-read interview titled "The Masked Philosopher" (1980), Foucault explicitly links atomic decimation with hierarchical thought, and imagines a new type of lateral criticism that multiplies rather than demolishes the connections between people, "It's amazing how people like judging. Judgment is being passed everywhere, all the time. Perhaps it's one of the simplest things mankind has ever been given to do. And you know very well that the last man, when radiation has finally reduced his last enemy to ashes, will sit down behind some rickety table and begin the trial of the individual responsible. I can't help but dream of a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgments, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them – all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms [...] We musn't adopt a protectionist attitude, to stop "bad" information from invading and stifling the "good." Rather, we must increase the possibility for movement backward and forward. This would not lead, as people often fear, to uniformity and leveling-down, but, on the contrary, to the simultaneous existence and differentiation of these various networks" (Foucault 1997, 323, 326)

and action) and between Borges and Foucault (self and the other). Foucault is not standing on scorched earth but on radically new philosophical terrain that demands the building of a new mode of subjectivity that privileges communication, community, and relation rather than hierarchy, domination, and extermination.

The feminist dimensions of this new poststructuralist subjectivity are parsed by Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, both of whom invoke laughter in their work as a shattering device that represents the return of the vocal, kinetic, female body to the patriarchal process of self-signification. Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), is careful to state the abstract nature of atomic laughter's explosive violence in sparking philosophical renewal:

The practice of the text is a kind of laughter whose only explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice which produces something new (a new device) is a practice of laughter. (Kristeva 1984, 225)

Cixous shares Kristeva's prioritization of language as the means by which a new mode of subjectivity may be established. Laughter is the device that shatters the old, patriarchal linguistic codes to free up the space for an insurgent strain of women's writing (*écriture féminine*) to take root. In her famous essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Cixous issues a call for female creativity that would serve "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter" (Cixous 1976, 888). Although Cixous does not explicitly mention the bomb,

she does describe the feminine text, fuelled by atomic laughter, as “volcanic,” thus drawing on the same images of fiery natural eruption that Truman uses when he describes the bomb as “the harnessing of the basic power of the universe, the force from which the sun draws its power” (Stimson 2011, 284).

These theoretical fragments disclose relationships among atomic laughter, artistic creation, and philosophical renewal. However, each author maintains that it is not in theory but in practice—more specifically, the speculative practice of creative writing—that the full potential of atomic laughter will be reached. In this chapter, I contend that atomic laughter is most clearly visible as an aesthetic practice and philosophical tool in the American strain of black humor that emerged in the wake of the Japanese bombings.² In 1965, Bruce Jay Friedman published *Black Humor*, an anthology of thirteen short pieces by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Terry Southern, among others. In his foreword, which is itself much anthologized, Friedman provided a list of political events, national and global, that helped to provoke the black humor movement. Among them is the flippant media treatment of the Vietnam crisis, the aggressive military suppression of peaceful student protests, the spectacular violence of the Congo Crisis, and the troubling intersection of the U.S. military and the KKK. Together, says Friedman, these stories “[confirm] your belief that a new, Jack Rubyesque

² From here on out I shall use the phrase “black humor” as a short-hand for “American black humor.”

chord of absurdity has been struck in the land, that there is a new mutative style of behavior afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction" (Friedman 1965, ix).

Friedman does not outline the nature of this mutation, but his examples suggest that the "chord" of absurdity is characterized by dissonance. The absurdity of modern politics becomes visible in the affective gap that opens between the horror of an event and the glib, benumbed language in which it was reported. Friedman emphasizes this disparity by including direct quotations from various media outlets. Upon the assassination of her husband, TV reporters ask Betty Shabazz, "how does it feel?" A newspaper describes Agent Orange as "fragrant-smelling." American army officers discovered burning crosses while dressed in Klansmen robes are publically reprimanded for "poor judgment" (Friedman 1965, ix). In the mid-sixties, Friedman's primary example of the absurd atrocities of American foreign policy is the Vietnam War. However, if black humor is the aesthetic struggle to create a new language with which to engage with the unimaginable scale and inexpressible horror of modern violence, then its origin is not Vietnam, but the invention and utilization of the atomic bomb.

Black Humor, or, Thinking the Unthinkable

On the day of the Nagasaki bombing, the *New York Times* published a short essay titled "The Promethean Role of the United States" in which author Anne O'Hare

McCormick claimed that atomic violence had philosophical parameters, causing “an explosion in men’s minds as shattering as the obliteration of Hiroshima” (McCormick 1945, 22). In his exhaustive retrospective on American reactions to atomic warfare, Paul Boyer cites McCormick’s comment as representative of “literally scores of observers in these earliest moments of the atomic age” (Boyer 1994, xxi). The nuclear fear that developed in the wake of the atomic attacks had two registers. Daily duck and cover drills, public safety announcements, and advertisements for fallout shelters helped fuel the fear of sudden nuclear death. The reality of the bomb as a weapon clearly threatened the continued existence of human beings. Simultaneously, the paradoxical philosophical dimensions of the bomb worked to unsettle the very ontological foundations of “existence” and “Being,” thereby instilling a second type of terror that was existential in nature.

The unprecedented character of the bomb was itself unprecedented. In its creation it stood as an emblem of the humanist values of scientific reason, mastery over nature, and human progress. In his famous announcement of the bombing of Hiroshima, Truman described the “discovery” of the atomic bomb in essentialist terms. The basic properties of the atom had been disclosed by “the achievement of scientific brains in putting together infinitely complex pieces of knowledge” (Stimson 2011, 285). Upon its detonation, however, the weapon dramatically rejected its philosophical lineage. The

logical conclusion of Enlightenment humanism, the bomb appeared to say, is the erasure of humanity. American journalist John Hersey's report of the Hiroshima attack, published one year later in a special issue of *The New Yorker*, portrayed the bomb not as a scientifically rational object of human knowledge, but as an unintelligible and alien force that moved through the city according to its own capricious logic. The city and its residents, utterly unprepared for the attack, were thrown into what Hersey identified as "weird and illogical confusion" as some bodies were vaporized into "vague human silhouettes" while others were barely touched (Hersey 1985, 30, 96).

It is perhaps because Hersey refused to represent the bomb in statistical terms—the temperature of its core, the number of its victims, the geographic range of its blast—and instead mapped its effects in the affective, experiential mode of eye-witness accounts that his depiction of the bomb's violence appeared so illegible and strange. Viewed from Japanese soil rather than the American laboratory, that is to say in practice rather than in theory, the paradoxical nature of the bomb became visible. In the figure of the bomb, progressive humanism culminated in the extinction of humankind, and scientific rationalism culminated in the production of an "alien" weapon whose nuclear path followed anarchic lines of flight that scientists could neither predict nor control. Ironically, as Truman publically lauded the bomb as a "harnessing" of the basic units of "Nature" by "Science," its detonation revealed the unfathomable scope of a vast,

ecological network that connected humans, animals and objects along invisible tributaries that proved impossible to cartographically map or scientifically anticipate.

The question of how to make sense of the bomb, of how to think through that which obliterated the very foundations of thought, registered in the American consciousness as an aesthetic problem. In his chapter “Words Fail,” Paul Boyer explains this artistic quandary:

What was the appropriate aesthetic for the bomb? [...] How was one to respond imaginatively to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and, still more, to the prospect of world holocaust? The question haunted writers in 1945, and it would continue to do so. As one linguistic specialist asked in 1965: “Is it possible that in spite of our vast and ever-growing vocabulary we have finally created an object that transcends all possible description? (Boyer 1994, 250)

Boyer is attentive here to the unthinkable scale of the bomb’s destructive capacity. How does one stretch the parameters of one’s mind to imagine “world holocaust”? Attempts to answer this question reveal another nuclear paradox. For the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction to function as a politics of deterrence, policy-makers had to be able to imagine world death as a real possibility. Filtered through an affective register of openness and care rather than the intransigent petulance of a “you drop yours, we’ll drop ours” mentality, the ability to conceive of the world as a totality inaugurated the environmentally ethical practice of planetary thinking. In other words, as the bomb threatened global annihilation it also highlighted the fragile interconnectivity of all life on Earth. Lewis Mumford identified this new global consciousness in the wake of the

atomic detonations. “For the first time, mankind exists as a self-conscious collective entity” he remarked in 1955, before calling for an all-encompassing, ecological attentiveness to “all forms of organic partnership between the millions of species that add to the vitality and wealth of the earth” (Mumford 1973, 461, 465).

Planetary thinking is a test in mental agility. The Archimedean point is abandoned in favor of a perpetual perspectival oscillation between the vast, global scale of the world and the small, everyday practices of people, animals, and things. In his book *About Planetary Thinking* (1964), Greek philosopher Kostas Axelos describes planetary thinking as a refinement of this paradoxical perspective that learns

to see being and things simultaneously from close up and far away large and small, in their and in our wandering (*errance*), in the great World which is at the same time small, where there are no victors. (Axelos, 1968, 13)

Victors and their victims are born when the great World is *made* small so that it may fit in the palm of the scientist’s hand, a palm that always threatens to curl into a fist. Axelos asks us to cultivate an alternate approach by way of a paradoxical double-vision that acknowledges that the World is great *at the same time* as it is small. Simultaneity replaces hierarchy. This double vision is the ethical heart of a planetary thinking—it is how we embrace relation without slipping into relativism, and it is how we think globally without consenting to globalization.

Planetary thinking seeks to appropriate concepts of world, unity, and totality from hierarchical and essentialist systems and apply them instead to a connective practice of relation. In his *Poetics of Relation* (1997), a beautifully wrought entreaty for planetary thinking, Édouard Glissant marries Axelos to Deleuze to describe the necessity for rhizomatic thought in recognizing totality without becoming totalitarian:

The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other. (Glissant 2010, 11)

The botanical image of the rhizome is a metaphor given by Deleuze and Guattari to a mode of thought that is mobile, connective, and heterogeneous. They offer it as an alternative to the image of the tree, which stands as a fixed totem that “plots a point, fixes an order” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). Rhizomatic thought resists causality, chronology, and origins to consider all things as on a surface which, in its openness and flatness, encourages nomadic movement and relation between different positions and perspectives.

American black humor is the artistic practice of this rhizomatic double-vision. It occupies the paradoxical platform of planetary thinking by cultivating an aesthetics of flatness. In the black humor text the banal and the uncommon, the comic and tragic, the minor and major—that is to say, the library fine and the decapitation—have propensity to hold equal affective and narrative weight. A large number of critics balked at this

non-hierarchical approach, and dismissed black humor as a nihilistic abdication from the political responsibilities of the satirist. John Aldridge typified this reaction in a 1979 article titled "The Deceits of Black Humor," in which he declares that "what troubled [him] most about black humor was that in too many instances it cut itself off from the vital source of effective satire—the close observation of the social and political world" (Aldridge 1979, 135). The satirist composes correctives to social and political concerns, but as we have seen, the bomb also raises important philosophical problems. With the sudden collapse of the Enlightenment values that constituted the ethical fabric of our social and political lives, the moral (and moralizing) language of the satirist ceases to function. Linda Barnes describes this necessary shift from the social perspective of the satirist to the philosophical perspective of the black humorist "Whereas satire, being moralistic, aims to correct by holding within brackets a vision of what should be," Barnes writes, "Black Humor does not tell us how to live; its concern is rather with perception and mediation, forging through surface reality to present life as it is" (Barnes 1978, 25).

Bruce Jay Friedman uses the same language of perception and surface in his description of the black humorist as a satirist in exile. With political reality increasingly grotesque and absurd, the difference between straight reportage and inventive satire was erased. Usurped by the journalist, the black humorist "has had to discover new

land, invent a new currency, a new set of filters, has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire" (Friedman 1965, x). Friedman's metaphor figures the black humorist as a nomadic explorer of surfaces rather than an excavator of depths. In his *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Gilles Deleuze helpfully aligns humor and satiric irony to two alternate practices of philosophical action. Irony is an intellectual technique that commits to essentialist hierarchies and so climbs vertically up and down the pole of an assumed "truth," the foundation of which is the fixed self. Steven Weisenburger explains Deleuzian irony as "a means of negating the object in order that the subject might exercise its mastery and hold up the self as a fixed point of reference" (Weisenburger 1995, 133). Humor, in contrast, is an "adventure" that renounces such essences, it is "the art of surfaces and of the complex relation between the two surfaces" (Deleuze 1990, 248).

The level surface facilitates adventurous mobility and helps to foster a new mode of subjectivity that privileges perpetual movement over fixity, simultaneity over exclusion, and the "enjoyment of relation" over an "ontological obsession with knowledge" (Glissant 2010, 19). Max Schulz, one of the finest commentators on black humor, offers a taxonomy of the mode with properties that include: "the comic and grotesque treatment of intrinsically tragic material, one-dimensional characters, wasteland settings, disjunctive and a-temporal narrative structures, and a mocking

irreverent tone" (Schulz 1975, 272). Cut loose from the psychic anchor of egoistic depth, the "one-dimensional" character is set in flight across the newly open and easy-to-traverse terrain of the "wasteland setting." The "disjunctive narrative structure" invites the reader to engage in a similar nomadic movement, as life arrives on the page as an archipelagic set of localized events rather than waystations pitted along a unidirectional linear path. Finally, the incongruities produced by the comic treatment of tragic material forces the reader to vibrate in an ethically and affectively uncertain space where an event cannot be regarded as decidedly comic or tragic, specific or general, playful or dramatic. The refusal to resolve paradoxes into a single linear narrative is the primary lesson of black humor whose function is, Schulz insists, to "instruct us anew in ways of perceiving reality" (Schulz 1973, 28).

Kurt Vonnegut uses a science fictional conceit in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) to literalize this new mode of perception. In the novel, the Tralfamadore alien race experiences the world without the structuring principle of temporality. From their cosmic perspective, all events unfold simultaneously; there is no hierarchical arrangement of past, present, and future. With the erasure of universal, linear time comes the erasure of the tragic heaviness of being. Vonnegut's hero Billy Pilgrim, a recent convert to the flattened alien perspective, no longer conceives of death as the tragic finitude of an individual life. Instead, he conceives of his life and death as

impersonal states of becoming between which he can swing with ease, a mobility that the book mimics in its own anecdotal, non-linear structure. From his newly cosmic, flattened vantage, Billy views his own death not with terror but as an invitation to communal laughter. Standing in front of a Chicago crowd, “Billy predicts his own death within an hour. He laughs about it, invites the crowd to laugh with him” (Vonnegut 2009, 181).

Chicago, Vonnegut tells us, “has been hydrogen-bombed by angry Chinamen. So it goes. It is all brand new” (Vonnegut 2009, 180). The atomically flattened city, abstractly mirrored in Tralfamadorean flattened time, is figured as a site for philosophical renewal—Billy literally uses the leveled city as a platform from which to publically espouse his comic philosophy of becoming. “If you think that death is a terrible thing,” he tells the crowd, “then you have not understood a word I’ve said [...] Farewell, hello, farewell, hello” (Vonnegut 2009, 181). In a book that is saturated by death, it is tempting to view Billy’s laughter as signaling a weary fatalism born amidst the violence of modern warfare. However, this reading only holds if we continue to value the private human individual, the solipsistic core of tragedy, as our guiding model of subjectivity.³ It is precisely this model of a permanent, essential identity acting in

³ We may only look at the eponymous titles of Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, in comparison to the situational titles of his comedies, *Measure for Measure*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and *A*

accordance with a transcendent moral order that Billy jettisons in this speech and others. Unbound from the humanist anchor of the suffering self, Billy's laughter signals the transmutation of tragic fatalism into comic nihilism.

The boom in American black humor coincided with the poststructuralist restoration of Nietzschean nihilism as an affirmative, comic force. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), Gilles Deleuze argued that in abdicating from "the tragedy of interiority," the nihilist opens herself to everything that stands outside the closed borders of the self, that is to say, everything *else* (Deleuze 2004, 147). Central to this recuperative project was the reassessment of the relationship between laughter and nihilism, as in the article "Nietzschean Laughter" (1968) by Pete Gunter, or in Derrida's famous "Différance" essay, also published in 1968, in which he argues that "Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance" (Derrida 1984, 27). Nietzschean laughter is the unruly force that jolts us from ourselves to create a moment of nihilistic suspension from which we may forge a new "joyful wisdom" based on an affirmative politics of multiplicity and difference.

Midsummer Night's Dream, to recognize that tragedy is forged around the exceptional individuality of a central figure, and comedies around a chaotic swirl of commonly experienced events.

In *Nihil Unbound* (2007), Ray Brassier calls nihilism “not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity” (Brassier 2007, xi). These “speculative opportunities” find literary form in black humor, or, black humor is the literature of an affirmative nihilism. In the remainder of this chapter, I look to two black humor texts that are routinely tagged as nihilistic, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb* (1964). Published within a year of one another, both texts adopt an aesthetics of flatness to collapse the hierarchies, dualisms, and binaries that constitute Western thought and build in their place, by way of atomic laughter, a speculative ethics of planetary thinking and, relatedly, a philosophy of becoming. Vonnegut and Kubrick are equally sensitive to the artistic and philosophical potential latent in the paradoxical nature of the bomb, which stands at the center of both texts as the ugly culmination of a modern temperament obsessed with social domination and scientific absolutism. Although the texts work toward similar ends, Kubrick organizes his film around the political paradoxes of Cold War nuclear policy, whereas Vonnegut treats the bomb as a philosophical axis upon which a rotation from a tragic Western-Christian humanism to a comic poetics of Relation may be enacted.

Laughing in the (Missile) Gap

Two months after *Dr. Strangelove's* cinematic release, renowned political correspondent Hans J. Morgenthau published an article titled "The Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy" (1964) in which he identified a troublesome gap between Enlightenment principles and the new epoch of the nuclear age:

while our conditions of life have drastically changed under the impact of the nuclear age, we still live in our thoughts and act through our institutions in an age that has passed. There exists, then, a gap between what we think about our social, political, and philosophical problems and the objective conditions which the nuclear age has created. (Morgenthau 1964, 23)

Morgenthau refers to this gap between nationalist structures of thought and the nuclear reality of global extinction as "the fatal flaw" that engendered the "four paradoxes of nuclear strategy."⁴ For Morgenthau, any attempt to reconcile this paradox by "trying to normalize, conventionalize, and so 'nationalize' nuclear power" will result in one of two absurdities: total political impotence or total global annihilation. The answer, argues Morgenthau, is not to reconcile the bomb to existent modes of thought, but vice versa. We must wrestle to "globalize" our thought in order to admit the reality of the bomb. Morgenthau admits the difficulty of such a process, "to do so successfully requires a

⁴ "The commitment to the use of force, nuclear or otherwise, paralyzed by the fear of having to use it; the search for a nuclear strategy which would avoid the predictable consequences of nuclear war; the pursuit of a nuclear armaments race joined with attempts to stop it; the pursuit of an alliance policy which the availability of nuclear weapons has rendered obsolete. All these paradoxes result from the contrast between traditional attitudes and the possibility of nuclear war and from the fruitless attempts to reconcile the two" (Morgenthau 1964, 23).

radical transformation—psychologically painful and politically risky—of traditional moral values, modes of thought, and habits of action” (Morgenthau 1964, 35).

Kubrick repeatedly explained that his impetus behind writing and directing *Dr. Strangelove* was his fascination with precisely this “flawed logic” that Morgenthau identifies as central to Cold War foreign policy. “I was struck by the paradoxes of every variation of the problem from one extreme to the other, from the paradoxes of unilateral disarmament to the first strike” (Kubrick 1963, 12). Struck by the “infinite horror” of the atomic arms race, Kubrick initially conceived of his “nuclear film” as a drama. As the project developed, however, he and fellow *Strangelove* screenwriter Terry Southern encountered an aesthetic impasse as the high seriousness of the dramatic genre failed to properly represent the paradoxical positions of the nuclear situation. In a 1963 interview Kubrick explained the comic provenance of the film:

The present nuclear situation is so totally new and unique that it is beyond the realm of current semantics; in its actual implications, and its infinite horror, it cannot be clearly or satisfactorily expressed by any ordinary scheme of aesthetics. What we do know is that its one salient and undeniable characteristic is that of the *absurd*. (Southern 2004, 30)

The absurd is not just a characteristic of or adequate aesthetic for nuclear strategy; it also signifies a particular philosophical approach to such paradoxes. Absurdism is born in the irreconcilable gap between the human pursuit of meaning and the vast meaninglessness of the universe. Like the nihilist, the absurdist does not attempt to close

this gap, but occupies it as a productive site where difference may be permitted to proliferate. Kubrick admits a similar tactic. Instead of trying to force shut the troublesome “gap” between thought and action, pursuit and paralysis, nuclear death and Enlightenment thought, Kubrick occupies it with laughter. “The things you laugh at most [in *Dr. Strangelove*],” he tells an interviewer in 1963, “are really the heart of the paradoxical postures that make a nuclear war possible” (Gelmis 2001, 309).

The comic occupation of a gap between thought and action corresponds in part to the incongruity-resolution theory of humor, which has been the dominant paradigm in humor studies since its formulation during the Enlightenment. In its earliest form, the theory did not include the “resolution” aspect. Writing in 1779, James Beattie suggested that

laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (Ritchie 2004, 124)

For Beattie, an incongruity is a speculative opportunity. It creates a field of uncertainty in which laughter enters to create new complex assemblages and unexpected or “peculiar” forms of relation. Within the decade, Beattie’s theory had been overshadowed by the work of Immanuel Kant, whose commentary on humor and laughter in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) is routinely acknowledged as the origin of the incongruity-resolution theory. For Kant, laughter is not the dissonant noise of artistic creation and

uncertainty, but the harmonious melody of cognitive resolution as the paradoxical heart of an absurdity is neutralized:

Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty, convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.* (Kant 2007, 161)

Taking their cue from Kant, modern incongruity-resolution theorists posit humor as a reasoning game that invites us to realize, reconcile, and so resolve paradoxical “gaps” within a pre-existing master-narrative of reason, understanding, and knowledge.

Reset to a global, political scale, however, “resolving difference” becomes “obliterating opposition,” and the “master-narrative of reason” becomes synonymous with “Western political ideology.” The fixation with closing gaps in a bid for mastery and progress is directly satirized in *Dr. Strangelove*, as the President’s military advisors rush to close presumed “gaps” between Russian and American military clout at the expense of humanity’s survival. Henry Kissinger’s dark premonition of an unavoidable “missile gap” in his book *The Necessity for Choice* (1960) is extrapolated in *Dr. Strangelove* as President Muffley (Peter Sellers) is warned first of a “Doomsday gap” (“preposterous!” Muffley splutters) and then of a “mine-shaft gap” in reference to Dr. Strangelove’s suggestion of a post-nuclear survival strategy based on the relocation of

men and women underground (Kissinger 1960, 26).⁵ The latter is announced in the penultimate line of the film, moments before the interior scene fades into a symphonic montage of exploding bombs. Thus exaggerated, the reasoning game of incongruous-resolution humor becomes a hysterical intolerance of gaps that fuels the inexorable passage to global annihilation.

Kubrick replaces the malfunctioning incongruity-resolution theory, which states we laugh at the pleasure of resolution, with black humor, which states we laugh at the pleasure of difference. Black humor retains the comedy of paradoxes, incongruities, and gaps but does away with the drive toward synthesis and resolution, asking us instead to laugh within the state of unknowing created by the unresolved paradox. *Dr. Strangelove* is a training ground for this state of uncertainty; it teems with unresolved paradoxes that constitute both the form and content of the film. Shot in black and white, the film simultaneously resembles both the high aesthetics of film noir and the documentary realism of a newsreel. This generic uncertainty makes the final montage of real military nuclear test footage impossible for the audience to identify as such with any assurance. This aesthetic uncertainty is compounded with the slew of unresolved incongruous situations that constitute much of the humor of the film's dialogue. General Buck

⁵ All dialogue has been transcribed from the film. Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb*, (Columbia, 1964).

Turgidson (George C. Scott) learns of the nuclear launch while he is in the bathroom, Colonel “Bat Guano” (Keenan Wynn) won’t shoot a Coke Machine to save the world (“That’s private property!”), and Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) is willing to have every atom of his body infiltrated by nuclear radiation but refuses to drink a glass of water for fear of “Commie” contamination.

Dr. Strangelove’s famous culminating scene recognizes the necessary conjunction of black humor—which does the important work of razing Enlightenment structures of thought—with an affirmative, atomic laughter that erupts on the abyssal brink of life and death. Somewhere over Russia, Major T.J. “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) straddles a nuclear warhead as he frantically scrambles to fix the malfunctioning bomb release mechanism of his B-52. Abruptly, the bomb bay doors open and Kong shouts in triumphant terror, unaware that his misguided heroics have triggered Russia’s Doomsday Machine and will directly lead to the extinction of all life on Earth. The bomb hurtles toward Earth, heralding the extinction of all being(s). Straddling the bomb with cowboy hat in hand is Kong, who emits a shriek of wild exuberance as he plummets to Earth. The affective parameters of Kong’s cry are illegible: the sound vibrates in an indistinct zone that is somewhere between pleasure and terror. Equally unreadable is the ontological basis of the noise, which sonically straddles the ridges between human, animal and machine. Ripped from his throat mid-air, Kong’s cry is readable as a

pathological scream of laughter, a maniacal rodeo yell, a deathly animal howl, an exultant whoop of joy, and an inhuman mechanical whine.

Thirty-five years after the release of the film, director Sydney Pollack admitted in *Entertainment Weekly* to still being troubled by the scene. "I remember watching it the first time," remembers Pollack, "seeing Slim Pickens riding that bomb, thinking, how does somebody think that up?" (Pollack 1999). Pollack's discomfort is rooted in his inability to cognitively digest the scene in any ordinary way, hence his repetition of the keyword "think." This intellectual impasse, I argue, is born from a learned instinct to neutralize paradoxical difference by way of an oppositional logic, rather than to keep its poles open in our mind. To watch the scene and accept that it is both nuclear horror *and* black humor, the end of the world *and* the hub of a laughing community, requires a repudiation of the type of binary thinking that brought about the communicative impasse of the Cold War in the first place. In his astute review of the film, critic Tom Milne implies that it is the responsibility of the audience to physically cultivate this affective ambivalence. In order to fully appreciate *Dr. Strangelove*, says Milne, one must accept that it is both "the most hilariously funny and the most nightmarish film of the year" (Milne 1964).

In this and a number of other ways, *Dr. Strangelove* stresses the importance of returning the irrational, affective body to philosophical and political practices. The

dangers of calculated abstraction and social rationalism are plainly presented through Turgidson's justification for a preventative nuclear strike. "I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed," Turgidson tells the President, "But I do say ... no more than ten to twenty million killed, tops. Uh ... depending on the breaks." Aran Saldanha has usefully suggested that much of the humor of *Dr. Strangelove* is derived from "the personalization of the political geographies of the Cold War into comical bodies" (Saldanha 2008, 323). Turgidson's anti-Communism erupts as a bug-eyed, hyper-masculine posturing. Confined to a wheelchair, Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers) is a frightening hybrid of man and machine, his hand involuntarily snapping into a Nazi salute as he gleefully discusses the prospect of a post-nuclear future. Meanwhile, President Muffley (Peter Sellers) has all the symptoms of a cold, and his sniffing, bumbling telephone manner betrays the weakness and ineptitude at the heart of his political neutrality.

These cartoonish embodiments of political discourses —reactionary anti-Communism, fanatical totalitarianism, blundering neutrality—are more than just grotesques aping for the camera. The hyper-physicality of the comedy gives a body to the dangerously abstract rhetoric of nuclear deterrence. In *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981), Jean Baudrillard describes the catharsis in giving the "unnameable panic" of nuclear fear concrete form in various imaginative fictions (Baudrillard 1995, 55). In

detonating the bomb, *Dr. Strangelove* provides its viewer with a sense of nuclear finality and resolution. However, as Morgenthau teaches us, the detonation of the bomb signals a troublingly totalizing synthesis of the paradoxical nuclear situation—a path has been chosen, the world is to die. Kong’s laughter functions as a second explosion that is open-endedly creative instead of fatally destructive. The bomb explodes bleach white and shockingly silent across the celluloid globe, while Kong’s laughter explodes as a multi-cadenced, contagious cry that leaks through the cinematic frame to physically infect the cinema-going audiences. Lewis Mumford identifies this explosive, activating effect of *Dr. Strangelove* on its viewers, describing the film as “the first break in the catatonic cold war trance that has so long held our country in its rigid grip” (Mumford 1964).

Laughing along with Kong, we do not seek to cognitively “know” or masterfully fix the parameters of his scream—ontologically, affectively, or otherwise. This trumping of cognitive resolution by affective participation has philosophical ramifications, as the confrontational competitiveness of an Enlightenment sensibility bent on mastery and obliteration of opposition gives way to an affirmative attentiveness to difference. Representing a euphoric loss of physical and ontological control, Kong’s suicide stands in philosophical opposition to that of the stony-faced, cigar-chewing General Ripper (Sterling Hayden), whose pathological obsession with ontological hygiene and “purity of essence” is presented by Kubrick as the culmination of a Western philosophy

obsessed with pure, fixed "being." Convinced that a "monstrously conceived" Communist plot to pollute the national water supply is underway, Ripper explains his fear of contagion in terms of infiltrating alien essences that threaten the monadic self. "A foreign substance is introduced into our precious bodily fluids without the knowledge of the individual," he informs Captain Mandrake (Peter Sellers) solemnly.

As the film progresses, Ripper recedes into smaller and smaller spaces. He seals off his base, barricades his office, and finally locks himself in the tiny bathroom that adjoins his office, where, terrified that he will be forced under torture to reveal the military codes that would issue the stand-down order on Kong's plane, Ripper ensures his own silence by putting a bullet in his brain. That Ripper's suicidal management of his own silence takes place in a bathroom, a private space reserved for the maintenance of bodily integrity, reflects his commitment to preserving a particular conceptualization of the self as an atomized individual, whose continued existence depends on its sealed containment. The two suicides thereby stand in opposition: Ripper's silent, meticulous, and private self-termination against Kong's hyper-physical and infectiously joyful self-explosion. Vitally, the former is the condition of possibility for the realization of the latter. The narrative arc of the film literalizes this necessary progression. Ripper's commitment to ontological essence must reach an intolerable, genocidal pitch in order for Kong to receive the orders that will provide him with the opportunity to ride the

bomb in the iconic scene. The explosion scene thereby literalizes the suicidal implosion of an Enlightenment thought of heights and depths into a platform for the post-structuralist enjoyment of surface and Relation.

As with Billy Pilgrim's flattened alien perspective in *Slaughterhouse-5* (1969), thinking laterally instead of hierarchically lends itself to a planetary ethics. In *Dr. Strangelove*, the Russian Ambassador is the first character to speak of nuclear war not in terms of human statistics, but as an ecological disaster. Revealing the existence of the Domsday Machine, he announces that the bombs will destroy "everything on the surface of the globe" (emphasis my own). This reconceptualization of death on a global, non-anthropocentric scale is a form of surface-thinking that decenters the self in order to conceive of "everything" else. This cosmic perspective is also a comic one which creates the proximity between laughter and death that we see in Billy Pilgrim's and Major Kong's "final" moments. In the same chapter from *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981) in which he describes the textual bomb as a form of cathartic release, Baudrillard describes an explosion as a form of *hope* that creates the conditions of possibility for the entrance of the radically new: "Because an explosion is always a promise" (Baudrillard 1995, 55). The laughter that moves laterally through Billy Pilgrim's crowd and *Dr. Strangelove's* audience is an alternate explosion that activates our capacity to think globally without annihilating difference, imposing universalisms, or accidentally destroying the world.

“See The Cat? See The Cradle?”

Cat's Cradle, Kurt Vonnegut's darkly comic vision of the end of the world, was published in 1963, a year before the cinematic release of *Dr. Strangelove*. As with *Strangelove*, the novel is haunted by the philosophical and political implications of the total violence of the atomic bomb. The bomb and its apocalyptic sibling and successor, the fictitious biochemical weapon “ice-9” stand as emblems of the deadliness of Western-Christian humanism. Vonnegut offers the invented religion of Bokononism, native to the small Caribbean island of San Lorenzo where the majority of the narrative action takes place, as an alternative to this genocidal trajectory. Bokononism is based not on inarguable scientific facts or immovable moral principles, but on the messy multiplication of “foma,” a Bokononist word meaning “harmless untruths.” The distrust of truth is contained in the epilogue of *Cat's Cradle*, which reads, “Nothing in this book is true. Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” For Vonnegut, “truth” was a euphemism for pure research, which he condemned as the scientific pursuit of objective knowledge at the expense of human survival. In an address delivered at Bennington College in 1970, Vonnegut pushes the euphemism further to make “scientific truth” synonymous with the atomic bomb: “when I was twenty-one, we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there” (Vonnegut 1974b, 161). In contrast to the dangerously blinkered pursuit of scientific truth is the Bokononist

practice of roving between and assembling different foma to create an accumulative, associative tapestry of personal belief that ensures one is “brave *and* kind *and* healthy *and* happy.”

The novel operates as a conversion narrative from Western-Christian humanism to Bokononism. Our narrator Jonah (formerly John) is the subject of the conversion, and the novel we hold in our hands is a testament to his conversion—it is the Bokononist mutation of his formerly “Christian” book project about the Hiroshima bombing.⁶ On the first page of the novel, Jonah announces his religious conversion and the transformative impact it has had on his project:

When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*.

The book was to be factual.

The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then.

I am a Bokononist now.

I would have been a Bokononist then, if there had been anyone to teach me the bittersweet lies of Bokononism. But Bokononism was unknown beyond the gravel beaches and coral knives that ring this little island in the Caribbean Sea, the Republic of San Lorenzo.

We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a

⁶ The temporal structure of *Cat’s Cradle* is non-linear, but sections can be chronologically identified by whether we are following John in his research for *The Day The World Ended* or Jonah in his lackadaisical engagement with Bokononism. Because the nomenclatural transition from John to Jonah indicates a seismic shift in the novel’s preoccupations I shall, at the risk of causing confusion, retain the two names in my reading of the novel, referring to the protagonist as “John” when he is a Christian, and “Jonah” when he is a Bokononist.

karass by Bokonon, and the instrument, the *kan-kan* that brought me into my own particular *karass* was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The Day The World Ended*.⁷

The rhythmic back and forth of this opening segment invites us to engage in a comparative reading that posits the abandoned book *The Day The World Ended* alongside *Cat's Cradle*, Christianity alongside Bokononism, factuality alongside "bittersweet lies," a linear history of scientific progress (as manifested in the atomic bomb) alongside undulating *karasses* that cleave together "without ever discovering what they are doing," and "important Americans" alongside humanity in its entirety.

For Fredric Jameson, the clarity of these comparisons betrays a philosophical laziness. In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson lambasts *Cat's Cradle* for peddling in racist, sophomoric binaries:

[The] displacement of the action from upstate New York to the Caribbean, from dehumanized American scientists to the joyous and skeptical religious practices of Bokononism, suggests a scarcely disguised meditation on the relationship between American power and the Third World, between repression and scientific knowledge in the capitalist world, and a nostalgic and primitivistic evocation of the more genuine human possibilities available in an older and simpler culture. (Jameson 2005, 269)

In reading the novel as a set of over-simplified opposites, however, Jameson threatens to replicate the very dualism he excoriates. Throughout his work, Vonnegut strives to

⁷ (Vonnegut 2010, 1-2). All future references to this book will be included parenthetically in the body of the text.

make visible the state of flux that lies beneath the artificial superstructure of binaries. Nothing and no one is “pure” in his schema, as implied by the title of his rejected Master’s thesis, “Fluctuations between Good and Evil in Simple Tasks.”⁸ In the opening paragraphs of *Cat’s Cradle*, we see that John’s Christian, factual, linear history is not only the philosophical opposite of Bokononism, but also the means by which he is able to attain Bokononism. He describes it as “the instrument, the *kan-kan*, that brought me into my own particular *karass* was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The Day The World Ended*” (2).

In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), a book whose philosophical ruminations in many ways mirror those of *Cat’s Cradle*, Édouard Glissant discusses how the “Age of Relation” is achievable only by pushing through and beyond “the Age of Reason.” The one contains the embryonic seed of the other:

The absolute of ancient filiation and conquering linearity, the project of knowledge and arrow-like nomadism, each used the other in its growth. But I maintain that, right from the first shock of conquests this movement contained the embryo (no matter how deferred its realization might have seemed) that would transcend the duality that started it.

Let us, then, press on past this duality. (Glissant 2010, 56)

⁸ Twenty five years later, in 1971, professors at the University of Chicago accepted *Cat’s Cradle* as Vonnegut’s missing thesis and awarded the author a Master’s in anthropology (Marvin 2002, 7). See also Vonnegut’s “Address at Rededication of Wheaton College Library, 1973” in which he discusses the pitfalls of considering life in terms of pure category divisions: “I am not pure. We are not pure. Our nation is not pure. And I insist that at the core of the American tragedy, best exemplified by the massacre of civilians at My Lai, is the illusion [...] that in the war between good and evil we are always [...] on the side of good” (Vonnegut 1974a, 213-214).

Black humor, affirmative nihilism, and planetary thinking all teach a shared lesson: we must resist resolving paradoxical dualities and learn instead to dwell within and “press on past” such oppositional approaches to reach a fertile field of multiplicity, difference, and affirmation. Glissant’s book itself enacts a philosophical transformation from a Western-Christian structure of thought to the Creole-inspired poetics of Relation. In both *Dr. Strangelove* and *Cat’s Cradle*, atomic violence gives way to planetary thought, the flat aesthetics of black humor give way to an irrepressible atomic laughter, and private, tragic Being gives way to a joyful, comic Becoming.

Echoes of Franz Kafka’s story “The Judgment” (1912) vibrate throughout Glissant’s description of Western-Christian discourse. Kafka’s story centers on the relationship between mild-mannered businessman Georg and his unnamed father. Wracked by an unspecified illness, the father spends his days cloistered in an air-tight, darkened room. Despite his physical weakness, the father exerts absolute control over his son by appealing to the “Father-knows-best” logic of the filiation-model: “Now attend to me!” cried his father, and Georg, hardly aware of what he was doing, ran towards the bed” (Kafka 1992, 45). The gap between the father’s weak physical frame and total paternal power creates in Georg a state of radical affective uncertainty that manifests itself in his frantic oscillation between filial care and filial terror. Georg is at first struck by his father’s enormity, “What a giant my father still is,” he thinks to

himself (Kafka 1992, 41). Within moments, he is seen carrying his father's fragile frame to bed, before being subjugated again under his father's hierarchical command — "Georg gazed up at the nightmare vision of his father" (Kafka 1992, 44-45). The story ends with the unnamed father verbally sentencing George to "death by drowning," a judgment that Georg carries out instantly and without protest.

Of course, we have heard this story before. Glissant identifies the roots of the filiation-model in Christianity, in which the absolute word of God is legitimized through the sacrificial death of his only son. "Christ is above all the Son," Glissant reminds us, "He consecrates filiation" (Glissant 2010, 48).⁹ As the structural seed of Western identity (both communal and personal), the filiation-model imposes linearity on everything it touches, from legitimate bloodlines and "arrow-like" geographical conquest, to scientific progress and chronological time. This obsession with the straight line spawns violent

⁹ Vonnegut tackles the flaw of the Christian filiation myth directly in a passage from *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) that summarizes a fictional novel written by science fiction author and repeat Vonnegut character Kilgore Trout. In Trout's novel, aliens study the New Testament to discern why Christianity has not brought peace on Earth but instead has perpetuated violence, exclusion, and cruelty. The answer lies, finally, in the legitimizing function of paternal filiation. It was only because Christ was the Son of God ("the most Powerful Being in the Universe") that his persecution caused such severe ramifications. This filial connection distorts the lesson of universal mercy and kindness we are meant to glean from the scene. The actual lesson of the Gospels, the aliens conclude, is this, "Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected." Patriarchy soon mutates into racially motivated violence: "[Readers thought,] 'Oh boy-they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch this time!' And that thought had a brother: 'There are right people to lynch.'" (Vonnegut 2009, 139). Incidentally, Georges Bataille shared Vonnegut's sense of divine comedy. Once again, the joke is founded on Christ's filial relationship to God which means that his death can only ever be rhetorical: "The death of Jesus partakes of comedy to the extent that one cannot unarbitrarily introduce the forgetting of his eternal divinity – which is his – into the consciousness of an omnipotent and infinite God." (Bataille 1990, 13).

kin: the juridical Father, the male heir, the imperial conqueror, the amoral scientist, and the generalist Historian. As a “factual,” “Christian” account of the atomic bomb, told through the biographies of “important Americans,” Jonah’s abandoned project, *The Day The World Ended*, is a testament to these figures of filiation.

The paternal centerpiece of *The Day The World Ended* was to be Felix Hoenikker, the deceased scientist who was the “Father” of both the atomic bomb and ice-9, and whose story is related to John by his three surviving children, Franklin, Angela, and Newt. As the creator of three children, the atomic bomb, and the apocalypse, Felix was three times a father—sanguine, scientific, and divine. Vonnegut weaves together these different paternal valences to confer upon Felix the absolute sovereign power of the filiation-model, the same power wielded by the unnamed father in Kafka’s short story. In one scene, John visits the cemetery where Felix and his wife are interred in the hopes that “the old man’s tombstone [might] make a good picture for the jacket of *The Day The World Ended*” (60). Felix’s gravestone is “a marble cube forty centimeters on each side” with a single word as its epigraph: ““FATHER,” it said” (62). John’s cover-art concept assumes a correlation between the end of Felix Hoenikker and the end of the world: the Father is the World. If unraveled, the marble cube would create a tesseract: the cube is a Christian crucifix, mathematically condensed. Without pronouns, the terse epigraph refuses to disclose *whose* father Felix was, an ambiguity that is reinforced by Newt, the

youngest of the Hoenikker children, who explains his paternity by combining together all three valences of the word: ““My father was the father of the atom bomb.” Newt didn’t say that Felix Hoenikker was *one* of the fathers. He said Felix was *the* father” (131). Depicting Felix as the “Father” of both the bomb and ice-9, both Jonah and Dr. Breed, Felix’s supervisor, repeatedly conflate his scientific prowess with a divine paternalism. Dr. Breed, moreover, appropriates the language of the unbounded sublime to describe Felix as “a force of nature no mortal could possibly control” (21).

With Felix Hoenikker as “Father,” the chain of filiation is made literal (and apocalyptic) by the Hoenikker children’s secret inheritance of the deadly ice-9. On the night of Felix’s death, Franklin, Angela, and Newt split the ice-9 prototype equally among them, and for the remainder of their lives each wear a single splinter of the deadly “seed” in a chalice around their necks. All three children trade on their filial claim to ice-9 and the Hoenikker bloodline to levy their social positions. “I bought myself a job,” says Franklin, “just the way [Angela] bought [herself] a tomcat husband, just the way Newt bought himself a week on Cape Cod with a Russian midget!” (243). Franklin is hired as Major General of San Lorenzo by its President, the dictatorial “Papa,” who is obsessed with Franklin’s Hoenikker lineage. Investigating Franklin’s qualifications for the post, Jonah finds an answer in an essay written by Papa in which

“Papa” referred to Frank five times as “...the *blood son* of Dr. Felix Hoenikker. The phrase reeked of cannibalism.

“Papa” plainly felt that Frank was a chunk of the old man’s magic meat. (82)

Papa’s fixation on Frank’s bloodline finds its logical conclusion in his efforts to forge consanguinity with the Hoenikker family by way of an arranged marriage with his beautiful daughter, Mona. “What children these two will have! [...] What blood! What beauty” (143).

But *Cat’s Cradle* is not a story about the continuation of one bloodline in particular, rather, it is a story about the extermination of the filiation-model in general. As Glissant reminds us, the age of Reason *gives way to* the age of Relation. As General Ripper’s obsession with ontological hygiene ultimately results in the atomic implosion of such models of containment, so the Hoenikkers’ commitment to the filiation model results in the hewing of the “family tree.” The apocalypse in *Cat’s Cradle* is brought about by the accidental unleashing of Papa’s ice-9 infected corpse into the ocean. Ice-9 finds its way into Papa’s hands through the Hoenikkers’ strict adherence to the rules of filiation. First, they privately divide their father’s intellectual estate, thus fulfilling the inheritance clause of the filiation model, and then Franklin bestows his portion of ice-9 to his new “Papa”-in-law.

Until its apocalyptic appearance at the end of the novel, ice-9 is thought to exist only in theory. Asa Breed explains the weapon’s origins,

“The Marines, after almost two-hundred years of wallowing in mud, were sick of it,” said Dr. Breed.

“The general, as their spokesman, felt that one of the aspects of progress should be that Marines no longer had to fight in mud.”

“What did the General have in mind?”

“The absence of mud. No more mud.” (42-43)

The Marine General’s call for military hygiene is similar to General Ripper’s pathological panic at the prospect of contaminated “essences.” The Marine General repeats his complaint elsewhere, “[the military’s] trucks and tanks and howitzers are wallowing, sinking in stinking miasma and ooze” (47). Looking to his language, we can assume that the General objects to mud because it perverts the orderly line of progress that organizes military protocol and human evolution more generally. His repeated use of the verb “wallowing” suggests that mud inviting a luxurious playfulness that perverts the military drive toward efficiency, productivity, and progress. The fecund descriptors “miasma and ooze” further call to mind a primordial soup that engulfs and breaks down the human form. The mutable indistinctness that so horrifies the Marine General entrances Bokononists, for whom mud is the fundamental basis of being. The Bokononist views mud as a dynamic site where various types of life may mingle, combine, and co-exist without being forced into a permanent or fixed form. Bokonon funeral rites tell their version of the creation story:

God made mud.
God got lonesome

So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!"
"See all I've made," said God, "the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars."
And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.¹⁰ (220-221)

The General's request for mud to be made "absent" therefore signifies for the Bokononist the horrifying obliteration of the very grounds of existence.

The Bokononist fear of total annihilation proves to be well founded. When ice-9 hits the ocean at the end of the novel, it hurtles through the world's moisture atoms, leaving in its wake a frozen planet. Jonah surveys the post-apocalyptic landscape:

There were no smells. There was no movement. Every step I took made a gravelly squeak in blue-white frost. And every squeak was echoed loudly. The season of locking was over. The earth was locked up tight. It was winter, now and forever. (269)

Dr. Breed explains ice-9 as a "seed" that teaches moisture atoms to "stack and lock, to crystallize, to freeze" in an "orderly, rigid way" (45, 44). Chemically speaking, water's fluidity is attained by the loose mobility of its hydrogen bonds, which are "constantly forming and breaking" in an aquatic version of becoming (Manisha). Ice gains its "rigid lattice structure" from the increased proximity of its hydrogen molecules, which are "pressed against each other very closely" (Manisha). Ice-9 kills not by annihilating physical bodies but by annihilating the relations between physical bodies.¹¹ It literally

¹⁰ Bokonon funeral rites follow a call and response pattern. In the novel, this sequence is spoken twice, once by the Doctor, and once by the dying Papa who reveals on his death-bed his Bokononist faith. To avoid unnecessary duplication, I have transcribed the lines only once.

¹¹ It is notable that this method of destruction accords to the classic definition of genocide as articulated by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, "By 'genocide' we mean the destruction of an ethnic group [...]. Generally

obliterates the “gaps” between hydrogen molecules in water, thus arresting the flow of water and, relatedly, the flow of life. We may recognize another *Strangelove* refraction here as the hysterical intolerance for “gaps” results in world death.

The “locked up” planet is therefore the apocalyptic end-result of the filiation model. Édouard Glissant repeatedly uses the word “chain” to refer to the hereditary series of legitimate linkages that constitute filiation, but also to indicate the oppressive and restrictive nature of the filiation model as a basis for community. The “chaining” effect of filiation is dramatized in the apocalyptic chain-reaction of ice-9 through the world’s waters, which literally disallows movement and connection between people, animals and things. Breed confirms ice-9’s homogenization of this multiplicity of flows. “When [the rain] fell, it would freeze into hard little hobnails of *ice-nine* – and that would be the end of the world!” he tells Jonah (50). Designed to “lock” life-forms into a static molecular pattern, ice-9 paradoxically provides the conceptual platform for thinking of life as flow, or Relation. When Jonah tries to conceptualize the destructive scope of ice-9, he finds himself unraveling an extending network of entangled bodies of water: the

speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation [...] It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such a group.” (Lemkin 2005, 79).

streams that feed into the swamp, the lakes and rivers that feed into the streams, the springs that feed into the lakes and rivers, the underground water feeding the springs, and the rain that feeds them all.

Planetary Thinking

Bokononism achieves through an affirmative irrationality and errant laughter this revelation of Relation that Western science achieves negatively through the global destructiveness of ice-9. Bokononism presents existence not as a one-directional slingshot of bloodlines and scientific progress, but as a tangled mesh of colliding and conjoining karasses, the Bokononist word for “team” (2). The karass, “as free-form as an amoeba,” is perpetually in motion as it circles its *wampeter*, or pivot (2). A karass’s roster and wampeter are never disclosed to its members, who must instead submit to existing in a perpetual state of unknowing. As Jonah tells us, these are “teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing” (2). This state of unknowing inflects everyday encounters and events with potential importance. A section from *The Books of Bokonon* reads, “if you find your life tangled up with somebody else’s life for no very logical reasons,” writes Bokonon, “that person may be a member of your *karass*.”” (2).

It is this heightened attentiveness to the minutia of the everyday that leads critic Todd Davis to assert that “Bokononism functions solely with small narratives and embraces the local over the universal” (Davis 2006, 63). I contend, however, that

Bokononism does not privilege the small and local, but rather does away with the hierarchical dualisms of small/large, and local/universal that make such “privileging” possible. A *wampeter*, we are told, can be anything, ranging in physical size and spiritual magnitude from “a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail” (52). Karasses are singular, and so cannot be universal. Bokonon himself reveals that *karasses* do not organize themselves according to “national, institutional, occupational, familial, or class boundaries” but resemble instead a globally interconnected network of people, animals, and things that can be wandered through and encountered but never grasped, for “Man created the checkerboard; God created the *karass*” (2). Thinking a *karass* therefore requires that ungrounded double-vision that Kostas Axelos placed at the center of planetary thought: “to see being and things simultaneously from close up and far away large and small, in their and in our wandering (*errance*), in the great World which is at the same time small, where there are no victors” (Axelos 1968, 13).

Upon his conversion to Bokononism, Jonah is forced to abandon *The Day The World Ended*, that linear history of Felix the “Father” that contains in its title the spectacular end-goal of world death. Instead, he writes the book we hold in our hands. Vonnegut intended the collage-like structure of *Cat’s Cradle*, which is divided into 127 short episodes, to function as a book of jokes. “In *Cat’s Cradle*, for instance, there are these very short chapters,” he told an interviewer in 1976, “each one of them represents

one day's work, and each one is a joke" (Cargas 1976, 1048). Elsewhere, Vonnegut admits rigging all his novels with humorous devices:

Jokes are efficient things and they must be as carefully constructed as mouse traps. And so for me to write a page of a novel is a very slow business, because the whole thing has to be rigged in order to snap at the end. My books are essentially mosaics, thousands and thousands of tiny little chips all glued together, and each chip [...] is a little joke. (Allen 2009, 69)

The joke is a carefully wrought technical device designed to "snap at the end." The explosive "snap" of the punch-line activates the reader's laughter, which in turn glues all the mosaic-chip chapters together, albeit momentarily, into an organic vision of narrative interconnection. In this way, Vonnegut summons laughter as an alternate, non-violent way of "filling in the gaps." While ice-9 permanently seals the gaps between molecules to arrest mobility, community, and life, laughter springs up in the novel's gaps to facilitate a poetic mobility between segments.

Within the novel, laughter is the noise of conversion as characters cease loyalty to the Western-Christian models of filiation and take up the Bokononist practice of planetary thought and communal relation. One chapter in particular, titled "Black Death," offers the reader a template on how to laugh in a Bokononist fashion and towards Bokononist ends. The chapter is often cited as an encapsulation of the black

humor mode.¹² The chapter revolves around a joke, delivered by Philip Castle, who is, fittingly enough, a mosaicist by trade. The central figure of the anecdote is Philip's father, a local doctor named Julian Castle. Years ago, a ship carrying a cargo of wicker furniture and a hull of disease-ridden rats ran ashore at San Lorenzo. Here, Philip pauses, and Jonah impatiently prompts him to continue:

"So?"

"So some people got free furniture and some people got bubonic plague."

Philip's refusal to make an affective distinction between receiving a new chair and suffering a painful death is typical of black humor's flattening principle. This is not, however, the punch-line. Philip continues his story, describing the macabre scene of bulldozers stalling as they pushed "stacks of bodies," indistinguishable in their swollen and darkened state, toward one "common grave." His father's hospital "looked like Auschwitz or Buchenwald," he tells Jonah. The comparison with the concentration camp is jarring. The bubonic plague is a negative incarnation of the Relation model: it is a natural force that kills arbitrarily as it extends outward in an embodied web of infection. In contrast, the death camp represents the genocidal violence of the filiation-model at its limits as whole groups are targeted and annihilated based on their illegitimate

¹² All quotations regarding this section can be found in Chapter 73 of *Cat's Cradle* (2010) 159- 162. Robert Scholes cites the chapter almost in its entirety at the beginning of *The Fabulators* (1967), his book-length study of black humor and other "fabulative" narrative techniques (Scholes 1967). In her book about Raymond Carver, Jingqiong Zhou quotes a large chunk of "Black Death" and calls it "an emblematic joke of traditional black humor" (Zhou 2006, 69).

bloodlines. In invoking the image of the death-camp, Philip creates of the mass grave a nexus between the filiation-model and the Relation-model.

The gruesome connectivity of the plague is mimicked in the electronic network of telecommunication, as Philip's story is interrupted by a ringing telephone. "'My God,'" said Castle, "I didn't know the telephones were connected yet.'" That Philip's exclamation is a response to the connected phone service rather than the horrors of the Black Death reinforces the affective flatness of the scene. Finally, he reaches his punch-line:

"Anyway, one sleepless night I stayed up with Father while he worked. It was all we could do to find a live patient to treat. In bed after bed after bed we found dead people.

"And Father started giggling," Castle continued.

"He couldn't stop. He walked out into the night with his flashlight. He was still giggling. He was making the flashlight beam dance over all the dead people stacked outside. He put his hand on my head, and do you know what that marvelous man said to me?" asked Castle.

"Nope."

"'Son,' my father said, 'someday this will all be yours.'"

Philip's anecdote culminates in the recognizable "snap" of a punch-line, which serves to transfigure his tragic, individual memory into a comic, common joke. Involuntarily, we laugh, our laughter mirroring Julian Castle's macabre giggling.

Julian's giggle is yet another example of the proximity between laughter and death that is a leitmotif of the black humor mode. As with Billy Pilgrim's and Major

Kong's laughter, I argue that this giggle represents a conversion. Castle laughs not because is overwhelmed by the unspeakable horror of the Black Death, but because he recognizes the grisly terminus of the filiation-model in a mass grave. The filiation-model is obsessed with bloodlines and family trees. These geometric structures are literalized in "Black Death" as the blackened corpses are arranged in straight lines and careful stacks. Julian's giggling begins the moment he encounters the repetitious line of corpses, "in bed after bed after bed we found dead people," Philip remembers. His giggling intensifies as he "dances" his flashlight over the corpse-tower, "all the dead people stacked outside." Julian's wholesale rejection of the filiation-model is made explicit in his punch-line. "Son, someday this will all be yours!" is a grotesque parody of the central ritual of filiation, the father bequeathing his estate to the son. In this way, the flattened humor of Philip Castle's joke, which makes no distinction between new furniture and the bubonic plague, between the Holocaust and a natural disaster, or between a mass grave and a telephone call, gives way to Julian Castle's irrepressible giggle.

Julian's laughter spills forth in the moment he renounces his paternal duties. No longer the Father, he becomes the source of an affirmative laughing plague that spills over the borders of the novel by way of the "snapping" punchline. In his short essay "Nomadic Thought" (1973) Gilles Deleuze suggests that it is the reader's responsibility

to transfigure “tragic” literature into a wellspring for laughter. He takes the work of Kafka as an example. Kafka’s stories may be saturated with “anguish, solitude, guilt, [and] the drama of communication” but, Deleuze reminds us, “Max Brod tells us how the audience would laugh hysterically when Kafka used to read *The Trial*” (Deleuze 2004, 257). Bound by the laws of signification, literature and film can only serve as a temporary site and platform for the anti-cognitive burst of laughter. The reader is the crucible where the tragic Being can explode into comic Becoming:

What springs from great books is schizo-laughter or revolutionary joy, not the anguish of our pathetic narcissism, not the terror of our guilt. [...] There is always an indescribable joy that springs from great books, even when they speak of ugly, desperate, or terrifying things. The transmutation already takes effect with every great book, and every great book constitutes the health of tomorrow. You cannot help but laugh when you mix up the codes. If you put thought in relation to the outside, Dionysian moments of laughter will erupt, and this is thinking in the clear air. (Deleuze 2004, 258)

Julian Castle’s giggle is provided by Vonnegut as a model for our own readerly laughter. Incited by the “snap” of the punchline, our laughter hops the partition between text and reality to traffic Castle’s giggle into our lived world, and with it, the lessons of Relation.

It is with the same giggle that Julian Castle begins to teach Jonah the history of Bokononism. The San Lorenzo government insists that the island is a strictly “Christian Nation” where all public displays of the outlawed religion Bokononism are punishable by the ominous sounding “Hook.” Jonah himself observes that the island appears to

split in two, with the “good in the jungle and evil in the palace” (226). Julian Castle reveals the truth with a burst of laughter:

He laughed. “You haven’t caught on, yet?”
“To what?”
“Everybody on San Lorenzo is a devout Bokononist.” (172)

Laughter once again signals the presence of a network of Relation that extends beneath classic dualisms such as good/evil. Proof of the island-wide spread of Bokononism is found in the oral circulation of the religion’s teachings, which take the form of laugh-inducing nonsensical calypsos and absurd aphorisms.¹³ These teachings are collected in *The Books of Bokonon*, but these books are rarely seen and never finished. “Copies are hard to come by,” Philip Castle tells Jonah, “They aren’t printed. They’re made by hand. And of course, there is no such thing as a completed copy, since Bokonon is adding things every day” (183). Instead, Bokonon doctrines are transmitted verbally in the dense San Lorenzo dialect which Jonah describes as “both easy to understand and difficult to write down” (108). Illegal and literally illegible, Bokononism circulates as oral hearsay through the physical bodies of a lived social network, thus avoiding any potential ossification into didactic law, regulation, or doctrine.¹⁴

¹³ In “Nomadic Thought” (1973) Deleuze describes aphorisms as “the pure matter of laughter and joy” (Deleuze 2004, 258).

¹⁴ Again, Bokononism is placed in opposition to Vonnegut’s formulation of science, which works to reduce the complexities and differences of life into one basic unit. In one scene, Jonah speaks with a bartender about Felix Hoenikker, and the conversation turns to the power of science to disclose the “secret of life.”

The cumulative, communal process of Bokononism mirrors the process of creolization that Glissant offers as a material example of Relation. Both are situated in the specific locale of the Caribbean, which Glissant describes as an “explosive region”:

The Caribbean [is] a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. [...] The reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation. (Glissant 2010, 33)

The political and cultural instability of the Caribbean is a condition of possibility for the production of Relation, of which the Creole language is a powerful symbol. Like Bokononism, French Creole is a supple, communal, and oral language that operates beneath and apart from the strict structures of colonial French. We can assume that the San Lorenzo dialect, the mediator of Bokononist teachings, attained its linguistic density during the island’s long history of colonial conquest and conflict. Since 1519, control of San Lorenzo had passed through the hands of the Spanish, French, Danish, Dutch, English, a group of mutinous African slaves, and an American sugar corporation before Lionel Boyd Johnson suffered a shipwreck and washed ashore with his fellow traveler, a deserter from the U.S. Marines named McCabe, in 1922. The unique San Lorenzo dialect

“Protein,” the bartender declared. “They found out something about protein.” (25). Science’s blinkered and reductive vision finds its apocalyptic rendering in the unleashing of ice-nine, which literally transforms all of life into one static block. In contrast to the trajectory of science, Bokononism fashions itself as an ongoing process of errant wandering that moves toward but can never “know” a final or fixed truth, “Bokonon simply observes that such investigations [toward totality] are bound to be incomplete,” Jonah notes (4).

helps to construct the nonsensical, oral fluidity of the Bokononist verse by providing a host of key Bokononist terms such as *karass*, *wampeter*, *kan-kan* and *granfalloon*.

For Glissant, the violent cultural “explosion” of colonialism provides the basis for an emergent ontology of Relation, as symbolized by the open, oral poetic variations of the Creole language. In *Cat’s Cradle*, we see this formulation literalized. Before arriving in San Lorenzo, Lionel Boyd Johnson is an itinerant colonial subject of Tobago who has committed to an errant life of nomadism in the Caribbean. He is described as “an idler, still seeking the storm that would drive him ashore on what was unmistakably his destiny” (107). On his way to Miami, the “explosive” Caribbean sea wrecks his ship and washes away his clothes, belongings, and identity before driving him ashore at San Lorenzo. The shipwreck is described as a rebirth, “I gasped on land, and I became me,” reports Johnson (107). The lilting San Lorenzo pronunciation of Johnson’s name translates and transforms him into “Bokonon.”

The bleak ending of *Cat’s Cradle*, an episode titled “The End,” sees Bokonon discarding Bokononism for a linear “history of human stupidity” (287). In the last scene Bokonon hands Jonah a scrap of paper, which is inserted directly into the novel as its final lines:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white

poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (287)

This is the first time Jonah has encountered the words of Bokonon in the form of a permanent document. The transition from oral hearsay to written text marks the termination of Bokononism. “The time for the final sentence has come,” Bokonon says as he hands the piece of paper to Jonah (287). This stilling of the errant Bokononism teachings onto an official document is the first of three deaths. The second is the death of the man Bokonon/Johnson, who desires to become an ice-9 statue and so divest himself of movement and life. The third is that of laughter as it suffers a fatal fixing into Bokonon’s horrible “grin.” Without the relating force of laughter, the grin and defiant “thumbing of the nose” can only signify what Robert Tally calls “ironic detachment” (Hanuman 2011, 19). The last image of *Cat’s Cradle* therefore stands as a warning against following the first flattening principle of black humor without the second relating principle of laughter. Twice in his short missive Bokonon imagines himself lying down: he will “lie down on his back,” he will make a statue of himself “lying on his back” (287). From this prone position, Bokonon imagines assuming a tight frozen grin, an ice-9 death mask. His revocation of Bokononism, and the ontology of relation that it represents, is simultaneous with the freezing of the creative and traversing state of laughter into a static, suicidal grin.

Bruce Jay Friedman, in his "Foreward" to *Black Humor*, describes the black humorist as a "fellow who unfreezes his mind" (Friedman 1965, x). The filial chains of the family tree, the frozen blocks of an ice-9 death, the gapless homogeneity of scientific truth, and the fixed coordinates of a static grin: all are renditions of the ossified and seemingly impenetrable monolith that is Western-Christian humanism. Towards the end of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant envisions a particular intellectual gait, a certain style of imaginative movement that would serve to "unbox" the World:

We travel on the surface, in the expanse, weaving our imaginary structures and not filling up the voids of a science, but rather as we go along, removing boxes that are too full so that in the end we can imagine infinite volumes. (Glissant 2010, 207)

Laughter is an embodiment of this infinite movement. It literally escapes the grip of the sciences to act as a creative, communal movement that vibrates through and dislodges the grouting between these chains, these blocks.

Billy Pilgrim's, Major Kong's, and Julian Castle's atomic laughs burst forth as they stare into the apocalyptic abyss created by a Western-Christian humanism pushed to its pathological limits. Their laughter is the noise of philosophical conversion, as the tragic heaviness of Being is transfigured into the errant joy of comic Becoming. This new philosophical mode is founded on perpetual nomadic motion and affective inter-relationality instead of a quarantined and "pure" universal Being, which in *Dr. Strangelove* and *Cat's Cradle* meets its own suicidal end in the clean, cloistered spaces of

General Ripper's bathroom and the molecular compactness of an ice-9 death. Calling upon the laughter that spills over the borders of texts, a readerly laughter, as evidence for a poetics of Relation may seem theoretically crude. Perhaps it seems so because it is impossible to map. Infinite and non-calculable, it exists beyond the texts in the embodied communities that form, however momentarily, around them. It is precisely in these unsteady zones of readerly laughter that resistance against the universalizing, annihilating maxims of a Western-Christian humanism becomes possible. Like the Bokononist karass, these laughing communities perpetually form and un-form across multiple times and spaces to embody the planetary principles of a new ontological framework, a poetics of Relation.

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Biography

Fran McDonald was born in 1985 in Alphen aan den Rijn, Netherlands, where she spent the first two years of her life before moving to the United Kingdom. She attended the University of Nottingham, where she received her B.A. *summa cum laude* in American and Canadian Studies in 2007. She received a Master's in English and American Studies from the University of Oxford in 2008. McDonald completed her doctorate in English at Duke University in 2015 with the support of the James B. Duke Fellowship and the Pope Family Fellowship. Her areas of specialization include twentieth-century and contemporary American literature, film, and critical theory. Her scholarly work has been published in print as "Wrong Laughter: Laughing Away the Human in Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2*" (Interdisciplinary Press: Oxford, 2014) and online as "Laughter without Humor: On The Laugh Loop GIF" (*The Atlantic*, 2013). A portion of this dissertation, "Laughing at the End of the World: Horror, Humor, and the Bomb," is currently forthcoming as part of the edited collection *Sidesplitting: sLaughter in Popular Cinema* (Scarecrow Press, 2017).