

Unknown Causes, or the Limit of Logos

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

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

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

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

Seventy years in these folks' world
 The child I works for calls me girl
 I say "HA! HA! HA! Yes ma'am!"
 For workin's sake
 I'm too proud to bend and
 Too poor to break
 So . . . I laugh! Until my stomach ache
 When I think about myself.

My folks can make me split my side
 I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died
 The tales they tell sound just like lying
 They grow the fruit but eat the rind.
 Hmm huh! I laugh uhuh huh huh . . .
 Until I start to cry when I think about myself
 And my folks and the children.³

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNREASON AND LAUGHTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOWARD A HISTORY OF LAUGHTER AS SOUND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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