

## Laughter as (Sound) Reproduction

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

—VLADIMIR PROPP

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

—TWITTER USER @CAPTHANDLEBAR

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

—MAYA ANGELOU

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### LAUGHTER AS PROLIFERATION AND TECHNIQUE

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### FROM VITALIST SUPPLEMENT TO REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### TOWARD SURROGATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived.<sup>62</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



It seems important that both of these racial stereotypes are associated with exaggerated laughter<sup>71</sup>—a laughter that is as pervasive as it is, at times, unnerving, inscrutable, less than human. It takes a whole world and tradition of reproductive laughter to see that the strange sound coming out of these women's mouths is the sound of their labor to maintain and multiply their masters' persons and possessions. But laughter here is not a sign of blithely accepted victimhood—on the contrary, it is, as we have seen, a double-edged weapon: compliance with reproduction as well as an audible acknowledgment of reproduction's laboriousness, its cost, the ever-present possibility of its interruption and withdrawal. Of course, and Roberts points this out as well, the labor of Black sexuality and motherhood exerted by figures of biocapital like the jezebel and the mammy is performed knowingly, detachedly, and, to use a racialized term for exploited Black labor, *lazily*.<sup>72</sup> Laughter names the labor of reproduction, even at a time of compliance—but in giving it a name, detaches it from the laborer's body and makes it both alienable and destructible. In these figures of biocapital, laughter sounds out the potential for both the theft *and* the willful withdrawal of reproductive labor, sometimes at the same time. I am reminded again (as in chapter 1) of when Maya Angelou, in her astonishing gloss of Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1895 "We Wear the Mask," reframes that poem by conjuring and envoicing the figure of an elderly Black maid who seems to laugh to herself—for no apparent reason—while riding the bus home from work. "Now, if you don't know black features you may think she was laughing," Angelou tells her audience during a 1988 performance, "but she wasn't laughing. . . . That's that survival apparatus."<sup>73</sup> The fact that the sound of laughter should come from a Black domestic worker heading home after a long day of underpaid toil at her white employers' homes is a necessary, politically charged detail here. And Angelou's stark reclaiming of laughter as a means of survival should remind us that the story of reproductive laughter—even through the slavery-surrogacy nexus—always already contains the seed of refusal. With the act of laughter, Angelou's maid gives a proper name (one that necessarily baffles and confuses her employers) to her otherwise invisible reproductive toil—and in so doing, she claims it, even as it is being yanked away from her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here we can be more precise, more cutting, more relentless in tracking laughter's political aurality. Laughter is the sound that the surrogate human effect makes as it is being produced. Indeed, laughter's long-standing bind to the mechanical, to the eerie aspects of technology—for instance, Bergson's refrain about its connection to the intersection of mechanical and living<sup>80</sup>—cannot be understood in

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

#### ALEXA AND ODRADEK LAUGH

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

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

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

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

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

*Jimmy Kimmel:* Alexa, hello!

*Alexa:* Hi!

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

*A:* What do you mean?

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

*A:* Oh. Hahahahahahaha! Like that?

*JK:* Yes, exactly like that.

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

*JK:* Oh. Alexa, what was the joke?

*A:* Why did the chicken cross the road?

*JK:* I don’t know that one. Why?

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

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

*A:* Hahahahahahaha! Have a nice day! Hahahahahahaha!<sup>82</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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