

George W. Johnson's Laughable Phonography

Sometime around 1891, George Washington Johnson, a young Black street performer living in New York, was singing for passersby on a pier on the Hudson. Johnson was a first-generation free man: his father had been enslaved in Virginia, and he himself had been enslaved in his early years before becoming free and moving to the North. One of the pieces in his street-singing repertoire was something he had composed called “The Laughing Song.” Agents for Columbia Records strolled by, heard the song, and signed Johnson up. What remains of the song, of the encounter, and, indeed, of Johnson himself is the cylinders (and sometimes sheet music) he produced starting that year. His repertoire included a handful of pieces broadly in the style of minstrelsy-derived “coon songs,” but “The Laughing Song” is the cylinder he recorded by far the most often and, so we can surmise, the one in highest demand.¹ It sounds like this: tinny piano accompaniment, a trotting 4/4 meter, a phrase structure built in blocks of four bars, plain diatonic harmonies (this is before the blues) in a loop of I-IV-V-I, with every chord filling a four-bar segment. A square, unpretentious musical contraption, as Matthew Morrison recently observed, which speaks of the white Irish basis for much minstrelsy repertoire.² The music repeats every sixteen bars, unchanged from verse to chorus. In the verse, Johnson—whose voice, mediated by the phonograph’s narrow frequency, is nasal and warbly—delivers the lyrics in a fast syllabic word setting, stubbornly on the beat. The words amount to several racist epithets strung together by a story about a primal, hostile racial encounter, a scene of “terror and enjoyment.”³ The singer narrates being hailed and harassed by white passersby in the street, a story reminiscent—as others have pointed out—of Franz Fanon’s recounting of the white child pointing at him and shouting, “Look, a negro!” in *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁴

As I was coming around the corner, I heard some people say,
 Here comes the dandy darky, here he comes this way,
 His ears are like a snowplow, his mouth is like a trap,
 And when he opens it gently you will see a fearful gap.
 And then I laughed . . . ha ha ha ha
 I just can't help from laughing . . . ha ha ha ha ha ha.⁵

And then there is the chorus: to the very same tune as the verse, Johnson intones a musicalized version of laughter, a peal of sharp, rhythmic, and half-voiced *ha ha has* that dots every beat and then lands (every four bars) on a fully voiced *haaaaa* as we reach a chord of the I-IV-V-I loop. Simple to the ear, although, as we will see, not at all simple to conceive, sing, and deliver. That's it—that is the song, and it goes by rather quickly: wax cylinders lasted no more than two minutes in the 1890s, so a couple of rounds of verse and chorus is all there's time for.⁶

Despite the striking effect of the chorus—halfway between singing and chuckling, reproducing the breathlessness of laughter one moment, dipping into vibrato the next—I'd wager that few people would know, upon encountering this song, that they have just encountered one of the primal scenes of American phonography and its foundational entanglement with Black “intellectual performance property,” to borrow a term from Morrison. This was the first song on the phonograph to achieve documented mass commercial success; a minstrelsy-derived tune marking the beginnings of popular music (in its twentieth-century incarnation as recorded music) in the United States; one of the first commercial recordings by a Black person; the object of one of the most infamous racist write-ups about the biological suitability of Black voices to the phonograph;⁷ a song whose success not just in the United States but also abroad sparked a series of appropriations and contrafacts whose extent, at the dawn of the twentieth-first century, is dizzying and impossible to track; and, finally, the beginning of laughing songs as a global genre of recorded popular music far beyond the United States.

Part of the challenge of writing about this piece is that we must hold together in our mind the song itself—a concrete, small contraption made with little thought of posterity—and the historical weight it has gathered in hindsight. Indeed, scholars who have considered “The Laughing Song” are drawn to it, at least in part, precisely because of the huge amount of hermeneutic weight it is capable of carrying. Johnson's “Laughing Song” offers that rare bird of history: an identifiable origin, the starting point of a series of thorny historical processes. (Or, at the very least, something that looks and sounds a lot like an origin.) As mentioned above, it was one of the first recordings to enjoy mass production in the United States and is a very early recording of a Black performer's voice, and so occupies a key crossroads of sound recording, capital, and race. But also, the song—its lyrics, the labor it demanded of Johnson, and the speed with which white singers in the United States

appropriated it—is steeped in the politics of postbellum and Jim Crow-era America, with its blend of potential social mobility for Blacks and effective and enduring discrimination and subjection in a segregated society. Last, the extensive appropriations of the song bring up the question of who has the right to own themselves and their labor—that is, of property and ownership of the self; the recorded voice allowed for this question of property and ownership to be made audible in the alienation of Black voices from Black singers and of revenue from Black performers. To speak of origins, then, in the case of “The Laughing Song” is to conjure a behemoth of political implications that are grooved into its history and practice.

Here I must put my cards on the table. I am interested in reducing, or at least redistributing, some of the hermeneutic weight laid on Johnson’s song rather than adding to it. The reasoning behind this methodological choice is as follows: this song was the occasion of so many direct and loose contrafacts that most people outside the United States (and even within, given how quickly white American singers appropriated it) have likely known it only after an acquaintance with one of its contrafacts, and likely in a different language and sung by a different singer. I am one of those people: someone who, while working on the history of Italian recorded music in the twentieth century, came across the Neapolitan version of “The Laughing Song” and found out—through a few clicks and browses—about the original.⁸ The story of this appropriation—and the difficulty I experience in telling it in a way that doesn’t seem reductive or overemphatic of the national politics of either the United States or Italy—is what brings me here. Yes, Berardo Cantalamessa, the author of the contrafact of Johnson’s “Laughing Song” in Naples, took something that he didn’t write, adapted it, and claimed it as his own—and, as we will see, did this with the knowledge that the original singer was Black. At the same time, he had no real understanding of what he was appropriating—and I mean this not abstractly but in a very practical sense. It is more than likely that Cantalamessa understood none of the lyrics (his have nothing to do with Johnson’s narrative setup): he probably had scant knowledge of American history, and, even assuming that he somehow had an inordinate level of Anglophone erudition, the words on the phonograph cylinder (which was being carted around exhibits and wore out more with each play) were hard to parse.

What, then, is the “proper” of a song appropriated in this way? What exactly *could* Cantalamessa seize and take, and how did it overlap with what Johnson made? These are impossible questions, but necessary all the same. If we shift our aural attention away from the original (which is, of course, always created by the copy) without, however, refocusing ourselves only on the copy, we might catch a glimpse of a key moment in the history of voice and sound reproduction. Namely, this: across the dull screen of mishearings, worn wax, poor articulation, and lost meanings granted by traveling phonographed music, recorded laughter (not singing exactly, nor speech) is a rare particle that made the crossing. The appropriations of Johnson’s song are the proof of that particle’s existence and ability to carry

across time and space. As we will see in the following chapter, this particle retained racialized meanings, meanings that were directly related to its transmissibility. We need an understanding of property and of voice as property that moves beyond original ownership and theft in order to account for Black laughter on the phonograph in its circulation beyond the United States. Morrison's recent work on *Blacksound*—a term that he coined, the sonic version of blackface—helps frame this question. He is interested not so much in dynamics of the property and theft of an essential Blackness but in the process by which Blackness and whiteness are molded and separated as properties by performance: “While my research on blackface seeks to unpack . . . performative nuances of whiteness, it does not assume an automatic ‘theft’ of ‘authentic’ scripts of blackness by the white minstrels in blackface. Instead, I consider the way in which these sonic and embodied racialized scripts were negotiated through performance and in blackface, and what this negotiation reveals.”⁹

The challenge of such an approach is, though, to reckon with the aspects of property built into Black performance by the long legacy of chattel slavery. And to do so without, however, reducing Black performances into mere passive objects of expropriation and appropriation by white ears and performers. Perhaps, then, phonography is more fundamental to this history than Morrison allows, because it engendered forms of labor, vocality, and self-consciousness that emancipated—and here I am grossly paraphrasing Alexander Weheliye's work—Black performers from narrower forms of writing, such as print and literacy.¹⁰ Though he hints at it, Morrison understandably does not delve into the legacy of *Blacksound* outside the United States or ask whether *Blacksound* is knowable as such in different racial contexts. I argue that laughter was, in many ways, the first passport that *Blacksound* obtained to move outside the United States through the phonograph and that in this movement *Blacksound* was bound to laughter as a particular, contradictory crystallization of property.

In this chapter, then, I am approaching this song not as a historian, critic, or analyst of American history but as a music and sound scholar asking what exactly allowed this music to move, to be taken, appropriated, reheard, and rewritten. This is a kind of uncomfortable listening—a listening away from context rather than into it, a listening that accompanies Johnson's song away from him rather than sewing it back to his body like Peter Pan's shadow. The discomfort is both methodological and political. I come from a generation that has taken area studies—and so emplacement, local knowledge, and specificity of context—as the main way to attribute politics to an artifact. But, more to the point, in the case of Johnson, the act of reemplacing the song into its original context works as an act of correction. For many scholars writing about him, the weight of all the things done to the song without the consent or even awareness of its composer and original performer has to be carried back to the original, as if to restore to it some of the power it dispersed and lost to other singers, ears, and phonographs. There is a

very good political reason for this: namely, to counteract the systematic exploitation and appropriation of Black singers' work, of which "The Laughing Song" is one of the earliest and most thorough examples. Some of the best writing on this song and on early recordings by Black musicians performs this noble mission, as if to eke out the possibility of resistance, or the inalienability of one's work, after the fact. Yet none of this can undo the fact that Johnson's song wouldn't matter so much to us nowadays—indeed, we might not even know of it—had it not been taken, rehashed, reheard, and repurposed away from its origin. I wonder, then, whether the power of the song can really be felt or understood unless we actively and deliberately work with rather than against its centrifugal energy—its tendency, for better or worse, to spread outward. That is what I aim to do in this chapter—to account for this centrifugal energy, for the song's flight away from its singer. And I will argue that this energy is created by a peculiar political and aesthetic mimesis and antiphony of singer and phonograph, an antiphony that is not a mere side effect of phonography or even racialization of the voice but instead something that Johnson *made*, specifically, to negotiate his relationship to the phonograph at that time and effected specifically and uniquely through musicalized laughter. In the story I will tell, laughter isn't simply an effect added to the phonograph but the means by which someone like Johnson could hack into the phonograph and make it its own—control it, redirect it, speak to it in ways we can't otherwise account for. In other words, Johnson was not just the victim, the passive object, of sound reproduction and appropriation. He was equally the subject of his own reproduction, and laughter made him so: in complex ways, he disavowed his own voice as property—and this complex aesthetic and political act is, perhaps, the very thing that "The Laughing Song" consistently transmitted as a global commodity.

A BRIEF PREHISTORY OF "THE LAUGHING SONG"

One evident precondition of the joining of laughter and phonography was the tradition of stage works from the late eighteenth century and after that involved musicalized laughter or laughterlike sound.¹¹ This seam spanned both opera and, in North America, minstrelsy theater and had a cluster of specific associations that reached into the longer history which I treated in the first part of this book: laughter's unsteady relationship to reason and speech, crossing over into animality and the mechanical. One particular characteristic of laughter in the operatic tradition is its connection with acts of visual and vocal masking. So it is that in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790), the male leads disguise themselves as Turkish princes (a form of Orientalist blackface rooted, of course, in the mimetic desire/revulsion dynamics between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires) to test their lovers' faithfulness and, upon succeeding in the ruse and still wearing their ethno-drag attire, are given to self-satisfied cackling—a set of distinct, unison *ha ha has* in an ascending scale pattern, which is already not a world away from

phonograph laughter a century later. And so it is also that in Mozart's *Magic Flute* (1791), Papageno, the bird catcher, roguish and birdlike himself, is punished for making poor use of his linguistic faculties (by lying) by having a lock installed on his mouth that reduces his speech to a series of laughterlike *hm*, *hm*, *hms* (doubled by the bassoon, ever the good stand-in for cantankerous male voices). And lest we forget about the Orientalist undertones, Papageno's magical instrument (the sidekick to the titular flute awarded to Tamino) is a set of bells—already a fairly reliable Orientalist signifier through the military-musical trope of the janissary—which, as Carolyn Abbate uncovered, was indicated in the original staging as “a machine with wooden laughter.”¹² Moreover, Papageno demonstrates the bells' incapacitating effect by trying them on Monostatos, another Orientalist monster, who, along with his animalistic Black henchmen, patrols the perimeter of Sarastro's kingdom. It is interesting that, already in these examples, laughter marks an encounter (often a hostile one) between a kind of hegemonic vocal subjectivity (the Queen of the Night, with her spectacular vocal powers; Sarastro, with his basso profondo) and those who are peripheral to it by dint of their less than fully human status. The vocal outline of this encounter is pretty specific, with on-the-beat voiced vocables (not words—for these are not quite arias nor recitatives) in a repeated, detached pattern, sung as a discontinuous, cut-up melodic line: *ha*, *ha*, *ha*; *hm*, *hm*, *hm*.

At the start of the nineteenth century, this rather elementary musical profile—sometimes presented as diegetic laughter, sometimes approximating the sound of laughter without being laughter in the diegesis—further crystallized into a representation of the failure to hang on to rational language (as distinct from the ability to overcome language through *melos*) and the presence, or even just proximity, of racialized beings. Take, for instance, the famous act 1 finale of Gioacchino Rossini's 1813 *L'italiana in Algeri* and its “noisy bodies”—ciphers of an Orientalist sublime, as described in Melina Esse's work.¹³ As the fantastical plot draws Elvira, Isabella (the titular Italian woman), and the latter's entourage into a number with Isabella's undesirable and comically Orientalized admirer, the bey of Algiers, and his retinue, the large group onstage famously embarks on a Rossini crescendo made up of dramatized nonsense. Characters morph into cawing birds, tinning bells, and booming cannons as they voice their state of confusion.

Simultaneously, in North America, the practice of blackface was developing in pre-Civil War plantations, as a means of both representing and preventing the proximity of Blacks (enslaved or free) and whites: whistling, laughing, and more extended performances of linguistic inarticulacy became part of the vocal stylings of this repertoire and markers of the racist stereotype of Blackness. By the time minstrelsy matured into a post-Civil War, Northern urban phenomenon, these markers had been siphoned off into discrete numbers that entered the sheet music market as a separate genre: “coon” songs, the repertoire that encompasses Johnson's globally circulated phonograph record. Though now

disgraced and seemingly remote, coon songs, and particularly the racist stereotypes of urban-dwelling Black people in which they traffic, were key, as Matthew Morrison recently argued, to establishing “Blacksound”—an aural means for white performers to define and delimit Black authenticity while implicitly asserting their own non-Blackness.¹⁴ But Blacksound so defined mutes the aspect of double consciousness implicit in laughter, an aspect that links it to the idea of the mask.¹⁵ Laughter has a long history in the aural representation of a less-than-articulate subaltern—its convulsion and disruption of speech were construed to signify, as we saw in chapter 2, the lack of control and ownership of language that goes hand in hand with racialized bodies. Yet this same phenomenon served to signify not only the human ownership of language (an ownership audible only through language’s temporarily loss in laughter) but also a technique of proliferation and reproduction, of upkeep, continuity, and even survival. Laughter is a loss of logos and a technique at once—it is a form of aural double consciousness broadly equivalent to the act of donning the mask of one’s own racialization. As scholars such as Glenda Carpio and Anca Parvulescu have argued, this tradition of laughter as a sort of defensive mask developed in Black American discourse across the twentieth century, in increasingly complex declinations.¹⁶ No wonder that, as we have seen, Maya Angelou’s poetic gloss of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”—a recurring figure in this book—picks Black laughter as the direct sonic translation of the grinning mask.¹⁷ This aspect of vocal masking—of laughter as both racist depiction and willful technique—had profound links to late nineteenth-century opera too.

I wonder, then, if sung laughter isn’t precisely one of the recognizable traces of the welding of these two cultural practices and their joint role in the representation of racial subalternity.¹⁸ Laughter functions as a mask in operatic numbers such as Adele’s laughing song from Johann Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus* (in which Adele, a maid in marquess’s clothing, laughingly fools a roomful of aristocrats into seeing her, and hearing her, as one of them). Even the performance practice (rather than directly scored music) of Riccardo’s twitching laugh in “È scherzo od è follia,” the act 1 quartet from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera*, might be linked to both proximity to a racialized other and masking. Riccardo, disguised as a fisherman, has just received an ominous prophecy (about his true self) from Ulrica, a mysterious fortune-teller (racialized as a “gypsy” in the libretto), and is nervously performing nonchalance to himself and his friends.¹⁹ These two strains of laughter—operatic and minstrelsy—meld in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phonograph market for laughing songs.²⁰ It is, for instance, striking that both Adele’s and Riccardo’s arias entered the market as stand-alone phonograph cylinders in the early twentieth century, seemingly after Johnson’s number and some of its European contrafacts—thus feeding the elite repertoire back into its American, vernacular counterpart and marking their joint existence as phonographic commodities.

BLACK LAUGHTER ON THE PHONOGRAPH

What can the long history of racialized sung laughter do for our understanding of Johnson's "Laughing Song"? Both Anca Parvulescu and Bryan Wagner have examined the political undertones in the lyrics of Johnson's piece. Wagner, reading the song's scene in the context of 1890s New York, connects it to the imminent threat of a lynching;²¹ Parvulescu locates Johnson's laugh within a Black modernist literary tradition that holds laughter as an audible stamp of double consciousness in the face of white scrutiny.²² Both authors note that the use by an African American of racial epithets brewed and circulated in minstrelsy theater is typical: Johnson preempts his white audience's verbal aggression toward a Black performer while signaling to African American and other more sympathetic listeners an ironic awareness of and distance from those same epithets. Discerning the intention behind the lyrics is a work of informed speculation, of course: the paper trail for Johnson, painstakingly reconstructed by Tim Brooks, amounts to only a combination of menial work history and, by his life's end, scandal.²³ In-depth interpretations of Johnson's subjectivity inevitably come by way of song lyrics—particularly of songs he authored—which endure a degree of textual analysis that is, to say the least, difficult to sustain if attending to a sung performance. In imagining this song in its material reality as a recorded cylinder in transit, we might perhaps reorient our attention to how, beyond the lyrics, the song's representation of the Black voice and body might have been carried out in sound, especially with respect to the phonograph.

In the particular context of 1890s North America, the question of the relations of Black voices to sound reproduction is enmeshed with the question of voice as a property, one that was created and then monitored by the legal apparatus developed in postbellum America in relation to sound reproduction—specifically the phonograph. This history is—Stephen Best argues—a continuation by other means of slave property law, a legal hermeneutics that constituted the Black voice as a property that was always an ex-property: a thing coercively gifted to whites. In *The Fugitive's Properties*, Best tells the story of Tom Wiggins, a young, blind slave who as early as 1857 was dubbed the Human Phonograph (more than twenty years before the possibility of mechanical sound reproduction) because of his ability to exactly reproduce, at pitch, any music he heard. Wiggins was a phonograph before there were phonographs, and his master monetized him for performances—showing off his reproduction-prone voice—just as the phonograph would eventually be monetized.²⁴ The key part of the story, for Best, is that the African American voice became, in the history of American law, a thing, a personal property, just in the same moment that it was expropriated, and indeed, only for the purpose of being expropriated. A Black voice is a property, a thing, just so that it can be gifted (a gift that masks a coercion) to white performers, composers, and sound engineers. So it goes that Tom Wiggins did not, of course, partake of the revenue raked in from his

performances, but also that the rationale for this was that the voice was never really his to begin with, as proved by the fact that he could replicate opera and art song, music traditions from which he was constitutively excluded. The legal framework that attempted to copyright recorded voices was the same one which ensured that African American voices were always already expropriated, always already sounding as if they not so much had escaped their body of origin but rather were never *of* their bodies to begin with and, as such, were always gifted to whites. Best writes, "In the nineteenth-century poetics of property, Black personae are presumptively expropriated through the generous designs of the gift—presumptively translations; presumptively repetitions; presumptively mechanical reproductions."²⁵ This, then, is how people—African American people—were always already, presumptively, phonographs: their voices were rendered into property that was never their own, things meant to be gifted.

I now want to bring Best's analysis to bear upon George Washington Johnson's "Laughing Song." *The Fugitive's Properties* is about the emergence of minstrelsy, sound recording, and copyright in Jim Crow-era North America, and it is striking that, although it doesn't mention laughing songs specifically, the close of the first, weighty chapter involves a horrifying laughing scene from a written account of the origin of minstrelsy in the periodical *The Atlantic Monthly*. As narrated in this article, T. D. Rice, perhaps the most famous minstrel-show performer of the Jim Crow era, borrows the worn-out uniform of Cuff, a poor Black stevedore, to complete his outfit for a performance. Such loans and pilfers are key to Rice's modus operandi: he also sings a song (the infamous racist ditty "Jump Jim Crow") that he seemingly overheard from an unnamed, unseen Black singer in Cincinnati. In the case of Cuff's clothes, the owner is known and able to reclaim his property. Indeed, Cuff soon finds Rice and asks for his uniform back so he can return to work. By then, Rice is onstage and midperformance and has no intention of complying, and when Cuff storms the stage to frantically plead for his clothes, the audience assumes this is part of the act and bursts out laughing: "The incident was the touch, in the mirthful experience of that night, that passed endurance. Pit and circle were one scene of such convulsive merriment that it was impossible to proceed in the performance; and the extinguishment of the footlights, the fall of the curtain, and the throwing wide of the doors for exit, indicated that the entertainment was ended."²⁶ Best comments on the scene thus: "However, when Cuff's mute appeals go 'unheard and unheeded' and are met by Rice's 'happy hit,' 'successful couplet,' and 'convulsive merriment' (when, in Rice's mouth, the stage driver's pilfered song fills in for Cuff's silence, *causes* that silence) the extent to which Rice's theft signals more substantive transformations in the conception of property comes to light."²⁷

Best lists this "convulsive merriment" of the audience as one of the actions that seal the making of voice into a property, a property whose purpose is expropriation, a thing made only to be taken. Laughter goes, in this sense, together with Rice's purloining of the Cincinnati singer's vocal stylings and the loan that Cuff

makes of his clothes—a loan taken as a gift, and therefore a theft.²⁸ We have seen in chapter 2 that laughter has a long-standing power to unsettle property relations. Within the context of the aftermath of the African slave trade, laughter signals two things: the making of the Black voice into a property, and the instant, successful white claim over this property. In the story of Rice and Cuff, laughter erupts as a direct consequence of the fact that Cuff's vocal requests for his own property were heard as mere theatrics by a white audience. This is because his clothes and his voice were properties that were not his: both were improper to their body of origin and something that existed only for the benefit of whites. Indeed, it is almost as if, for Best, the audience laughter in this anecdote is the cipher of the theft of the Black voice *in process*: laughter is the sound of the Black voice coaxed out of its body of origin and into the white body. This might help rearticulate the problem of the relationship of ownership, reproduction, race, and laughter in "The Laughing Song." Here, on the one hand, the Black voice is a property assumed not to belong to the singer, a presumptive translation or reproduction of an absent original—in short, a phonograph—and on the other hand, laughter is the very sound of the theft of a voice, but a theft intended as process, as action, as the interrupted signal caused by a sonic property changing hands. What happens, then, when a Black singer performs laughter—and thus, perhaps, the expropriation of his own voice—for a phonograph?

Attempting an answer to the question requires us to go deeper into the history of "The Laughing Song" and the labor—technological, physical, vocal, and psychological—that it not only required but audibly represented. "The Laughing Song" was, as far as we know, composed by the singer George W. Johnson himself and is in the style of the late nineteenth-century genre of the "coon song," musical numbers from the Northern, urban incarnation of minstrelsy shows that relied on the racial stereotyping of Southern African American people, mostly, of course, male. To say that the connection between "The Laughing Song" and coon songs was stylistic is not enough. "The Laughing Song" incarnated the adaptation of coon songs for phonography. Johnson moved between the minstrelsy circuit and the phonographic market. Indeed, he performed in minstrel shows after his success as a recording singer had waned and he needed a new source of income. "The Laughing Song" is thus exceptional in that it marks the successful but temporary intersection, in Johnson's career, of a theatrical repertoire and recorded music and therefore of two very different kinds of vocal and physical labor. A few terms of basic comparison: the artist in a minstrel show would have performed visually as well as aurally, would have worked onstage, copresent and yet at physical remove from the audience, and been inserted into an (admittedly flimsy) narrative and musical scheme and grounded firmly in North American race relations; a recorded performer was both absent from and invisible to the audience—one of the obvious

reasons why "The Laughing Song" sold explosively across the color line—but also far, far more proximate (speaking to them from ear tubes that were, as Jonathan Sterne reminds us, descendants of the doctor's stethoscope).²⁹

This issue of proximity and embodiment in relation to the phonograph is, in fact, key to Johnson's musical laughter and his being—or becoming—a phonograph. Unsurprisingly, strange things happen when we cross-reference critical histories of race with midcentury ideologies of sound recording, such as the split from source and schizophonic/acousmatic regimes, including even the terminology used to name the relation of recording to source (copy-original) or of recording device (subject / ear / writing agent) to source (object / voice / the unwritten). The famous sound engineer Fred Gaisberg, who took "The Laughing Song" to incarnate a racial stereotype (the "carefree darky," in his words), considered the laugh to be the very sound that made Blackness audible and marketable.³⁰ Lisa Gitelman, writing about the media histories of the phonograph, notes that the repertoire of "coon songs" was about rendering Blackness audible and recognizable even when (and, of course, also because) it was split from its visual source, creating a discourse of excess and presence that clung to the marketable Black voice:

According to the publishers of sheet music, the coon song reached the height of its popularity in the late 1890s, when large numbers of songwriters such as Paul Dresser (who had once been a minstrel) churned out more than six hundred coon songs to cash in on the vogue. By then the immense popularity of minstrelsy had passed [. . .]. What this meant is that the sound of white-constructed "blackness" survived without the sight of minstrel blackface, as performers of coon songs could go without burnt cork, particularly as recognizable "coon" elements were incorporated into a variety of different songs and formats. Some unblackened white performers were seen to "sound 'black.'" Finally, when music roll and record companies set out to record coon songs, sounding "black" went colorblind.³¹

Recent work by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber warns us against any idea of phonograph-enabled "colorblindness" and offers a history of how a specifically *sonic* color line was established together with phonography.³² In a similar vein, Nina Eidsheim explains that Black voices on the phonograph were, in short, constructed from a series of audible techniques enacted, consciously and unconsciously, by singers and listeners both.³³ In other words, with phonography, vocal "Blackness," split from the blackface that originally accompanied it, not only was a property of white voices singing coon songs but became a requirement of Black performers who—like Johnson—could profitably record that repertoire on the phonograph, which kept them within earshot and out of sight. The insistence on Black voices being constructions, not essences, is in many ways a concerted reaction against the racist discourse, typical of early phonography, about Black voices being inherently physically more suited (more forceful, more brutish, less effete) than white voices for recording technology. Scholars have countered this by arguing that Black voices

were not inherently disembodied but instead evidently audible to whites as always already property they (whites) were entitled to. Improperness was pinned on the Black voice by a racist epistemology that constituted that voice as the property of whites. It was this improperness, this negation, this constructed absence that the phonograph naturalized into a presence.³⁴ Bryan Wagner tailors this point specifically to Johnson's "Laughing Song":

The phonograph offered a new explanation for why the black voice sounded not only disenfranchised but disembodied, as if it came from nowhere. From the point of reproduction, the black voice's primary effects became indistinguishable from their technological condition of possibility, and this led to a situation where, for the first time in its history, the music could be commonly considered as folklore on the grounds that it was indexed directly to the individual consciousness of its producer. Alienating the voice from the body, in this instance, creates rather than disrupts speech's capacity to stand for subjectivity [. . .]. The aura is made, not destroyed, by the phonograph.³⁵

For Wagner, the lack of presence inherent in the voices of African Americans in the late nineteenth century, their sounding as though they were never of their bodies to begin with, was what made them such marketable goods on the phonograph. Interacting, as absences, with a writing machine that alienates voices from their sources, they somehow throw a spanner in the works and cancel two negatives (the disembodiment of Black voices and the disembodiment produced by the phonograph) into one shiny positive: a voice that sounds fully present, a hyperhuman excess. This, then, would be the political-technological lineage that runs from Johnson's phonograph records to, say, Bessie Smith: a disembodiment somehow canceled out, via recording technology, into a marketable, durable, and exploitable Black presence. Note, though, how Wagner lands us back in an exploitable material excess, one that makes it impossible for the Black artist to perform any meaningful act of resistance to their own expropriation.

What, then, of the possibility of Black subjectivity and even resistance in and through phonography? Put simply, this is a problem of whether we consider Black performers—and particularly Black voices at the turn of the twentieth century—to be the objects or the subjects of recording technology. Wagner's analysis of Johnson's "Laughing Song" ultimately takes the Black voice to be the object of technology, not its subject. On the other hand, although he does not deal directly with "The Laughing Song," Best's argument in *Fugitive Properties* is, in fact, directly the opposite of Wagner's: the Black voice is nothing but the phonograph itself—the disembodiment and improperness of the Black voice are markers of its fundamental legal, economic, and aesthetic cosubstantiality with recording technology. If people are phonographs, in Best, it is mainly because they carry the trace and burden of their expropriation, of their lack of self-possession. And so we are left with some hard questions about whether and at what point people, and specifically Black performers, can be said to have become the active, intervening, and even

disruptive subjects rather than just the passive objects of recording technology.³⁶ The 1890s are rarely considered as a moment of emergence of such a subjectivity within sound recording technology. Case in point, in Best's argument (which is deeply rooted in the late nineteenth century), the negative, rebellious charge of the disembodied, improper voice is not yet a figure of resistance. Arguments concerning the use of recording technology as a form of resistance, of disruption of hegemonic listening, tend to focus on postphonographic technologies: tape, digital sampling, even the use of turntables in 1980s DJ culture. Alexander Weheliye seems to identify the 1920s as the point of this agential turn of Blackness and phonography: "While black performers were a part of the phonograph and recording industry from the beginning of its mass entertainment function, it was not until the 1920s and the coming of the jazz age that they became a substantial part of recording industry. The end of the nineteenth century is marked, not so much by the proliferation of black performers, as in later historical assemblages, but in the way that the newly invented technology of mechanically storing and reproducing sound perturbed prevalent perceptions of race and instantiated a new form of sonic blackness."³⁷ Weheliye goes on to acknowledge the turning point of "coon songs" on the phonograph: racialized music on record destabilized the primarily visual regime of racial recognition. But it seems that there is an implicit understanding that the possibility of active Black self-representation with the phonograph began some thirty years after Johnson's seminal recording. It is this narrative—of the 1890s as the prehistory of Black vocal agency and self-representation—that I want to challenge here. Viewed from the longer history of laughter's political relationship to reproduction and definitions of humanity through logos, Johnson's laughter emerges as a kind of racialized phonographic labor capable of representing itself and being heard as such a self-representation. Sonic Blackness and Blacksound can both be more precisely tied to this particular performer's rogue and influential configuration of race, reproduction, and property.

THE LABOR OF RECORDED LAUGHTER, CIRCA 1890

Consider the various forms of labor that Johnson brought to the recording of "The Laughing Song." The first and perhaps most obvious one is the labor of musicalizing laughter—and so of creating the conditions under which a melody consisting of *ha ha ha* syllables may be taken to signify and even elicit laughter. A key element of distinction between "The Laughing Song" as a phonographic and gramophonic genre and the operatic laughing number is the aim, and the related technique, of the musicalized laughter. Laughing songs as a genre tend to present musical laughter as rhythmical but essentially unpitched, or at least microtonal, in an effort to mimic the pitch content of genuine laughter. Indeed, the unsteadiness of pitch is but a part of a code of realism in "The Laughing Song." The *ha ha has* of Johnson's chorus imitate, that is, the sound produced by the physiological

process of laughter as involuntary reflex: a convulsion of the epiglottis cutting a single stream of pressured air from the larynx and vocal folds. This is a subtle technical adjustment by the vocalist: for he is, really, imitating discontinuity (the voice unevenly cut by the epiglottis) through vocal repetition. Johnson's song also replicates the impact of this convulsion on breath (the wheezing intakes to compensate for the obstructed larynx) and the sharp stop of each *ha*, dampened by the epiglottis.

Because convulsions of the epiglottis cannot be replicated at will, a musical laughter such as Johnson's imitates what is effectively a temporary malfunction of the breathing and speaking apparatus. His laughter, performed as a song, is therefore not a single column of air pressure "cut" by the convulsing epiglottis (the standard physiology of laughter) but a series of individually sung (and thus breathed), unpitched *has* in crisp staccato, interspersed with rhythmic intakes of breath.³⁸ Musical repetition stands in for a convulsed, discontinuous vocal signal. Breath technique is here masquerading as its very opposite: the unseemly loss of control of the vocal apparatus. This double aurality of sung laughter—as failure and technique—can be connected to Parvulescu's argument, mentioned above, about Black laughter as a form of Du Boisian double consciousness: heard as simple-mindedness by whites, encoded as a cipher of suffering and seething rebellion for Blacks.³⁹ I echo this understanding but postulate that, before this heightened, literary understanding of double consciousness appeared, there was already a double aurality built into Black sung laughter in the 1890s: interruption and malfunction performed by way of rhythmic repetition. Laughter was uniquely capable of signifying inarticulacy and sophisticated vocal technique at once: technique masking as malfunction (and vice versa), positive signal masked as noise (and vice versa). For Johnson's laughter to work, it has to be consistently audible as two things simultaneously: inarticulateness and loss of speech, typical of minstrelsy-era depictions of Blacks, and a technique revealing the Black voice as a sophisticated instrument. But we could just as easily say that for Johnson to be marketable on the phonograph, he had to become, to audibly morph into, a laugher, a risible creature.

The performance of laughter as discontinuity—as convulsed, interrupted signal—is, further, key to understanding the ways in which Johnson sang *to* the phonograph rather than just *for* it and the ways the phonograph may have sung him back. Johnson sang, specifically, for a phonograph wax cylinder, whose recording process and playback process were, to say the least, temperamental. In tracing, as we are, how "The Laughing Song" traveled and was communicated far beyond the sphere of influence of its original singer, we have to consider the phonograph not just as a transparent medium but for what it truly was: an emergent, highly fallible technology with a mind of its own. For example, the recording stylus on a wax cylinder didn't always etch a groove that sounded good in playback, which means

that for every good cylinder, many would go to waste, and also that recording sessions could be long, arduous, and unprofitable for performers, particularly if, like Johnson, they came from a working-class African American background and weren't paid much for their time.⁴⁰ In fact, cheaper, less prestigious singers were preferred at the time of the wax cylinder, because they were willing to put in the extra hours needed to make a satisfactory number of workable records. We will return to the issue of labor and repetition in a moment, but first let's consider the ailments of the phonograph that Johnson had to work with. Because the groove of the cylinder was inscribed vertically and not sideways, as with gramophone discs, it was harder for the pressure of the stylus to stay even, as gravity pulled the needle downward. Long cantabile phrases and arched dynamics were much less likely to sound good in playback, because the variation in pressure when the stylus went from a shallow to a deep groove (and vice versa) was so hard to control. Loud continuous sounds—with wider amplitude—would create grooves that went deeper into the wax, working with and not against the weight of the vertical stylus, and therefore tended to sound better on playback. However, almost any sound would have failed to reproduce well in the long term—because the heavy phonograph arm would press down hard on the wax groove, thus wearing it out after just a few plays.⁴¹ Playback, back then, materialized the sound at the cost of its progressive disappearance, in the process creating all kinds of undesired sound effects. Buildup of material (bits of wax from the cylinder) could cause the playback needle to slow down, wobble in the groove—thus making the discontinuous, warbly sound (known as the “wow and flutter” effect) that many associate with early sound recordings—and eventually skip. Add to this the fact that the phonograph had a relatively narrow pitch range and did not do well with speech sounds such as consonants and sibilants (that is, the means of speech articulation), and you have a realistic profile of the phonograph's capabilities: namely, reproducing loud, preferably discontinuous sounds (so as to work with the uneven pressure of the needle and the deterioration of the groove in playback, but also with the likelihood of skipping) in a relatively narrow range, with few consonants, and somehow able to withstand random slowdowns and speedups. Laughter, then, was not just an aid or a playful addition to the phonograph but the *one* sound it could reliably pick up and sing back at will.

And not just any laughter—but Johnson's laughter, which was doubly coded, as a “coon” sound and as a deliberate vocal technique. Johnson sang to the phonograph—to its actual, real, fallible apparatus—so well that he became one with it and the phonograph became one with him. Imagine this: while successful playback would allow listeners to delight in Johnson's sung rendition of laughter—its on-beat punch, its percussive half-voicedness, the sheer breath control necessary to sustain it, without compromising on projection or rhythmic accuracy, for thirty-odd seconds—faulty playback worked okay too, for laughter was already coded as a glitch of the Black body and so was mimetically augmented, perhaps

even improved, by playback malfunction. Indeed, specific aspects of Johnson's performance come through more clearly once we imagine what he was singing to. Later contrafacts of the song, like Bert Sheppard's version of 1901, are audibly different in the rendition of laughter. Sheppard's laughter is much closer to speech, goes much higher in pitch, is full of wheezing and exaggerated breathlessness, and does not attempt to stick to the base rhythm and tune. Johnson's laughter was precise, rhythmical, obviously musicalized; Sheppard voiced laughter's uncontrollability much more overtly. For Wagner, Johnson's particular style has to do in part with performing a sound, like laughter, that would have struck white audiences as threatening coming from a Black person: indeed, the loss of speech and inarticulacy that it carried as a racial signifier could easily tip "cooning" cheerfulness into the threat of unreason, so Johnson sang his laughter while keeping it firmly within the world, pace, and tune of the song, as if to insist that technique rather than abandon was behind it.⁴² I think this is likely true—but the choice was also made with an eye to phonography as it then stood. For one thing, artists like Sheppard, recording even just a decade later, were using electric microphones and discs that allowed for mass reproduction from a matrix, so many of the problems to do with making identical copies and maintaining evenness of tone, loudness, and playback speed no longer applied. Johnson, instead, was working with acoustic amplification (he sang into a horn that transmitted the sound vibrations to the stylus) and a machine that didn't take well to variations in speed or loudness, so his somewhat more square delivery was mindful (in a way that later artists simply didn't need to be) of the contraption before him. But we impoverish his performance if we think of it simply as a negotiation with limitations. Consider this, for instance: if Johnson's laughing chorus, for all its rhythmic sharpness and phonograph-tailored vocality, dutifully sticks to the same pitch, square 4/4 meter, and pace of the song's verse, it is probably because he knew—whether from the advice of a sound engineer or after hearing it himself—that playback was uneven, warbly, prone to skip. He didn't, in other words, need to perform the laugh wholly on his own. Some of the reality effects of a whooping laugh (its stopping and starting, unevenness, and breathlessness) might have come through, for better or worse, in playback. Johnson sang laughter to the phonograph—and we can imagine, to an extent, that the phonograph sang it back, warped, uneven, broken up as a laugh should be, to enraptured audiences.

Another reason for the particular way that Johnson performs the laugh is that he was—unlike most of his successors—making copies. As I mention in this chapter's note 6, his song is thought to have sold between twenty-five and fifty thousand copies, each of which would have been played in an exhibition context where up to ten headsets would be hooked to a single phonograph, between 1891 and 1902.⁴³ In the history of phonographic reproduction, this number is extraordinary because it tells us not just circulation but also something about production and the labor of recording the song. It was extremely difficult to make copies of a phonograph

cylinder, as the phonograph does not have a matrix, unlike gramophone discs.⁴⁴ Some studios had equipment that allowed them to produce up to ten copies from a single cylinder, and sometimes copies could be made directly in the recording studio if the horn aimed at the musicians was connected to three or four styluses (each cutting one cylinder). However, neither option was evenly distributed or reliable (that is, not all copies would have been usable). Johnson had to repeat this song thousands of times, likely in recording sessions that lasted for hours, to meet the market demand, a demand that exceeded the technological possibilities of the phonograph and preceded the possibility of mass production. This created a temporary and indentured form of labor: the labor of performing the song over and over again to produce enough sellable cylinders. Johnson was repeating himself for reproduction—and each phonograph of “The Laughing Song” captured a particular, historically unique suturing of the labor of vocal repetition to the act of recording and reproduction. Even to this day, there is no standard recording of “The Laughing Song” but instead dozens of digitized cylinders. Johnson’s interface with recording technology, then, had to do not only with the popularity of the song he sang but also with his willingness and ability to perform, for little money, the intense labor of producing the song over and over again in order to keep up with a demand that the phonograph was never built to meet. This cheap, exploitable labor made Johnson both highly desirable as a performer and equally easy to dismiss once copies of his song could be made from a flat matrix and the singing could be assigned to a more expensive but also more palatable white performer, like Sheppard. (It is, however, significant that the song that reached Naples in 1895 was Johnson’s version—and we will see in the following chapter how racial and ethnic matters mingled in the elaboration of the Neapolitan version.) Johnson didn’t record the song again after disc records became standard in 1902, and even though he returned to minstrelsy theater, his fortunes as a performer drastically declined, and he died in poverty in 1914. His voice archived—phonographed—the phonograph itself at a unique moment of its interface with the global market economy. “The Laughing Song” marked, and sonified, particular historical and political processes: it represents one of the first instances of mass demand for a recorded Black performer’s voice, the problem of keeping up with a demand for cylinders that exceeded the mechanical capability to produce them, and a temporary solution that relied on the repetitive and exploited labor of a Black performer. Ultimately, the song also sonified a moment when the ratio of original performance to commercial copy was closer to 1:1 than it would ever be in the future—a moment, that is, when musical repetition and sound reproduction nearly mingled in the groove. Johnson really was a phonograph, in all of its complex economic, technological, and racial implications. “The Laughing Song”—and specifically its performed laughter—is not captured by the phonograph but rather *is* the phonograph. Johnson’s laughter brought the phonograph audibly into the space of representation: it sounded the phonograph and was sounded by it. This

kind of technological human symbiosis—reasoned and executed through a feat of imagination and skill—is more often associated with the cyborglike happenings of vocoders, turntablism, and tape composition; that is, we tend to associate this level of play with a technology with a moment of maturity and self-consciousness in the history of that technology, the moment when artists’ performances go meta and acknowledge and even ape the medium in which they are working.

But Black laughter on the phonograph tells us a different history—a history of laughter as a vocal technique that embodies recording technology in its earliest incarnation and cumbersome fallibility and the complex politics and aurality of the voice mediated through it. This—not the authenticity of laughter as a humanizing sound, not its intended comedic value, not any lyrics-based understanding of racialization—is what warranted this song not just national success but the role of one of the first global ciphers for the phonographed voice. This leaves us, though, with the question of whether this history—of human phonographs, of performed vocal disarticulation, of commercial successes of racial stereotypes that bound artists to extenuating forms of labor and quickly superseded technologies—lands us back in the familiar scene of subjection that Saidiya Hartman identifies as a persistent strand of the historiography of Black lives in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Without going deeply into the complexities of Hartman’s argument, we might consider whether this history leaves room for the possibility of resistance—and if, so against which grain and by what ethical stance might such resistance be audible or even imaginable?

There are two key issues here. First, a return of my initial question about who is the subject and who is the object of sound recording. We can rephrase this in more specific terms. Namely, was Johnson simply captured and reproduced by the phonograph—was he, even, a plain victim of the phonograph’s hungry mechanical ear—or can we say something about the particular ways that he worked with the extractive technology for which he sung and harnessed his technique to sing *to* or even *for* instead of simply *at* the phonograph? That is, can we imagine that singers are not simply directing their voice toward the horn or priming their voices for optimal sound reproduction but rather treating the phonograph as a listener whom things must be both disclosed to and hidden from, who is more likely to pick up certain strains over others, whose body responds live to the music and changes even over the short two-minute span of a cylinder? Second, if the phonograph can be sung to, does that mean it can sing back? Could, in other words, playback be made into *singback*, a way of voicing a relation between vocal apparatus and technology that exists only there and then and is a deliberate part of the communicative act of the song? Can phonography be sung, just as song is phonographed?

In pursuing these questions I am guided by Nina Eidsheim’s key observation that it is listeners, not singers, who make the voice. Race, then, is an attribute of vocal timbre that listeners instinctively—yet often erroneously—make out, an identification derived from long-standing constructions, or “phantom genealogies,” of

what, for instance, the Black voice ought to sound like.⁴⁶ Eidsheim frames her work in part as a corrective of such malfunctions. I, however, am here interested in how such malfunctions, short circuits, lapses, and obfuscations of our listening are not only deplorable events but willful, performative, and political actions and have been since the beginning of phonography. So perhaps we ought not to reach for correctives too quickly.

Just as listening offers us, in the end, little reliable knowledge, not everyone wants to be known by listening. Having a voice does not mean one is willing to offer it up for recognition by all—one might prefer to hide it, to unmake it, to kill it, if not to perform its ownership in ways that are radical and perverse. Although Eidsheim doesn't focus on the phonograph's role in this ecology of racialized singing and listening, she pointedly reminds us of the many occasions in which sound engineers of the 1880s and 1890s singled out Black voices as being "good" for recording, in terms that were obvious racialized appraisals of the Black body: naturally powerful, harsher, forceful.⁴⁷ For Eidsheim, any discourse of a voice's "nature" erases the technique that the singer brings to the performance and renders it a precultural asset of that body ("blacks are louder, women sing treble, men sing bass," and so on)—which has obvious political implications, particularly when the attributed bodily traits are, as is the case for the phonographed Black voice, dehumanizing and animalistic. Yet accepting the voice as always already disembodied, constructed, and acousmatic leads us again into an enduring bind for the liberal music scholar working with Black voices: one must risk essentializing race and voice on the one hand or implicitly abetting cultural appropriation on the other.⁴⁸ Sung Black laughter is, in many ways, the aural articulation of both sides of this bind at once: audible as the presumed natural inarticulacy of the Black race (essentialism), and ready to be picked up and exploited by others as a profitable and imitable vocal technique (expropriation). Attempting to correct either the essentialism or the expropriative logic will land us back in the middle of the same political-aesthetic quandary: we will overcorrect into an all-absolving social constructionism of race or into irreducible Black essences. Is there any way of imagining Johnson's laughing voice as not fully determined by this bind of essentialism and expropriation? Perhaps.

IMPROPERTY AND NECROPOLITICS OF THE VOICE

The laughter sung by Johnson in "The Laughing Song" is a strange thing: in its double aurality, it signifies an essential, racialized Black feature (in short, a lack of capacity for language), but a negative one, not only in the sense of a derogatory characteristic but in the more proper sense that Johnson presents his laughter as a signifier of Black people's loss of voice as speech, loss of articulation. As we have seen, laughter has long been a cipher for humanity precisely as this unsteady proper, this ownership of a loss of language. What is lost through laughter—

through the convulsions, discontinuity, and glitches of the speaking apparatus—is the liberal, humanist, and implicitly white understanding of the voice as self-expression and self-determination. This may seem extremely abstract, yet it is historically determined. The human voice has long carried, in Western discourse, the weight of being a sonic index, a symbol, of personhood but also of political and legal status within society. Scholars and theorists have traced this role to the concept of biopolitics and the nineteenth century: the moment when, as European societies switched from monarchical order to democracy, governing meant paying attention to populations as living bodies whose physical attributes, whose lives, were directly connected to their ability to participate in a functional democracy, to comply with humanist ideals of self-control and determination. Voice then became one of these attributes. As scholars like Sophia Rosenfeld, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Adriana Cavarero have traced in different ways, voice has been construed as a signifier of the ability to be considered a unique and valued member of a political community.⁴⁹ A sung laughter such as Johnson's is something of a defect in this respect—because it is the deliberate performance (self-determination) of the loss of the speaking, singing, valued, and unique voice.

But generalizing about the biopolitics of the voice won't quite get us far enough here. The other side of this is that Johnson—as a Black performer working in an entertainment circuit of minstrelsy and its musical merchandise (“coon songs”) and, on top of that, laboring to adapt that repertoire for the phonograph throughout the 1890s—was inhabiting a world in which voices and singing, though not yet controllable by copyright, were already being understood as properties, as possessions. In postbellum northeastern cities, the lingering, slavery-era notion of Black Americans and their labor as possible possessions of whites undergirded and continued on through a series of systematic practices of expropriation, institutionalized violence, and cultural appropriation. This is a key point: as Stephen Best's work shows, property law and the right to ownership became, in the Jim Crow era, central to the conception of the self in North America.⁵⁰ Unequivocal entitlement to own one's voice and, on the other hand, the lack of such an entitlement broadly outlined the color line between whites (entitled to ownership) and Blacks (not entitled).⁵¹ Laughter, in minstrelsy repertoire, signified precisely this lack, this inevitable expropriation carried out by the civil, self-owning, white voice; we could easily hear the performed laughter of both minstrel characters and “coon songs” as this convulsive renunciation of self-ownership and even hear the laughter that greeted those performances as the appropriation of that stereotype from the other side of the stage. So here is Johnson, performing the loss of his selfhood (as laughter) for the very machine that would seal the loss (financial and legal) to rights to his own voice, singing with the phonograph's fallible playback in ways unimaginable to us, for hours on end, producing a number of individual copies that had been previously unthinkable with that hardware. He was not only the victim of expropriation but also its skilled and hardworking executioner. Instead

of assuming that this was an act of self-alienation, the Black performer hearing himself through a white subjectivity that expropriates the Black voice, I want to imagine this relinquishing of vocal ownership as something other, something more. After all, the liberal self-ownership model of citizenship is always already a losing game: the fundamental alienation of a self into a property to be owned, even for those who are entitled to that ownership, implies that self-possession is a perilous form of freedom under capitalism. It is a form of revocable having rather than a form of being. The history of Black and white voices on the phonograph is the audible continuation of the turning of self into property. The question is whether there is a notion of voice that acknowledges yet audibly undoes itself as the property it is purported to be. Could such a musical act as Johnson's phonograph laughter allow us to imagine a different economy of voice, self, ownership, and agency?

In his brief but eloquent foray into music, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," Achille Mbembe gives us an extended meditation on how the beauty—which he casts as a series of bodily effects of joy and pleasure—of Congolese music across the (then) five decades since decolonization lies in its capacity to relay a serenity blended with a mimesis of the increasing violence of postcolonial society in Congolese urban hubs. He offers this startling definition: "The very notion of serenity assumes that each subject is an ego endowed with the ability to act on its own body. Subjects can dispossess or rid themselves of their bodies, even if only temporarily."⁵²

There is something deeply jarring about seeing a definition of self-determination in one sentence and then a negative understanding of that self-determination in the next. If your body is your own, Mbembe says, then you can attain peace not—as one might expect—by asserting your control over it and protecting it from others' plunder but precisely by giving it away, undoing it, disowning it. This definition could be adapted to the regime of ownership of the voice discussed above, and reinterpreted to fit a context in which owning one's voice as private property is the ultimate definition of serenity. But why should serenity be understood negatively, as dispossession, as ridding oneself of one's apparently most treasured possession? After all, inalienable possession, owning something that can't be stolen or taken, is, within the American regime of self-ownership, the best, aspirational form of selfhood. The right to one's voice is the key to adequate civil life. In his seminal essay on necropolitics, written shortly after this article on Congolese music, Mbembe takes issue with this very notion, pointing out that Western democracies built their humanist conceits of life as self-determination on slavery, thereby predicating their civil life upon the work of death they wrought in their colonial domains. In those settings, where the liberal idea of self-ownership was fully exposed as a lie, the only way for the colonized to exert control over their lives was to sacrifice them before they were taken—the most controversial part of

Mbembe's essay concerns martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and suicide.⁵³ I hear a gentle echo of necropolitics in Mbembe's definition of serenity above—one imagined in the realm of self-expression, describing an act of liberation in the face of the constrictions of an impossible self-ownership. Giving one's voice away is the last possible act of self-determination.

This is, for me, the thought worked into the phonograph, through laughter, by Johnson. Laughter, as a sound implying the loss of one's biopolitical voice (a voice audible as self-determination and articulation), here becomes an act of willful dispossession, a musical technique for the erosion of property. For a voice made into property is, yes, always already a theft and is bound to be thieved back—particularly if it is the voice of a Black singer whose claim to property is heard, as Ronald Radano argues, as “illicit.”⁵⁴ If this seems much too high-concept for the concrete realities of singing and recording with which Johnson was wrestling, we must remember that he, perhaps more than any other phonographed performer of his time, had an extensive chance to work through such thoughts with his voice. He recorded “The Laughing Song” thousands of times, in sessions of four to five hours, over the course of nearly ten years, beginning in 1891. It is, then, not such a stretch of the imagination to conjure him as someone thinking carefully about the reproduction of his voice, about the demand for more copies, with which he complied by repeating the song for the phonograph over and over again. He would have learned—by watching the technicians check his freshly cut cylinders and then estimate how much more work he was to do that week—which elements of the voice carried and which didn't, what worked and didn't work. It is not such a stretch, either, to imagine that he crafted his sung laughter into something that could keep on the phonograph, that worked not just with the recording apparatus but with the failures of playback, resisting the wear and tear of the groove and stylus. Finally, over those ten years of recurring performances for the phonograph horn, he would have noticed other artists picking up the song, would have had to consider that his sung laughter would get away from him even as he kept on recording it.

What does such an act—of studied, audible, explosive self-dispossession—do to those who hear it and consume it? This is where we might think, ahead of the ensuing chapter, about not just the act of self-dispossession but also its aftermath and effects on others. For that is the history of “The Laughing Song”: the history of a sound that, as Stephen Best so poignantly puts it, is “fugitive”—that is, subject to attempts of control and monitoring that echo fugitive slave laws—but across continents and bodies far beyond its original site of production.⁵⁵ This chapter has argued that the fugitivity of Johnson's laughter was the result of not just some unfortunate early instance of appropriation but rather an im-property—a lack of ownership—that was part of the legacy of racialized laughter and its intersection

with phonography. There may be an immanent philosophy of the phonograph in “The Laughing Song,” a philosophy woven from practice, technique, throat, wax, and stylus. We might call this a necropolitics of the voice: a killing of the voice as a symbol of liberal self-ownership, carried out—wittingly or unwittingly—by an artist who couldn’t have ignored the fact that he had little control over or claim to the fruits of his own vocal labor. In a world like the one Johnson inhabited, where property and access to property (including the ownership of your own body and voice) were hallmarks of power, such a symbolic killing could be heard as a quietly radical act, something that ensured the song’s escape from Johnson’s person but—and this is key—also from anyone who would pick it up after him. “The Laughing Song” was stolen from Johnson but retained the strange im-property he breathed and sang into it. Because of this, it never rested with any of its appropriators—and has been known under different names and sung by ever-changing and multiplying performers ever since. The product of an im-proper, broken-up voice, lost as soon as it was found, Johnson’s laughter conjured up the phonograph’s true, vanishing face and created, as we will begin to see in the following chapter, an enduring cipher for the perilous humanity of subaltern groups elsewhere.