

## Contagion

*Io rido se uno chiagne,  
Se stongo disperato,  
Se nun aggio magnato,  
Rido senza pensà*

I laugh when someone cries,  
When I am feeling desperate,  
When I haven't eaten,  
I laugh without thinking

—BERARDO CANTALAMESSA, "A RISA," 1895

### THE LORE OF CONTAGION

There is a scene in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* that goes something like this: Cholera has come to Venice. The authorities are keeping the news under wraps in order to not disseminate panic and—crucially—to avoid scaring away the tourists. Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist, an aging German writer, is whiling away a summer night in the courtyard cafe of the Hôtel des Bains; he is surrounded by wealthy central European tourists, including Tadzio—an adolescent Polish aristocrat and the forbidden object of Aschenbach's desire. Suddenly, a troupe of itinerant southern musicians scuttle in and perform a few classic Neapolitan songs while moving from table to table asking for coins. The very last number they play is a horrifying laughing song. Mann writes:

It was [a song] Aschenbach had never to his knowledge heard before, a rowdy air, with words in impossible dialect. It had a laughing-refrain in which the other three artists joined at the top of their lungs. The refrain had neither words nor accompaniment, it was nothing but rhythmical, modulated, natural laughter, which the soloist in particular knew how to render with most deceptive realism. Now that he was farther off from his audience, his self-assurance had come back, and this laughter of his rang with a mocking note. He would be overtaken, before he reached the end of the last line

of each stanza; he would catch his breath, lay his hand over his mouth, his voice would quaver and his shoulders shake, he would lose power to contain himself longer. Just at the right moment each time, it came whooping, bawling, crashing out of him, with a verisimilitude that never failed to set his audience off in profuse and unpremeditated mirth that seemed to add gusto to his own. He bent his knees, he clapped his thigh, he held his sides, he looked ripe for bursting. He no longer laughed, but yelled, pointing his finger at the company there above as though there could be in all the world nothing so comic as they; until at last they laughed in hotel, terrace, and garden, down to the waiters, lift-boys, and servants—laughed as though possessed.<sup>1</sup>

The layers within this literary moment are many, but I want to press on one particular archaeological level: the binding of Aschenbach's disdain for the troupe with the danger of possession and contagion—the loss of reason and logos and the exposure to disease here being one and the same—precipitated through the sound of laughter. Mann's Neapolitan musicians carry, in the eyes of the protagonist, markers of the European south that are a far cry from the obvious nineteenth-century fare of dreamy Orientalism: the amber skin, beautiful voices, and carefree attitudes of those relieved of the burden of logos.<sup>2</sup> The lead singer is, by Mann's and Aschenbach's account, too southern to be positively Orientalized: "He was scarcely a Venetian type, belonging rather to the race of Neapolitan jesters, half bully, half comedian, brutal, blustering, an unpleasant customer, and entertaining to the last degree."<sup>3</sup> This is a negative Orientalism well on its way to scientific racism—rinsed in the dye of Cesare Lombroso's views, discussed below, of the Italian south as a hotbed of madness and crime. The switch between positive and negative southernness is operated, sonically, through the switch from an implicitly classic Neapolitan song, all arch-phrases and *bel canto*, to the fragmented, weaponized voice of the laughing song.<sup>4</sup> In the chorus, the mellifluous continuity of Italian vocality cracks to reveal a dangerous racial flaw. Not just *melos* is fractured in the song, but *logos* too: the troupe's dialect is "impossible," hostile to signification. Indeed, before launching into his dreadful final number, the lead singer willfully sidesteps spoken communication—when quizzed by Aschenbach about an imminent cholera epidemic—by answering vaguely about the warm southwestern wind before grinning and evading further questions.<sup>5</sup> The bad southerner is approached, as it were, from the side of *logos* and the side of *melos* simultaneously, and as a renunciation of both: he will neither speak the truth nor sing prettily. Rhythmized laughter stands as the residue of this double renunciation, a residue that is both viscerally popular—everyone but Aschenbach laughs as though possessed—and threatening.

Mann's famous novella dates from the year of Berardo Cantalamessa's first recordings of "A risa," in Milan, which were cut as part of the first ever recording session on the peninsula.<sup>6</sup> The song, as we shall soon discuss, was a Neapolitan appropriation of George W. Johnson's "The Laughing Song" (discussed in

chapter 4). It is doubtful whether Mann knew that “A risa” was an appropriation of another song—Cantalamessa instantly claimed “A risa” as his own work. It is, however, quite possible that Mann heard Cantalamessa’s song on a phonograph or gramophone in Italy that same year—the author’s references to Neapolitans, laughter, and itinerant musicians point to an anchoring in historical detail. In Luchino Visconti’s film adaptation of the novella, “A risa” is performed by the Neapolitan singer Tonino Apicella, who had already incorporated it into his repertoire prior to this appearance.<sup>7</sup> Visconti picks up on Mann’s racializing disdain for the musicians and amplifies it visually and aurally. The singer, shot in uncomfortable close-up, is covered in stage makeup, his face pasty, hair colored red; his teeth are blackened, his eyes red, the skin grooved and slack. Despite its seventy-year history as a song recorded in various versions by a multitude of artists, “A risa” here retains the tune, accompaniment, and words of Cantalamessa’s version: its strikingly repetitive structure, a chord sequence that doesn’t let up for a moment, not even for the chorus, is kept intact. The only thing that marks the chorus as different from the verses is the use of laughter, and the scene is aurally and visually built around this: Visconti approaches Apicella frontally and close up only when he laughs; what is more, the soundtrack fades the vocals out so as to render them indiscernible during the verse—almost as though to preserve their unintelligibility for an Italian audience—and then becomes suddenly louder with the laughing chorus, sometimes bringing us into aural proximity before the camera fixes on the singer’s face. Both Mann and Visconti also give us a sense of audience reaction. The usual response, as we will see, is to laugh back at the song, as though one had been infected by a virus, such contagion being part of the lore of laughing songs.<sup>8</sup> But Aschenbach cannot take the laughter as a reproducible musical riff: for him it is a sound aimed exclusively in his direction. The scene played out before him is one in which he himself is the comic prompt. The laughing song—mere entertainment to his fellow patrons—works on him like a devastating denouement. He is undone by it. But why should this song be given the power not only to incarnate a version of the Italian south—violent, sick, inarticulate—but to render Aschenbach, separated from the itinerant Neapolitan singers by class, language, and ethnicity, so intensely vulnerable?

One straightforward answer has to do with the issue I raised in chapter 1—the issue of laughter’s uneasy causality and ties to reason. As readers and viewers, we witness this scene from Aschenbach’s point of view and so see the singer implicitly mocking the protagonist for all the things that he—and we with him—knows himself to be: a high-bourgeois aesthete in a deep existential crisis, obsessed to distraction with a beautiful Polish youth whom he has never spoken to yet has invested with impossible allegorical significance. The laugh of the performers is one of utter recognition: it is the laugh of Aschenbach’s self-loathing externalized. But Visconti’s film, by staging the scene and lending bodies and faces to the troupe of musicians—bodies and faces that are shot not exclusively from Aschenbach’s POV but also from that of the rest of the audience—raises a simple but key question: who are

these people, and why, putting aside Aschenbach's narcissistic assumption, are they laughing? This is clearly impossible to know from Mann's or Visconti's account, first and foremost because of the musicalized laughter's remoteness from the specific performance. By "remoteness" I mean that "A risa," like any laughing song, disciplines laughter into something musically scored, rhythmic, quasi-pitched, and reproducible and thus suspends it from causes (the humorous prompt, the punch line, the "why" of the laugh). Even if the song verse were humorous, the musicalized laughter is in fact music *about* laughter—not a spontaneous giggle. It is precisely on this ambiguity—is laughter the result of musical technique or the spontaneous response to something here and now?—that the explosive effect of the performance relies. Massimo Donà, commenting on the scene in Visconti's film, dubs the laughter a "risata assoluta"—a Nietzschean absolute laughter, possibly loosened from the bonds of causality and logos.<sup>9</sup> Yet suspension from causality is not absolution, and the suspicion of causality, the fact that the sung laughter roves among its audience in search of a cause (significantly, the singer points his finger during the performance), is precisely what lends this laughter its force. Imagine this scene rewritten from a Gramscian or a postcolonial viewpoint: the troupe of musicians is indeed mocking the wealthy patrons, and taunting them, but under the protective spell of musicalized laughter. The fact that the sung laughter has no evident cause is what allows the musicians to laugh in the audience's face without missing out on tips when the hat is passed round. But for Aschenbach this state of suspension is unbearable. He conceives only of a consciousness like his own—self-reflexive, well spoken, skilled in writing—and thus the singer's laugh is truly foreign, dangerous, epistemologically impossible. Clearly, he thinks, it is he himself—his *Mitteleuropean* refinement, his aesthetic and erotic devotion to Tadzio—who is being mocked, yet that's impossible. His pretense of being immune to the southern contagion—whether of laughter or sex or cholera matters not—is being laughed at yet not laughed at. It is a problem with laughter without reason, yes, and with the unsteady tethering of laughter to political constructions of civility and humanity, but it is also to do with a laughter that proliferates and repeats beyond its original context and meaning in complex and threatening ways. The laughter of the itinerant musicians in *Death in Venice* may be, in other words, a phonographic laughter.

As I mentioned above, I would not be surprised if Mann first heard the laughing song in question on a phonograph, although he fictionalized it as a live encounter between Aschenbach and the musicians. I suspect this not only because the song circulated far more widely as a recording than in live performance but also because Mann's imagination is rich in reproductive ciphers. First, there is the imminent choleric contagion—reproduction as bacterial proliferation, which is foreshadowed by the way in which laughter quickly spreads throughout the audience. Second, there is the suspension of the intentionality of the singers—the sense that the laughter doesn't truly come from them, even though they are its sound sources. In the symbolic language of the turn of the twentieth century, such a suspension makes the laughter acousmatic and phonographic, produced

and reproduced away from its source by a mechanized body. Finally, there is the incontrollable, contagious audience laughter, which was a widely reported effect of the phonographed laughing song. The feverish international circulation of phonograph laughing songs—beginning in the 1890s in the American northeast and moving along colonial routes to Europe, Asia, and Africa—left a paper trail through phonograph exhibitors, artists, and writers. We can work backward in time from Fred Gaisberg, an early phonograph impresario and exhibitor, ubiquitous and unreliable patron saint of phonograph and gramophone historians. Writing half a century later of his work as a traveling phonograph exhibitor in the 1890s, Gaisberg recalled the response to a recorded laughing song: “It was ludicrous in the extreme to see ten people grouped about a phonograph, each with a tube leading from his ears, grinning and laughing at what he heard. It was a fine advertisement for the onlookers waiting their turn. Five cents was collected from each listener so the showman could afford to pay two and three dollars for a cylinder to exhibit.”<sup>10</sup>

The implications of this passage are striking. Laughter is here both the recorded content of the cylinder and the response it elicits in its audience; this is a unique fact and moment of phonographic history—the moment when the content of a record and its audience response are one and the same. It is a detail that connects directly to the economic reproduction of the phonograph: laughing customers market the phonograph, their payments recouping its cost and growing into profit so that more records can be bought and then more (laughing and paying) customers drawn in. In simple Marxist terms, laughter could be said to be the sound of a commodity that makes money so that more commodities may be bought to make even more money. But it is the link of sound reproduction, economic reproduction, and laughter here that is key and unrepeatable. This is a late nineteenth-century articulation of laughter’s long-standing capacity—as we saw in chapter 3—as a sound that helps to make *more*. Contagious laughter is here a sign of the demand for and circulation of a new commodity—the commodity of sound reproduction. The possibility of contagion from laughing songs became a deliberate selling point. Andrew Jones writes of a French phonograph exhibitor in Shanghai whose “new business gambit” went like this: “When a sufficiently large crowd had gathered around the machine, he would ask each listener to pay ten cents to hear a novelty record called ‘Laughing Foreigners’ (Yangren daxiao). Anyone able to resist laughing along with the chuckles, chortles, and guffaws emerging from the horn of the gramophone would get his or her money back.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the 1899 published score of Cantalamessa’s “A risa” carries, under the title, an imperative statement directed to the audience: “Redite!” (Laugh on!)<sup>12</sup> Audience laughter was not just a by-product of laughing songs but an expected result; the possibility of contagion was looped into and through the commodity of laughter.

Gaisberg’s narration of the success of laughing songs isn’t, then, a mere matter of marketing rhetoric but a way of parsing something that laughing songs

*did* within the emergent market of phonographic records. They were, that is, the closest thing to a viral artifact that one could find between the 1890s and the 1930s. The short version of the story of laughing songs is that they flooded the early sound recording market and in many ways helped to create it. But the longer story is worth retelling: George Washington Johnson recorded his “Laughing Song” for the first time in 1891; the circumstances of this recording, which quickly achieved such popularity as to show up the limits of the late nineteenth-century phonograph (whose mechanics did not allow for mass reproduction), have since achieved a kind of mythic status. As Bryan Wagner details, unsubstantiated stories have been circulating since the 1890s about Thomas Edison recruiting Johnson on the spot, after hearing him perform on a Hudson pier, for a recording session. As Wagner’s analysis shows, these stories enact a racialized ritual of a white (technologized) ear extracting a Black voice from a performer for profit and, indeed, show us the dynamics of recording impresarios hearing the voices around them as always already primed for reproduction.<sup>13</sup> Johnson’s recorded song entered the international market fairly quickly after its release. “A risa,” Cantalamessa near note-for-note, Neapolitan contrafact of Johnson’s song, is reported to have been put together in 1895 and was likely performed regularly before being published in 1899 and released as a phonograph record in 1901 for Edison; from then onward, “A risa” stayed in the Neapolitan song repertoire (often sanitized out of dialect and into official Italian as “La risata”), thanks to the scores of other Neapolitan singers who adopted it, such as Nicola Maldacea, Daniele Serra, Pasquale Jovino, Leopoldo Fregoli, Giuseppe Petrone, Luigi Presolini, and Roberto Mario De Simone.<sup>14</sup> More performers, such as Aurelio Fierro and Tonino Apicella, continued this song’s tradition after World War II, when it was also immortalized as part of “anthologies of Neapolitan songs.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time as the Neapolitan/Italian market for “A risa” was developing, things were happening to “The Laughing Song,” in the United States and elsewhere. Gaisberg writes of exporting an American version of the record—by the white performer Bert Sheppard—to “China, Africa, and Japan.” Thanks to the colonial commercial lines of the East India Company, he reports the record arriving in India, where it apparently caused riotous laughter among local audiences.<sup>16</sup> Although Gaisberg’s account of the consumer response and the exact chronology of the export may be unreliable, the fact of the song’s circulation eastward is demonstrated by the work of local sound recording historians—like Sunny Mathew, the owner and curator of the Gramophone Museum in Kerala, India—who have compiled lists of laughing songs in their archives, including not only American and Italian but also local-language versions, such as Bhai Chhela’s “Laughing Song” in Hindi, cut in 1912, a straightforward contrafact of Johnson’s version, and another version in Tamil and Telugu.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Jones details the presence of a French laughing song (“Five Men Laughing”) in Shanghai at the turn of the twentieth century, marketed as “Laughing Foreigners” (*Yangren daxiao* in Mandarin).<sup>18</sup> Cutting back to Gaisberg,

he also writes in his memoirs of appropriating Johnson's song for Sheppard, who released his version in 1901, quickly obscuring Johnson's recording (and effectively tanking his career as a recording artist).<sup>19</sup> This generated more contrafacts of the song abroad. One famous example based on the Sheppard version is the British vaudeville number "The Laughing Policeman" (also issued, with slight variations in tempo and lyrics, under the titles "I Tried to Keep from Laughing," "Laughing PC Brown," and "Laughing Ginger Brown"), recorded several times by the British music hall singer Charles "Jolly" Penrose between 1912 and 1926 and popular through the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Colonial markets may have brought Sheppard's song to Nigeria: Jones reports—via the historian Michael Chanan and the writer (and Nobel laureate) Wole Soyinka—on witness accounts of its being played in middle-class homes there.<sup>21</sup> This staggeringly wide map of circulation becomes wider still when we consider not just near-exact contrafacts in foreign languages but also looser replications of the song's simple but recognizable premise of sung verse and laughed chorus. Penrose, for instance, also recorded "The Laughing Typist," "The Laughing Xylophone," "The Laughing Huntsman," and "The Laughing Sailor." Another such loose contrafact is the 1905 "Laughing Song" (with, confusingly, the same title but different music and lyrics from the Johnson/Sheppard version, although obviously inspired by it) recorded by Maurice Farkoa.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Berardo Cantalamessa, the original Neapolitan appropriator of Johnson's "Laughing Song," tried his luck at releasing a new laughing song of his own in 1907 ("A risata nova"), with limited success. In 1922, an even more distant relative of Johnson's song appeared on the market: "The Okeh Laughing Record," a German production involving no lyrics but instead a cornet player who, on making a mistake, is answered by and then eventually joins in with a woman's laughter. This version too produced its own spawn: it was the soundtrack to a Walter Lantz cartoon of 1955 called "Sh-h-h-h-h-h" and was imitated in a French song cut in 1923 called "Le fou rire," as well as doubtless many others whose variants and circulations are yet untracked.<sup>23</sup>

With the above list comes, perhaps, the dissatisfaction of acknowledging a historical phenomenon that was obviously enabled by colonial markets of the late nineteenth century but whose significance doesn't square easily with those material conditions. The arrival of an English or French laughing song in the respective colonial domains wasn't, that is, merely a fact of cultural domination: the songs were taken up and reissued by local singers in local languages, some of them—like Tamil and Telugu—local and minoritarian, and even the Neapolitan dialect version speaks to a "vernacular" appropriation of the original song, which was itself a complex representation of a minority.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, a broad pattern among laughing songs is that they tend to involve the representation of a linguistic or racialized subaltern. The fact that this seems to repeat across national and cultural contexts is something we cannot ascribe to a straightforward translation or adaptation of the original song's lyrics and political content. Most of these laughing songs were sonic commodities in flight, consumed by people often unable to understand the lyrics, drawn merely by the inscrutable pleasure of phonographed, musicalized



laughter. Even if the lyrics were in a language understandable to the audience, there were further obstacles to a clean transcultural adoption. Language isn't, after all, a matter of semantics alone. For one thing, there are dialectal inflections: Johnson's song, for instance, draws on Black vernacular in the lyrics, which also make references to racial politics in North America. But even assuming an unlikely level of linguistic and cultural competency among listeners, we must again remember that the cylinders and even the discs of early phonography were subject to decay. And linguistic articulation was one of the first things to be erased by wear and tear: transients (i.e., consonants key to the articulation of speech) were among the first victim. This consideration is essential to the history of any popular early record: there is no telling what was carried from needle to ear or how it was received. Indeed, in the case we are considering, the recognition of the sound of laughter and the engagement with the physical presence of the phonographic hardware are the only two constants.

Mangled logos, racialized people, colonial-built ideas of human universality, and reproductive power leaking between body and machine—we have encountered all of these things in the first part of this book, albeit in more theoretical, general forms. Here they occur again as fundamental problems of method and knowledge when studying recorded laughter. The problem can be articulated like so: laughing songs are both inescapable (for anyone who cares about early commercial phonography and the sounds circulated with it) and tricky, because of the complex racial dynamics behind the original and behind its export abroad, because of the often nonsemantic processing of the lyrics of individual songs, which makes their verbal content unevenly relevant to their received meaning, because of the way they were reproduced, contrafacted, and transmitted at a global scale, and because the relationship of the history of phonography to laughter pulls us in two opposing directions, political and historical circumstance on the one hand and the seemingly ahistorical and universal phenomenon of laughter on the other.

That pull is felt in some of the most exhaustive work on laughing songs. Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks*, for example, considers them as a global phenomenon—and as precursors of TV laugh tracks. He also interprets them as a kind of aid to the acceptance of phonographs. He writes, "Laughter, then, is a kind of suture between the rigid and the flexible, the social and the individual, the mechanical and the human. The incitation of laughter in the listener and the frame disintegration described above would work to remove anxiety about interacting with a machine, making the phonographic apparatus appear more 'human.'"<sup>25</sup>

Smith's interpretation takes its lead from the discourse on laughing songs on the phonograph that I have outlined thus far: namely, that these songs caused listeners to laugh back at the phonograph, making it seem "more human" (because it laughs and can cause laughter in others) and therefore more palatable. There are, though, several problems with this interpretation. For one, "human," of course, is not an ahistorical category—and, as I argued in chapter 2, laughter has a particular, contradictory bind to the category of human, a bind that threatens the specificity of the



human species just as it affirms it. That is why laughter worked so well to signify the human on a phonograph and in the mouths of racialized and gendered people who were deemed to be at the edge of humanity. But, importantly, we can say more about the economic, sonic, and social reproductive power of laughter in the history of phonography: laughter's unique role was to articulate the labor of reproduction at these three levels, and it could do so because, as I argued in chapter 3, it already had profound and millenary links to biological and social reproduction. Indeed, Smith notes the way that laughter "work[ed] to remove anxiety"—a phrase that could easily define the concept of emotional labor, the gendered labor of reproducing social structures by catering to the feelings of those within them. For this reason, the reproductive power of laughter is a code not simply for economic reproduction—marketing and profit making—but also for reproductive labor that is dismissed and erased, and indeed naturalized, just like the history of early phonographic laughing songs. One name for this erased reproductive labor is *contagion*: an asexual, nonhuman, mindless, and, as we will see, implicitly racialized form of reproduction. If, to gloss Smith once again, the incitation of laughter in the audiences of early phonographic laughing songs served to make the phonograph seem more human, this effect was obtained by spiriting that humanity away from the very laughing audiences who sealed the phonograph's commercial success. In order for the phonograph to be human, its early listeners had to be turned into something between a bacterium, a woman, and a phonograph.

In the early history of phonography, contagion and reproductive labor follow parallel and often complementary courses as naturalized, passive, feminized, and racialized forms of labor—a labor that laughter simultaneously voices and masks. When, for instance, Gaisberg gloats about the laughing phonograph audiences effectively doing his marketing for him, consider that this enacts an eminently colonial primal scene, of witnessing a "native" engaging with a new technology, and thus grants the listeners of laughing songs little agency beyond a thoughtless mimicry of technology. This perspective is directly connected to the colonial practice—highlighted by Ranajit Guha in his seminal essay "The Prose of Counter-insurgency"—of willfully misinterpreting shared thinking and intention among Indigenous populations as mere "natural calamity." Guha writes of colonial accounts in India as "assimilating peasant revolts as natural phenomena: they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history."<sup>26</sup>

Such dismissal of agency becomes all the more pointed when local audiences in (often colonial) phonographic exhibits effectively carried out the work of economic reproduction as the laughing records were marketed with their laughter (which both amplified, in a way, the contents of the record and modeled a response to it). Exhibitors like Gaisberg deliberately parsed the continuity between the sounds on the phonograph (laughter) and the sounds made by those listening to it (also

laughter) as contagion because that way the phonograph (as the infecting virus) retained more profit-making agency than the listeners who were processing the laughing records with and for one another. The latter had to be dismissed as passive, “feminized” receptors and reproducers of thought, of marketing, rather than active thinkers and feelers, obliterating the verbal and intellectual labor of communication as an unintentional, natural phenomenon. The phonographic laughter is here cast as acting through a passive host who receives and replicates its information unawares.<sup>27</sup> As in Guha’s remark above, this naturalizing discourse is also, though, a way of downplaying a dangerous power: unexplained collective public laughter of any subaltern group can be a sign of incipient rebellion. The challenge here is not just to identify ciphers of reproductive power within laughter but to work through the ways in which this reproductive power became suspect, gendered, and/or racialized and was dismissed or erased. This is a history that continues from laughing songs to recorded laugh tracks, as chapter 6 will show. And, at a theoretical level, this is where the discourse of contagion becomes loaded and therefore crucial.

Contagious laughs—and indeed contagious media—are hardly neutral stand-ins for the viability of commodities in international markets. We begin to see this a few pages deeper into Gaisberg’s memoirs, as he conjures the effects of another favorite laughing song, this time at some length:

The spontaneous and boisterous laugh [Bert Sheppard] could conjure up was most infectious and was heard by thousands through his records. Bert Sheppard’s “Whistling Coon” and “The Laughing Song” were world-famous. In India alone over half a million records of the latter were sold. In the bazaars of India I have seen dozens of natives seated on their haunches round a gramophone, rocking with laughter, whilst playing Sheppard’s laughing record; in fact, this is the only time I have ever heard Indians laugh heartily. The record is still available there and I believe that to this day it sells in China, Africa, and Japan as well.<sup>28</sup>

Laughter has more than a passing link to contagion here, and the connection goes by way of race. First, consider Gaisberg’s interest in Indian audiences: the reported numbers are suddenly hyperbolic (five hundred thousand records) and the contagion of laughter considered atypical for “natives” but also, perhaps, especially powerful there. Second, consider that the songs causing such mirth involved stereotyped representations of Blackness (and had originally been sung by the Black artist George W. Johnson). Finally, it was the exponential success in India that implicitly opened the gate to non-Western markets. The lore begins to transform into a pandemic. And no wonder: anyone traveling anywhere, but especially to India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would have known it as the point of origin for the cholera epidemic of 1817, whose waves had reached North America and Europe soon after, precipitating a famous crisis of public health (razing of working-class neighborhoods, sanitation campaigns, etc.) that had resulted in the restructuring of several European capitals. In a pattern grimly familiar in

global pandemics, Europe had, although unevenly, succeeded in shielding itself from outbreaks while leaving colonial territories to fester and die; in India a devastating fifth wave of the pandemic began in 1899, a year in which Gaisberg would almost certainly have been on the road as an exhibitor.

The connection between a cholera epidemic and the mysterious infectiousness of laughing songs on the phonograph may seem forced. Yet we have already seen cholera and laughter linked in Mann's *Death in Venice*, from 1912, when Aschenbach recoils in horror from the southern singer of the laughing song—whose performance has a hotel courtyard howling with laughter—in cholera-ridden Venice just hours before he finally contracts the disease. Indeed, discourses of contagion were rampant by the late nineteenth century and had been seeping into everyday language since the mid-nineteenth century. As Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb recalls in her *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020*, the discourse of epidemics and sanitation and the consequent idea of public health stemmed from the concomitant responses to cholera epidemics and anticolonial insurgencies in nineteenth-century British India and were connected to both anti-Islamic sentiment and the racialization of Muslim populations at a global scale: “Two distinctive features of cholera writing in nineteenth-century British India [. . .]—both of which primarily developed in observations and diagnoses from and of colonized space—might be best understood as first the Orientalization, and later the ethnicization of ‘cholera’ as a historical and imperial phenomenon. Building on this legacy, cholera writing in the metropole would conscript and synthesize both rhetorical tactics in service of the racialization of the disease, beginning with an imprecise colorism that hammered again and again the blackness and blueness [. . .] of the choleric body.”<sup>29</sup> She goes on to identify the contagious symptoms of racialized bodies: “External markers of morbidity are joined by a ‘terror’ or ‘wildness’ in the patient, as well as a loss of agency in the form of speech—the suppressed, breathless ‘vox cholericus’ standing as a tragic antonym of the vox populi.”<sup>30</sup> According to Raza Kolb's argument, then, by the late nineteenth century, cholera—whose popularly known symptoms included convulsion, impaired speech, and a darkening complexion—became a cipher for the potentially unruly subaltern everywhere, a subaltern whose convulsions, breathlessness, and darkness were contagious and instantly communicable. The subaltern turned, in short, choleric at the same time that cholera began to function as the shorthand for the sickness, the ailment, of being poor, dark skinned, and noncompliant.

#### PHYSIOLOGICAL LAUGHTER

How did laughter get entangled with the imagination of the choleric subaltern and thus with contagion? The answer lies at the particular, late nineteenth-century fold of the topics of the first part of this book: laughter's shaky relationship to reason and, most especially, its role in the ideological constructions of the human and its linkage to reproduction.<sup>31</sup> In the 1860s, particularly in the Victorian realm

that Raza Kolb examines as the breeding ground for philosophies and metaphors of contagion, the discourse of laughter had its primary dwelling in the world of physiology and medicine. We have, of course, met laughter in this context earlier in this book—in Aristotle’s account of the relationship of *phrenes* (diaphragm) and *phronesis* (political thought) and in Laurent Joubert’s sixteenth-century discussion of the boundary between healthy and unhealthy laughter. We also saw how Porphyry’s discussion of laughter as a human proper (along with the medieval theological elaboration of that discussion) was swept up, in sixteenth-century theology, into a discourse ratifying slavery as the natural state of some humans.<sup>32</sup> In the 1860s we find cholera, contagion, convulsion, and all manner of observations of the human body’s expressions tied into a biopolitical knot by public health and implicitly colonial political governance. This was an era when early modern physiognomy—the tracking of facial expressions as indications of compliance with or deviance from behavioral norms—returned to haunt scientific literature and was employed as a means of discerning anybody’s ability to belong to a political community. Vocalizations, particularly when accompanied by striking facial expressions (contracted muscles, gaping mouths), were part of this nineteenth-century interest in physiognomy. It is not surprising, then, that laughter was an important element of this social Darwinism of the face. Two of the most influential works on laughter in the late nineteenth century were penned by, respectively, Herbert Spencer and, soon after him, Charles Darwin. Spencer’s “Physiology of Laughter” (1860) is a stand-alone essay devoted to the topic, and laughter takes up the best part of a chapter in Darwin’s 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the third and final volume of his evolutionary theory.<sup>33</sup>

The interest in laughter here lies precisely in its uneasy relation to any single familiar emotion—an idea dating back to at least Thomas Hobbes’s aforementioned dubbing of laughter as the result of “a passion that hath no name.”<sup>34</sup> Both Spencer and Darwin were attuned to the idea that comedy is a poor theory of the causality of laughter, and they also grappled with the ways in which laughter defies any master discourse on the universality of human expression. This sticking point had Darwin write to colonial envoys to confirm what could be commonalities among the world’s laughers. He mused, “Mr. Swinhoe informs me that he has often seen the Chinese, when suffering from deep grief, burst out into hysterical fits of laughter. I was anxious to know whether tears are freely shed during excessive laughter by most of the races of men, and I hear from my correspondents that this is the case.”<sup>35</sup> In seeking a lowest common denominator for laughter, the diagnosis turns—and this is a key point—to moisture levels: tears are, in this world, a means of discharging a surge in moisture and blood. Spencer turned instead to spasming muscles. He was especially concerned—as someone with a stubbornly functionalist understanding of bodies natural and politic (everything must be put to sensible, civil use)—with the uselessness of laughter’s convulsions: “In general, bodily motions that are prompted by feelings are directed to special

ends; as when we try to escape a danger, or struggle to secure a gratification. But the movements of chest and limbs which we make when laughing have no object.”<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Spencer names the cause of laughter as an “efflux” of nervous tension, a term that renders the laughter’s physiology akin to the release of liquescent bodily matter.<sup>37</sup> *Moisture, convulsions, contractions, discharge*: all these were, by the 1860s, loaded terms. Raza Kolb notes that moisture—and its conduits, which we can imagine as both human and urban ducts—had become one of the points of concern regarding cholera spread: losing water meant dehydration, thickened blood, and cramping muscles.<sup>38</sup> Guts and viscera were especially under scrutiny, since the disease evidently attacked the digestive system. The fear of convulsions—of the belly or of the face—was equally caught up in this network of choleric symptomatology.

Yet this is by no means a set of hard and fast correspondences—more a spider’s web of anxious associations in the face of a symbolically charged disease that was, we must remember, already the topic of panic and cagey discussions and so might well have been spoken of indirectly, knowingly, through a set of coded references. And, we should add, the discourse of laughter and cholera allowed for laughter to be both a symptom and a cure, both a sign of the contagion and a sometimes allopathic, sometimes homeopathic pharmacon. Darwin brings up cholera once in his discussion of laughter, again in relation to moisture levels and contraction but this time in *contrast* with laughter: “According to Dr. Piderit, who has discussed this point more fully than any other writer, the tenseness [of eyes during laughter] may be largely attributed to the eyeballs becoming filled with blood and other fluids, from the acceleration of the circulation, consequent on the excitement of pleasure. He remarks on the contrast in the appearance of the eyes of a hectic patient with a rapid circulation, and of a man suffering from cholera with almost all the fluids of his body drained from him.”<sup>39</sup> Spencer goes so far as to state and confirm the general belief that laughter salubriously quickens bowel movements: “One further observation is worth making. Among the several sets of channels into which surplus feeling might be discharged, was named the nervous system of the viscera. The sudden overflow of an arrested mental excitement, which, as we have seen, naturally results from a descending incongruity, must doubtless stimulate not only the muscular system, as we see it does, but also the internal organs: the heart and stomach must come in for a share of the discharge. And thus there seems to be a good physiological basis for the popular notion that laughter facilitates digestion.”<sup>40</sup> We have here an outline of a symptomatology and, most important, the subtle emergence of laughter as an uneven and contradictory but nonetheless present cure. One could, in the 1860s, become a member of the subaltern class by mere exposure to a certain kind of convulsive laughter. But laughter was, at the same time, a means of tightening and regulating a dystonic mind and body.

## LAUGHTER BETWEEN CONTAGION AND CURE

When phonograph laughter became a reproducible commodity, it was enmeshed with the logic of contagion in two main ways. First, it could imply a racialized, choleric subaltern, particularly when open discussion of cholera in public places was difficult. Second, and most important, it signified immunity from the fearsome aspects of contagion: it offered a sonic cipher of a subaltern who was contagious in a profitable way, one who could be owned and exploited by artists and exhibitors and recognized and enjoyed by audiences without their running the risk of being touched by the disease of being poor, Black, and helplessly noncompliant. I will now focus on a particular contrafact of George W. Johnson's "Laughing Song": Berardo Cantalamessa's "A risa," made in Naples in 1899. Of the vast range of global appropriations and contrafacts of Johnson's song, I have chosen this one for several reasons, some pragmatic and some conceptual: I have the most access, linguistic and archival, to Italian sources, but, more important, Naples was the site of the worst European cholera outbreaks of the nineteenth century and was one of the main ports from which the colonial expeditions of the 1890s departed. Both of these characteristics make it an ideal place to consider the intertwining of contagion, racialized subalterns, and laughter. Finally, the Neapolitan contrafacts of "The Laughing Song" have left behind an impressive paper trail, including published scores, memoirs, and advertising materials.

It may seem strange, at first, to switch from the Victorian-colonial sensibilities of Darwin, Spencer, and Raza Kolb's cholera-minded administrators and writers to the world of late nineteenth-century Naples. There are good reasons to do so, however. Naples, as I mentioned, experienced the worst sanitation, crowding, and cholera outbreaks in Europe, and it is likely that its authorities looked to British colonial reports on and responses to the disease for ideas. Moreover, the link to colonial administration writ large holds: Naples had recently gone from being the capital of the southern Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to being incorporated into the territory of the Savoy monarchy (which unified most of the Italian peninsula into one nation-state in 1861). The Savoy made a showy but ultimately vain attempt to contain cholera in the city with ambitious plans for public works that were either suspended or carried out in ways that negatively impacted the local population. The new monarchy, in other words, treated the southern province of Naples as a colony, and the alienation from public authority—including medical authorities—created by this approach was not a world away from the mutinous crowds of India, nor was the official reaction to it essentially different.<sup>41</sup> Social Darwinism had made it to Italy, after all, in the infamous work of Cesare Lombroso, whose theories of the relation of climate and race to criminality were steeped in the post-unification southern response to the Savoy monarchy. Although Lombroso does not discuss laughter in his works, it is remarkable that the first chapter—indeed, the first sentence—of the first edition of his *Uomo delinquente* (1876)

mentions that the investigation of a crime isn't and shouldn't be so different from the investigation of a disease like cholera, whose origins may also be "individual" and "psychological": "An etiology can be established for crime just as it can for illness, and possibly more easily. Cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis all originate from specific causes, but who can deny that they are also influenced by broader meteorological, hygienic, individual, and psychological factors?"<sup>42</sup> Lombroso then goes on to discuss the impact of climate and heat on crime rates—and we will leave him there. For now, it is enough to note that subalterns and cholera were not so much a fully worked out dyad as a kind of emergent biopolitical association, uneven and hybrid, barely at the surface of rational language. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that it should be a song about laughter—that is, a conjunction of music and nonsemantic utterance, a double undoing of language—that snapped this constellation into place.

As for laughter's relationship to subalternity and sickness, we have already encountered the *Mittleuropean* phobia of a laughing song in *Death in Venice* and have noted how the published score of Cantalamessa's "A risa" includes the imperative subtitle "Redite!" (Laugh on!), thus hinting at the lore of contagion. That song's Neapolitan lyrics, which are the only part of it written by Cantalamessa, existed before both Mann's novella and the published score of 1899—Cantalamessa included the song in his repertoire before he claimed it via copyright—and are themselves darkly suggestive:

Neapolitan	English
Io tengo 'a che so' nato,	I've had since I was born
'Nu vizio gruosso assaie,	This very great vice,
Che 'un aggio perzo maie	I never managed to lose it
Va' trova lu ppecché!	Go figure out why!
M'è sempe piaciuto	I have always liked
De stare in allegrie	To be in a good mood
Io, la malinconia	To me, melancholy
Nun saccio che robb'è!	Is totally unknown!
<i>De tutto rido e che nce</i>	<i>I laugh at everything and</i>
<i>pozzo fà</i>	<i>what can I do</i>
(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah,	(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha,
Nun me ne mporta si stono	<i>I don't care if I am wrong</i>
<i>a sbaglià</i>	



*(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah.*

Io rido se uno chiagne,  
Se stongo disperato,

Se nun aggio magnato,  
Rido senza pensà,  
Me pare che redenno  
Ogne tormento passa  
Nce se recreia e spassa  
Chhiù allegro se po sta.

*Sarrà difetto gruosso chistu  
cca!*

*Ah, ah, ah, ah,  
Ma 'o tengo e nun m' 'o  
pozzo cchiu levà  
Ah, ah, ah, ah.*

Lo nonno mio diceva  
Ca tutte li ffacenne  
Faceva, isso redenne  
  
E accussì voglio fa;  
Chisto è 'o difetto mio,  
Vuie mo già lu ssapite  
Nzieme cumme redite  
Che bene ve farrà!  
Redite e ghiammo ià:

*ah, ah, ah, ah.*  
*(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah,*  
Che bene ve farà  
*(ride) Ah, ah, ah, ah,*  
Ah, ah, ah, ah.

*(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha.*

I laugh when someone cries,  
When I am feeling  
desperate,  
When I haven't eaten,  
I laugh without thinking,  
I think that by laughing  
All troubles melt away  
We can rest and have fun  
And live more happily.

*Isn't this such a big flaw!*

*Ha, ha, ha, ha,  
But now I have it and I can't  
get rid of it  
Ha, ha, ha, ha.*

My grandfather used to say  
That all that he did  
He did while he was  
laughing  
And I want to do the same;  
This is my flaw,  
And now you know it too  
So laugh along with me  
And it will do you good!  
Come on, laugh along with  
me:

*ha, ha, ha, ha.*  
*(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha,*  
And it will do you good  
*(laughs) Ha, ha, ha, ha,*  
Ha, ha, ha, ha.

These lyrics are ostensibly about an irrepressible happy laugh, an instance of the trope of the *lazzaro felice* (cheerful, happy scoundrel) that Goffredo Platino summons as a key figure of nineteenth-century Neapolitan song.<sup>43</sup> Yet by the second verse, it is not difficult to pick up overtones of laughter as a sinister flaw and inscrutable reaction to physical and psychological misery (laughing while hungry, while desperate, while someone else is crying). Johnson's original lyrics speak of laughter as a response to a confrontation with white onlookers, a laughter both complying with the racist stereotype of the bumbling Black man and offering a shield, a defense against the mocking gaze. Here the laughter is much closer to the musings (on moisture and convulsion) of a Darwin or a Spencer, who were, as we saw, particularly curious about laughter mingled with tears. This is a laughter without narrative context, without a cause, a glitch of the body that has slipped into the realm of the unthought. And for a song that is a deliberate appropriation of another's sung laughter, it is striking that Cantalamessa's laughter is not particularly attached even to the diegetic "I" of the song, except as a sort of recurring hiccup. The laughter becomes a strange, impersonal, and physiological index of subalternity—the references to hunger and despair tell us as much—but a subalternity that can be marketed as a mindlessness and cheerfulness that is nonthreatening and desirable, even therapeutic.

Before we delve deeper into Cantalamessa's "A risa," though, it is worth sketching out the network of signifiers that allowed it, by the mid-1890s, to communicate. We can begin with the August 20–21, 1887, issue of *La follia di Napoli*, a weekly satirical magazine that often featured material on cholera.<sup>44</sup> The gist of most of its articles is the wry observation that tourists were fleeing on the word that a new wave of the disease was spreading through the city, while the government, unsurprisingly, hushed up the extent of the contagion in order to not lose any more tourist money. One long poem, titled "I casi" (The cases), satirizes the policy of denial and reassuring babble about the absence of new cases and evokes racialized subalternity, choleric threat, military metaphors, and, eventually, laughter:

Italian	English
[. . .]	[. . .]
Poi disse: dunque è salva la città? . . .	Then he said: You mean the city is safe? . . .
Ed io: non ci è la <i>bestia</i> , né verrà.	And I: The <i>beast</i> is not there, nor will it be.
Non viene, Don Annibale, non viene,	It won't come, Don Annibale, it won't come,
E statevi a sentir, se ve ne tiene:	And listen to this, if you are still worried:

Qualche casuccio, se  
 casuccio è stato,  
 Ha colto qualche profugo  
 malato.  
 E se qualcuno a Napoli fu  
 spento  
 È stato colto come a  
 tradimento.  
 Di su, di giù, di qua di là si è  
 estesa  
 Una cinta tremenda di  
 difesa.  
 Le più severe e strette  
 pulizie  
 Si fanno per le piazze e per  
 le vie.  
 Le cloache di sera e di  
 mattino  
 Sciacqua e riscalda l'onda  
 del Serino  
 Acidi corrosivi e puzzolenti  
 Scendono nei meati i più  
 latenti.  
 Vice-Sindaci aggiunti e  
 titolari  
 Saggiano le carni-cotte e i  
 baccalari  
 Olii, resine, polveri, metalli,  
  
 Sassi verdi, cilestri, rossi e  
 gialli  
 Stanno nelle armerie  
 municipali  
 Diventati terribili arsenali.  
  
 Se ficca il naso sol la *rea*  
*marmotta*  
 Sarà schiacciata come una  
 ricotta!

A few tiny cases, if they  
 were indeed cases,  
 Have occurred among some  
 sick refugees.  
 And if anyone in Naples  
 died of it  
 It happened as if by  
 accident.  
 Up and down, far and wide,  
 we have built  
 A tremendous wall to  
 defend us.  
 The most strict and  
 thorough cleaning  
 Has been given to squares  
 and streets.  
 The sewers, each morning  
 and evening,  
 Are rinsed out by the tide of  
 the Serino  
 Corrosive and smelly acids  
 Are poured into all dark  
 passages.  
 All kinds of Vice-Mayors,  
 new and old,  
 Sample the cooked meats  
 and preserved fish,  
 Oils, resins, powders, and  
 metals,  
 Green, blue, red, and yellow  
 rocks  
 Are kept in the city's  
 storage rooms,  
 Which have now become  
 awesome arsenals.  
 If the *nasty animal* so much  
 as sticks her nose here  
 It will be crushed like a  
 ricotta!

Ci instruimmo oramai come conviene	We have now learned our lesson
L'ottantaquattro ci ha imparato bene.	1884 has taught us well.
S'agguerriscono attente, ed ogni giorno,	The cities and surrounding villages,
Queste cittade ed i villaggi intorno.	Are armed, and ready to go, every day.
Anzi, sentite questa, è originale,	And so, hear this, for it's a new one:
Ridiamo perche il riso è contro il male	Let's laugh because laughter cures the illness
Onde antidoto sommo è la Follia[.]	Whose ultimate cure is folly[.]
[. . .] <sup>45</sup>	[. . .]

The tone of the poem is knowingly sarcastic: the author evokes in detail official reports that diminished the disease as a poor foreigner's curse, a dark beast from the East to be kept away from the city's middle classes by a blend of showy military intervention and quackery. And the act of laughter emerges as the paradoxical response to the unspeakable yet imminent contagion—a taking leave of one's senses just as sickness strikes. In this issue of *La follia*, the sickness of cholera, though never named outright, is even given a body and a face. In the front page's illustration it looms behind Vesuvius in full Orientalist regalia: sickly, dark skinned, and turbaned (choleric contagion was, as Raza Kolb details, associated with and blamed on Muslims undertaking the hajj), teeth bared in a menacing grin.<sup>46</sup>

But we can be precise here: the key racial aspect of choleric subalternity—as Raza Kolb explains—was not its predictable connection to a Muslim, dark-skinned “other” but the fact that it could be caught as easily as a water-born bacterial disease. The person who got cholera became Black—literally too, as the final stages of the disease involved a darkening of the complexion that came to be understood as a racialized feature. Splinters of this discourse of contagious Blackness can be picked up in “Salamelic,” a popular Neapolitan song from 1882 dealing with the aftermath of Italy's first attempt to join the Scramble for Africa, which consisted of a failed attempt to pry an Egyptian port on the Red Sea away from the British.<sup>47</sup> An early example of repertoire reporting on such early colonial expeditions, “Salamelic” did not yet uphold the triumphalist, violent nationalism of later numbers like “Africanella,”<sup>48</sup> but it established a conduit between a Neapolitan subaltern and an Eastern, Black “other”:

Neapolitan	English
Da l'Egitto so' turnato	From Egypt I've come back
stracquo, strutto e	tired, exhausted, and utterly
sfrantumato	crushed
cu 'na faccia assaje cchiù	with a face way more black
nera	
de na cappa 'e cimmeniera.	than the top of a chimney.
Rossa, 'ncapo, na sciascina,	On my head I've got a red
	cap
comm' a turco de la Cina . . .	like a Turkish man from
	China . . .
Io me paro nu pascià,	I look like a pasha,
ma nun tengo che mangià.	yet have nothing to eat.
Salamelicche, melicche	Samelik, melik salam,
salemme,	
Salamelicche, melicche salà,	Samelik, melik sala,
chesta canzone voglio cantà.	that's the song I want to
	sing.

The odd world of “Samelic” is one in which Blackness could be caught by Neapolitans partaking in colonial expeditions—along with the compulsion to croon in mangled Arabic. The connection to cholera is not, in this case, apparent, but the disease had been detected and discussed by the British rulers of Egypt as early as 1848 and would explode into a full-blown epidemic in 1883, a year after the song was composed. Along with contagion, Blackness, and a Muslim, Eastern subalternity, laughter carried out a fundamental linguistic function. It belonged, that is, to a network of signifiers capable of conjuring cholera without explicitly naming it. At a time when cases were either underreported or outright denied, particularly in Naples, this network of associations was increasingly functional and powerful.

Others before me have documented the harnessing of ideologies of voice and breath in the service of a biopolitical modernity that is manifested in public health campaigns and violent urban restructuring.<sup>49</sup> This was precisely what happened in Naples in the aftermath of its annexation by the Savoy monarchy. That northern monarchy's governing of the unruly, sick southern provinces featured violent repression of dissent, hasty plans for urban restructuring, and showy public works that were, by and large, unfinished or nonfunctional. But

the singular aspect of laughter here is that it was able to signify both the negative ideologies, highlighted in Raza Kolb's work, of contagion, subalternity, and race and their positive counterparts: ideologies of quick circulation, strength, and the profitability and exportability of commodities. The laughing contagion presented by Cantalamessa's lyrics is sinister but also desirable, fortifying, *fun*, a version of Herbert Spencer's cure for dyspepsia: a dose of the sickness and an inoculation from it all at once. Nicola Maldacea, who recorded one of the laughing songs we encountered in the introduction, recalls in his memoirs how upon hearing Cantalamessa's "A risa" in a live performance, audience members were sometimes so amused that they needed to leave the hall: "Più di una volta, avvenne che qualche spettatore in preda a sfrenato e convulso riso, dovesse abbandonare la sala per smaltire la . . . sbornia di allegria" (More than once, it happened that an audience member, overcome by unrestrained, convulsive laughter, had to leave the hall so as to come down from the . . . overdose of cheerfulness).<sup>50</sup> The laughing sickness could be caught during a live performance of "A risa," then, but audiences could also hear the performer's recommendations for antidotes for convulsive laughter. In the spoken section of a second laughing song of his own composition ("A risata nova," 1907), Cantalamessa would quip to his audience that he'd started taking a common digestive tonic, Tot, so he'd stop laughing for no reason.<sup>51</sup> In those years, Tot was pointedly marketed as a fortifier of weak (and thus potentially choleric) guts.<sup>52</sup> Laughter could be a cryptic symptom of this ailing sovereign gut—but one that could be used for product placement of the appropriate tonics and powders.

#### APPROPRIATING LAUGHTER

The ability to effect, through laughter, the switch between negative contagion and ideologies of healthy incorporation and circulation—within the bodies politic and natural—is worked out in the genesis of "A risa" as an appropriation.<sup>53</sup> After all, laughing songs were *songs*—compositions scripted and performed deliberately, not pathogens traveling from body to body, undetected by conscious thought. Exhibitors and the artists who produced contrafacts could profit by marketing such songs as contagious—as a healthy exposure to a choleric subaltern—but their circulation and the contrafacts they spawned were acts of conscious musical and linguistic thought, the result of several aesthetic and political choices. This is very much the case for "A risa," stolen via a phonograph cylinder from its original composer and performer, published under a new name, performed in *cafés chantants* and cabarets all over Naples, and recorded by Cantalamessa and, as I mentioned above, many others after him. The paradox, then, is that this was an appropriation of a song that needed to seem and be heard not just as catchy but as if it had been caught by the singer himself, as if it compelled its singer-songwriter and others to repeat it mindlessly, automatically, without thought.

Such an effect requires, of course, plenty of thought—from the performer, the lyricist, the publisher, and those who informally and formally promote the song as performance, cylinder or disc, and score. We already know about the lyrics, about the exhortation to laugh written into the published score, about Cantalamessa's attempted spin-off of "A risa" ("A risata nova") and its relationship to gut-strengthening tonics. Let's at last turn to the music. Nicola Maldacea devotes a full chapter of his memoirs of 1933 to the history of Cantalamessa's "A risa." It must have been a very well-loved element of his repertoire, because no other chapter revolves around a single song. The chapter offers us two lines of insight: it gives us, albeit in embellished form, a narrative for how Cantalamessa came across the song, the effect the cylinder had on him, and the steps he took to appropriate it and pass it off as his own; and it shows Maldacea's rhetoric and agenda in outing the song as an appropriation, a move probably intended to legitimize his own performance as more than just an imitation of Cantalamessa's original. We can now also examine Maldacea's story about his and Cantalamessa's first encounter with Johnson's song in Naples, where it was being played over a phonograph at an exhibit in 1895:

"A' risa" is by Berardo Cantalamessa, both the lyrics and the music. Actually, the music, to be honest, was not really the work of that great and much missed artist. Both he and I were under contract at the Salone Margherita [. . .]. One day, after rehearsals at the Salone, we stopped in the Galleria in a shop on the side of the nave that leads to Via Roma, on the right, where the Di Santo bakery is now. There were displayed, for the first time in Naples, phonographs, which had been invented really recently. [. . .] The most interesting product was a song in English, fruit of the labor of a black artist from North America. I don't remember the name of the song. All I know is that it made a huge impression on Cantalamessa and me, because of its irresistible, communicative joy. That singer laughed musically, and his laughter was so spontaneous and so funny that one felt compelled to imitate him.<sup>54</sup>

The galleria in question is the Galleria Umberto I, also known as the Rettifilo, site of the café (Salone Margherita) where Maldacea and Cantalamessa had a regular gig as entertainers.<sup>55</sup> Any Neapolitan of the late nineteenth century would have known this place as a charged site: it had been built in 1887–1891 over the hastily razed grounds of the working-class quarter of Santa Brigida, which had been decimated by the cholera epidemic of 1884. Now a cross-shaped, Parisian-style glass-and-steel arcade, it symbolized the aspirational modernity that marked the Savoy monarchy's governing of Naples—as well as the disillusionment with this modernity on the part of locals who saw their conditions of poverty and vulnerability to contagion unchanged.<sup>56</sup> The rhetoric of this useless, violent modernity was a biopolitical one: monarchy bureaucrats proudly named the process of razing and rebuilding *risanamento* ("healing" or "recovery") and, at the same time, *sventramento*—"gutting," or, as Frank Snowden pointedly translates it, "disembowelment."<sup>57</sup> Such terms are, it should by now be clear, part of the choleric



lexicon, words joining the imaginary of the diseased bowels of the bodies natural and politic and the violence needed to heal them. As he brings us back to this charged site of contagion, poverty, and disembowelment, Maldacea doesn't name Johnson or the song's original title, maybe because he genuinely doesn't remember them but maybe because, in his attempt to remove some of the credit for the song from Cantalamessa, he doesn't intend to then give it to anyone else. So the authorship of the song stays lifted, yet Johnson's ethnicity is refashioned by being glossed as *moro*, Moorish: in other words, he's identified as a North African Muslim Black person. Needless to say, this (far more than an African American) was one of the chief figures of racial otherness in Naples at the time—and a not so distant relative of the gaunt, toothy figure personifying cholera in the illustration from *La follia* of August 20–21, 1887. And of course Maldacea remembers the sung laughter—so “spontaneous” (Fred Gaisberg would have said “natural,” another biopolitical trope) as to compel others (before, perhaps, they quite knew what they were doing) to imitate it. The lore of contagion activated here is, in part, a strategy for erasing the song's original and reducing the deliberate act of appropriation to a mere physiological reflex.

But Maldacea and especially Cantalamessa did know what they were doing: they were members of the Neapolitan petite bourgeoisie and beneficiaries of Naples's new modernity, now hired as regular acts in one of the city's most well-to-do cafés. Ownership of the song—being the copyrighted author—was something to be secured, and quickly. So Johnson's cylinder was remediated into a score: Maldacea's memoirs detail how Cantalamessa asked a friend to transcribe the cylinder on the sly and, presumably with the help of this same friend, adapted the music. He then rewrote the lyrics. This was, interestingly, a reversal of the usual process by which Neapolitan songs were written at the time: one of the city's literati (journalists and columnists for the local newspapers) would pen the lyrics, which someone else would set to music. But here the music came first and involved quite a bit of adaptation (although the harmonic sequence and overall structure remain recognizable). “A risa” is a studied, catchy contraption, put together with surgical precision. Not only is it performed at a faster tempo than the original, but that song's four-bar phrases are here split into units of 2+2 bars restating the same tune over different chords, effectively doubling the amount of melodic repetition. The tune is adapted to be more shapely and mobile—fewer of Johnson's recitatives on a single note, more rotatory motions around a central pitch, giving the song a propulsive spin. Repetition and a kind of quick, circular melody are devices used to make the music as insistent and memorable as possible, as if overacting its catchiness and circulation within the score. Also, the song's upbeats are embellished and highlighted and its downbeats tripped over in syncopation—both original features of Johnson's song but here used much more aggressively and thoroughly, as was common in Neapolitan songs of that era.

It is not surprising that Cantalamessa should have contrived to make the song catchier or adapted it in some ways to emulate the more arched, ornate melodies that were, after all, proper to the Neapolitan vaudeville style in which he operated. Comparing original and contrafact helps us to understand what it meant for Johnson's sung laughter to pass into a Neapolitan setting and, more specifically, what, in Cantalamessa's and his collaborators' ears, was the coveted thing in Johnson's song, the core that needed to be appropriated. The proper of "A risa"—its text, its surgically enhanced catchiness, even its score—tells us that that thing was transmission itself. Cantalamessa stole "The Laughing Song" because he heard, in that particular song, the possibility of enacting a kind of profitable sonic contagion. "A risa" is a song about the transmissibility of Johnson's laughter, and it works because laughter and choleric contagion were part of a live network of signifiers connecting subalternity, race, health, and international commerce.

As we saw earlier, Ranajit Guha reflected on this ideology of contagion as a means by which British colonial bureaucracy dismissed mutinies as mere flare-ups of pathologies rather than planned, reasoned, and reasonable responses to oppression. For hegemonic forces, such thoughts of the subaltern were like a contagion: spontaneous, pathological, and dangerous, but mindless, like a natural disaster. (Of course, the idea that ecosystems are mindless is also a legacy of extractive colonial ecologies.) Guha, however, believed that subaltern people can be understood on their own terms and that ideologies of contagion can be cast off quickly once the dynamics of oppression and rebellion are better understood. Let's put aside the age-old question of whether the subaltern can "speak"—or be interpellated and heard clearly by well-meaning members of the hegemony, provided they are armed with sufficient documentation and adequately moral listening practices. We might instead wonder how the so-called unintelligibility of the subaltern has survived beyond its origin as a distorted colonial appraisal of indigeneity. How is such unintelligibility stored, reified, and capitalized on in ways that render subalterns perhaps less capable of and disincentivized from accounting for themselves as reasonable beings? How did subaltern minorities at a global scale come to actively represent themselves as contagious, mindless, and racialized laughers? What I hope to have shown through this history of contagious laughter is that contagion wasn't just an ideology of subalternity but also one of the key ideologies of successful capital. Combined with late nineteenth-century contagion, laughter made for a protean sound caught between increasing profit and devastating sickness and gave a name and a sound to a particular form of modern unthought. Thus, exhibitors celebrated the contagiousness of laughing songs as a positive feature, not a frightening occurrence, proof that colonial markets were gloriously operative. "A risa" is as much about choleric subalternity in Naples as it is about internationally circulating songs and the markets they opened up: Cantalamessa left for a Latin American tour shortly after recording the song on wax cylinders

and then discs for the Società di fonotipia italiana—and its convulsive laughter, which stops at neither hunger nor despair, was his passport. Raza Kolb's work, as we have seen, argues that the Islamophobic explanation of cholera's spread as being due to the hajj was, in part, a way of papering over how it followed colonial transport and British commercial routes—a willful suppression of the connection between epidemics and international capital. Such repressed connections are not too far beneath the surface in the history of laughing songs: there, the contagiousness of a laugh meant moneymaking, the reproduction of sound, and the sickness of being racialized all at once.