
Risible Creatures

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

—PORPHYRY, 268–270

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

—ERASMUS, 1535

LAUGHTER AGAINST HUMANITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE LAUGHING AND THE RISIBLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOGOS UNDONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OWNING THE LOSS OF LOGOS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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