

# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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