

HUMORWORK, FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY, AND UNSTABLE POLITICS

by

AMY BILLINGSLEY

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Amy Billingsley

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Philosophy by:

Bonnie Mann	Chairperson
Beata Stawarska	Core Member
Delia Chiaro	Core Member
Michael J. Stern	Institutional Representative

and

Janet Woodruff-Borden	Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
-----------------------	----------------------------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Amy Billingsley

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This dissertation examines humor as a situated practice of reappropriation and transformation undertaken by a subject within a social world. I bring together insights from humor studies, philosophy of humor, and feminist philosophy (especially feminist continental philosophy) to introduce the concept of *humorwork* as an unstable political practice of reappropriating and transforming existing images, speech, and situations. I argue that humorwork is an unstable politics because the practice of reappropriation and transformation often exceeds the intentions of the subject practicing humor, taking on a continued life beyond the humorist's intentions. By focusing on the practice of humor, the subject who produces it, their social and political world, the affects circulated through political humor, and the politics of popular and scholarly discourse about humor, I push against a reductive, depoliticized concept of humor and the trivializing gesture of "it's just a joke." Instead, I argue that humorists are responsible and connected to (if not always blameable) for the social and political life of their humorwork, despite the unstable and unpredictable uptake of humor against a humorist's intentions.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Amy Billingsley

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR  
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, West Chester, PA

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, Philosophy, 2019, University of Oregon  
Graduate Certificate, Women's and Gender Studies, 2019, University of Oregon  
Master of Arts, Philosophy, 2014, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, Women's Studies, 2010, West Chester University of  
Pennsylvania  
Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, 2010, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Feminist Philosophy  
Social and Political Philosophy

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Teaching Assistant, Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon, Eugene,  
2011-2016, 2019

Teaching Assistant, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, University of  
Oregon, Eugene, 2016-2018

Graduate Assistant, Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI),  
Penn State University, State College, June 2017

### GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Women's and Gender Studies, University of  
Oregon, 2016-2018

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Philosophy, University of Oregon, 2011-2016,  
2019

Paideia Teaching Award, University of Oregon, 2016

Center for the Study of Women in Society Travel Grant, Trans Subjugated Knowledge, University of Oregon, 2016

Philosophy Matters Prize, Laughing against Patriarchy: Humor, Silence, and Feminist Resistance, University of Oregon, 2013

West Chester University Outstanding Student Award, 2010

#### PUBLICATIONS:

Marvin, Amy. "Transsexuality, the Curio, and the Transgender Tipping Point." In *Curiosity Studies: Toward a New Ecology of Knowledge*, edited by Perry Zurn and Arjun Shankar. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (Forthcoming).

Marvin, Amy. "Groundwork for Transfeminist Care Ethics: Sara Ruddick, Trans Children, and Solidarity in Dependency." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (Forthcoming). <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12448/>.

Marvin, Amy. "The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy." *Hypatia Reviews Online*. Book Review (June 2018). <http://hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/356/>.

Billingsley, Amy. "Technology and Narratives of Continuity in Transgender Experiences." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2015.1.6/>.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION:

#### LAUGHING AT MY EXPENSE:

#### PRACTICAL REFLECTIONS ON UNSTABLE HUMORWORK

##### Humor and Humorlessness among Women and Snake People

In a November 1973 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, the cover boasted pop art of a man talking to a woman about humor and feminism. The man, exhibiting a pose of aggression or stern lecturing while facing away from the magazine reader's point of view, remarks to a woman in the style of a joke, "Q. DO YOU KNOW THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT HAS NO SENSE OF HUMOR?" The woman completes the joke with her face plainly in view of the onlooker, her hair blue and her facial expression displaying a matter-of-fact calm, "A. NO...BUT HUM A FEW BARS AND I'LL FAKE IT!" The cover directly responds to charges by men that the women's movement and the women who participate in it lack humor through the interruption of his loaded question by a woman's joke, her actual practice of humor cutting through the insinuation that she lacks a sense of it. The format of the man's speech is shifted against him, his loaded "do you know" responded to by the woman as if the man had asked about some tune she is unfamiliar with rather than an attempt to force her to defend the women's movement from his charge of humorlessness. In this way, the woman's joking response cuts through the assumption of her humorlessness by using humor against the man's speech, both shifting the terms he

has set up for the discussion and bringing an actual instance of women's political humor to the center of a discussion that attempted to bracket it out.

The *Ms.* cover joke refers to an essay in the November 1973 issue of *Ms.* written by feminist professor of psychology Naomi Weisstein titled "Why We Aren't Laughing Any More." Weisstein discusses the association between the women's movement and humorlessness in a context where women are expected to constantly show good humor and pleasant laughter towards men in advertisements and in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Weisstein concludes that the problem of "humorlessness" among women and the women's movement is not the inability to practice humor but a failure to enact a specific style of humor expected of women by men, in the mode of being pleasant and charming for men.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the expectation by men and patriarchal society that women's humor be pleasing to men, Weisstein calls for a humor practiced among women and for women to push against a shared condition of powerlessness. Weisstein admires humor when it is used by marginalized groups for survival and resistance. She writes,

...people *do* laugh at their own pain. The important difference is that if they are really to find it funny, *they* have to have made the joke. Humor here, too, has a political use, but its function is reversed: it is a weapon or technique of survival used by the oppressed. It is the powerless fighting back.<sup>3</sup>

Weisstein's concern is thus not the overblown and loaded question, "Are women funny?" or "Is the women's movement humorless?" but rather the possibility that humor could be

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Weisstein, "Why We Aren't Laughing Any More." *Ms. Magazine*, November 1973, 51.

<sup>2</sup> Weisstein, 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

used on the side of the women's movement and on the side of women despite its continued use against women, even when practiced by many women among men.

Weisstein's acknowledgment that humor has often been used against women, alongside her call for a women's tradition of political humor, brings her to a complicated consideration of humor's ambivalence towards women. She laments that she knows of no comparable consistent tradition of women practicing a survival or revolutionary humor among each other like she finds in other oppressed groups such as her grandparents' Eastern European Jewish tradition. She writes, "...there may be traditions of women's humor in different social classes, ethnic groups, cultures, historical periods. But if such traditions existed or exist now, I have been denied them. I remember no redemptive or fighting humor about my condition."<sup>4</sup> Weisstein traces her personal inexperience with a women's "redemptive or fighting humor" with the frequent dispersal of women among men and under the control of men at the expense of forming a women's culture and tradition. Under these conditions of isolation and subjection, humor becomes a practice that is usually not on women's side. Weisstein emphasizes,

An independent, mocking humor is too active for the objectified role we were meant to fill. Yes, we had an obligation to laugh endlessly at men's jokes, whether or not they were funny, insulting, crude, unpleasant, stupid; yes, we were supposed to laugh at what others thought we were; yes, we were supposed to be witty and pleasing - all that is part of personal charm. But to be able to mock the requirement that we be all these things is quite a different thing.<sup>5</sup>

Though Weisstein is interested in a humor that is on the side of women as part of the women's movement, she is also wary of a history in which humor has been used as part

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 89.

of the relentless techniques of oppression holding women in subjugation to men.

Weisstein asks, “How can you trust humor when it’s used as a weapon against you?”<sup>6</sup>

She answers, hopefully, “We must reclaim our history, our rights to self-expression and collective enjoyment. We must create our own humor. The propitiating laughter, the charming smiles are over. This time, when we laugh, things are going to be funny.”<sup>7</sup>

Weisstein’s essay emphasizes a hope for a humor on the side of the women’s movement in a context where humor has often been used against women. The ambivalent relationship between women, the women’s movement, and humor has persisted for decades since the November 1973 *Ms.* article. In January 2007 essayist Christopher Hitchens wrote a polemic for *Vanity Fair* on the subject of “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” reframing his question a few paragraphs into the essay as, “Why are men, taken on average and as a whole, funnier than women?” Citing a Stanford University School of Medicine study in which men and women were presented with 70 black-and-white cartoons chosen by the researchers as a test of different sexed responses to humor, Hitchens interprets, “Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine?” But his main focus is not on the reception of humor by women, but rather on its production: “And remember, this is women when confronted with humor. Is it any wonder that they are backward in generating it?”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701/>.



When considering the production of humor, Hitchens attributes his theory that men are more aligned with humor than women, a claim he primarily supports through anecdotes, to a fundamental difference between men and women. To that end, Hitchens believes that women who produce humor tend to derive it from a source other than being women. In his own words,

Most [funny women comedians], though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three. When Roseanne stands up and tells biker jokes and invites people who don't dig her shtick to suck her dick—know what I am saying? And the Sapphic faction may have its own reasons for wanting what I want—the sweet surrender of female laughter. While Jewish humor, boiling as it is with angst and self-deprecation, is almost masculine by definition.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with women as a group for Hitchens is that fundamental sex differences direct women away from the practice of humor. Whereas men are directed towards the serious irreconcilable disparities and anguishes of life, women, according to Hitchens, are too focused on hopes and pleasantries. Hitchens writes,

Humor is part of the armor-plate with which to resist what is already farcical enough. (Perhaps not by coincidence, battered as they are by motherfucking nature, men tend to refer to life itself as a bitch.) Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is.<sup>10</sup>

Hitchens thus appeals to a fundamental sexed difference between men and women to explain why he should find the dynamic of humorous men and humorless women so inescapable: women sacrifice a clear-eyed, objective, heavy outlook towards the world

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and its inevitable suffering and inequality for a fanciful yearning for finding a fairness and sweetness through a self-deception, a curse of “their tender hearts.”<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis on a masculine, humorous embrace of ugly reality in contrast to a feminine humorlessness that aims for the delusion of fairness persists in 2010 discussions about whether humor is on the side of the “millennial” generation. In a September 2015 essay for *The Atlantic* titled “That’s Not Funny! Today’s College Students Can’t Seem to Take a Joke” journalist Caitlin Flanagan traces the epidemic of humorlessness among millennials to a socially conscious over-sensitivity that fails to understand humor.

Specifically, the problem is kindness. Flanagan writes,

The students’ determination to avoid booking any acts that might conceivably hurt the feelings of a classmate was in its way quite admirable. They seemed wholly animated by kindness and by an open-mindedness to the many varieties of the human experience. But the flip side of this sensitivity is the savagery with which reputations and even academic careers can be destroyed by a single comment—perhaps thoughtless, perhaps misinterpreted, perhaps (God help you) intended as a joke—that violates the values of the herd.<sup>12</sup>

This over-sensitive herd mentality of kindness, Flanagan continues, is at odds with the more serious moments that comedy is capable of. Watching a now-sensitized comedian perform for a humorless millennial college audience, Flanagan misses the absence of heavier, darker humor. She explains,

Those jokes include observations about power and sex and even rape—and each, in its complicated way, addresses certain ugly and possibly immutable truths. But they are jokes, not lessons from the gender-studies classroom. Their first objective is to be funny, not to service any philosophical ideal. They go where comedy

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Caitlin Flanagan. “That’s Not Funny!: Today’s College Students Can’t Seem to Take a Joke,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/>.

always wants to go, to the darkness, and they sucker-punch you with a laugh when you don't think you should laugh.<sup>13</sup>

The question of women's allegiance or discord with humor, stretching from individual women to the women's movement and the gender studies classroom, continues to inform discussions of who has abandoned humor and who has recruited it to their side.

As Weisstein notes in her *Ms.* essay, the split between men on the side of humor and women against humor is not set in stone, regardless of whatever anecdotes Hitchens can throw at women. A 2018 piece in *The New Yorker* by humor writer and stand-up comedian Ginny Hogan echoes Hitchens' essay with the headline "Women Just Aren't Funny" just before tearing apart his circumstantial anecdotal style through humorous satire.<sup>14</sup> The popular women's and feminist satire site *Reductress* will be adapted to late-night television for Comedy Central airing 2018 or 2019.<sup>15</sup> Comedian Michelle Wolf received mass media attention for her humor targeting the Trump administration at the 2018 White House Correspondents Dinner, resulting in her public condemnation by the President and members of his cabinet for going too far.<sup>16</sup> Even the humorless millennials have somehow taken up humor against the articles written about their failure as a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ginny Hogan, "Women Just Aren't Funny," *The New Yorker*, March 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/women-just-arent-funny/>.

<sup>15</sup> Devon Maloney, "Perfect Women's Satire Site Reductress is Getting a Comedy Central Show," *The Verge*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/13/17458658/reductress-comedy-central-show-abby-elliott/>.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Manchester. "White House Press On Defensive After Michelle Wolf Torches Trump, Sanders." *The Hill*. April 29, 2018. <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/385409-white-house-press-on-defensive-after-comedian-torches-trump-huckabee-sanders/>.

generation. In 2015, in response to a cottage industry of disingenuous articles lamenting the faults of the millennial generation, coder Eric Bailey created a Web browser extension that, when downloaded, changes the word “Millennial” into “Snake People.” Bailey was inspired by the frequency with which thinkpieces characterize an entire generation as “this weird, dehumanized, alien phenomenon,” using the label “Snake People” to transform anti-Millennial essays into humor against their own intentions.<sup>17</sup> Humor’s sides are not as well defined as some essayists such as Hitchens and Flanagan insist.

The humor of replacing “millennials” with “Snake People” also went beyond its creator’s and users’ intentions. In addition to changing Millennials to Snake People, the web extension replaced commonly used phrases in articles about Millennials to fit the absurd Snake People theme. For example, it changed the name of the 2011 movement Occupy Wall Street to the “Great Ape-Snake War” and the Great Recession to the “Time of Shedding and Cold Rocks.” In a March 2018 essay published by the New York Times, a mistake made it to print due to an editor who used the extension. The essay, titled, “President Trump’s Exaggerated and Misleading Claims on Trade,” now contained a printed sentence reading, “America’s trade deficit narrowed dramatically during the Time of Shedding and Cold Rocks.” New York Times editor Justin Bank admitted he was at fault, suggesting to his followers on Twitter, “Pro tip: Disable your ‘Millennials to Snake People’ extension when copying and pasting.” When asked to comment about his

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<sup>17</sup> David Scharfenberg, “Innovation of the Week: Millennials to Snake People,” *The Boston Globe*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2018/03/09/innovation-week-millennials-snake-people/CTpwKyBsxOwwN4mhQmUoWJ/story.html/>.

creation finding its way into the New York Times several years later, Bailey responded mirthfully, “Computers were a mistake.”<sup>18</sup> Whether said to be on the side of women or men, or one generation or another, humor maintains an element of instability that can lead to unintended results.

These discussions about humorous groups in contrast to humorless groups are discussions about the social and political dynamics of humor as it relates to gender and power. Though the phrase “it’s just a joke” or “lighten up” are often deployed by individuals to excuse a given joke from the charge of harm, or to paint another individual or group as oversensitive, this phrase is deployed in a larger context where some social and political groups are associated more with an affinity for humor, and others are depicted as humorless or even dangerous to the continuation of humor as a human practice. The larger social and political backdrop of humor I am interested in focusing on in this dissertation is not only the different practices of humor by enfranchised and disenfranchised groups, but also political discussions about who is humorous and who is humorless.

Beyond this, I am also interested in the ways in which humor fails to totally lie upon the side of individuals and groups who practice it, regardless of whether they are seen to have more of an affinity for its practice. For this reason, I focus on the subject of unstable politics, through which humor can be practiced with social and political aims and effects, but also frequently thwart the intentions and expectations of people and

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<sup>18</sup> Rhett Jones, “New York Times Issues Correction After Editor Fails to Turn Off ‘Millennials to Snake People’ Browser Extension,” *Gizmodo*, March 7, 2018, <https://gizmodo.com/new-york-times-issues-correction-after-editor-fails-to-1823587138/>.

groups who take it up. Considering the instability of humor as a political practice not only is necessary to understand the many ways its thwarts expectations and results in continued humorous practice, but also for centering a mode of potential feminist practice that takes up this instability. As an unstable politics, I argue that humor is a practice that enables a distinct evasion of speaking on the terms set by oppressive systems to instead remake them, carrying the risk that this instability will be used against the subject who takes it on as a practice. I thus am hopeful that a discussion of humor as a feminist political practice will lead to more discussions about the potential and risks for indirect, tricky, and playful feminist political practices.

#### With Laughter on My Side

Before diving more into the discussion of humor as an unstable political practice, it is useful to draw out the relationship between humor and instability. For an introduction to this, I turn to Søren Kierkegaard as a philosopher who has sometimes been given the title of “funniest philosopher” while simultaneously directing readers to the ambiguities of laughter of humor. Thomas C. Oden, editor of *The Humor of Kierkegaard*, writes, “Who might reasonably be nominated as the funniest philosopher of all time?...I provisionally declare Søren Abaye Kierkegaard (despite his enduring stereotype as the melancholy, despairing Dane) as, among philosophers, the most amusing.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this affinity between Kierkegaard and humor, he often emphasizes humor’s ambivalence in relation to human life. In *Either/Or*’s first section Kierkegaard

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas C. Oden, introduction to *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

writes from the pseudonym-character of A, named by Kierkegaard's other pseudonym-character Victor Eremita from the book's Preface. Eremita associates A's writings with "a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life," associating his soul with a "wild unruliness" that differs from the second half of the book's writings from pseudonym-character B (also named by Eremita).<sup>20</sup> This multiplicity of aesthetic existential positions does not clearly hang together as an elaborated theory of laughter, with Eremita suggesting that no coherent presentation of A's esthetic extremes are possible.

Regardless, A presents two intriguing aphorisms on laughter and its potential instabilities.

In A's opening section "Diapsalmata," a word that harkens to both Psalms and repetition, A describes a crowd laughing in response to a clown,

In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed - amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke.<sup>21</sup>

This apocalyptic vision of laughter emphasizes one potential instability of humor and its subject. The clown, often taken to embody the comic but also its synthesis with the tragic as the tragicomic (consider the abundance of the sad clown), is so associated with a comic situation and reception that the fire around the audience is interpreted as but a joke. In this context, it is the situation of the clown vis-a-vis joke-telling that leads to misinterpretation, as his words of warning are rendered ineffective and instead interpreted in the less straightforward and direct mode of the joke.

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<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part 1, ed. and trans. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

This misinterpretation, occurring at the site of clown and audience, is then extended to the “wits and wags,” the tellers of jokes and humorists, who threaten to end the world by losing sight of a world-view beyond their comic position and practice. A, resonating laughter with the tragicomic through its associations with weeping<sup>22</sup> and with revenge as a response to rage and contempt,<sup>23</sup> has a tendency to laugh at the world around him. In one passage, A suggests that he has been unable to stop laughing upon learning what “the meaning of life” means to his society.<sup>24</sup> A’s laughing response to society, reflecting critiques found in Kierkegaard’s other books such as *The Present Age*, has the potential for not only world-ending jest but also serves as social critique. But though A, who is quite a wit and a wag, acknowledges the potential risk of engaging with the world as a joke, he soon finds himself in a characteristic mode of personal despair about the results of laughter:

Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way.<sup>25</sup>

There is a lingering matter of A’s earlier association between laughter and weeping and here the setup of a diverging choice between the two, but taking seriously Emerita’s claim that the esthetic position need not hang together coherently when articulating itself, laughter takes up a mode of not only the specter of world-ending misinterpretation

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38.



through jest, but also personal regret. Here the comic is not only a site for laughing-at or scorn, but also the unstable situation of misinterpretation and negative results inclusive of both the personal and the larger world.

In another passage on the gods' laughter, A takes this potential instability of laughter and the comic in a more positive (but nonetheless tricky) direction by describing his wish for laughter to always be on his side. A writes,

Something marvelous has happened to me. I was transported to the seventh heaven. There sat all the gods assembled. As a special dispensation, I was granted the favor of making a wish. "What do you want," asked Mercury. "Do you want youth, or beauty, or power, or a long life, or the most beautiful girl, or anyone of the other glorious things we have in the treasure chest? Choose-but only one thing." For a moment I was bewildered; then I addressed the gods, saying: My esteemed contemporaries, I choose one thing - that I may always have the laughter on my side. Not one of the gods said a word; instead, all of them began to laugh. From that I concluded that my wish was granted and decided that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste, for it would indeed have been inappropriate to reply solemnly: It is granted to you.<sup>26</sup>

Here, A has shifted from laughter's power ending the world to a "dispensation" and wish for laughter's allegiance that he is to receive from the most exalted regions of heaven. Instead of simply having his wish confirmed through direct acknowledgment, the gods respond to A's request with laughter.

A has concluded that his wish was successfully granted, and interprets the laughing response as a fitting affirmation, but there is a lingering ambiguity in the passage.<sup>27</sup> If A has previously associated laughter with scorn, revenge, derision, and a refusal to take situations (such as a fire in a movie theater) as straightforward, A's

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> This ambiguity was initially pointed out to me by Professor Michael Stern at the University of Oregon. Fall 2013.

conclusion that the gods granted his wish is potentially erroneous, since it is unclear what the gods' laughter entails. Certainly, the gods could be affirming A through the laughter he so desires to be on his side, but the gods could also be laughing at the person who requests laughter be on his side in a way that denies his request for laughter, or the gods may be acknowledging the uncertainty of laughter's allegiance. Perhaps the only laughter that is on A's side is the laugh that meets him with scorn rather than the laugh he directs at his society.

What it means for laughter to be on A's side is also ambiguous, given that Kierkegaard's text in general places A in a limited esthetic situation, and Kierkegaard associates A's relationship with laughter as a relationship with contradiction. In his notes, Kierkegaard states that A assumes a "total break with actuality" through his "mental depression and its dominance over actuality."<sup>28</sup> In his notes on the gods' laughter passage, Kierkegaard writes,

"The last διαψ. [diaps.] tells us how a life such as this has found its satisfactory expression in laughter. He pays his debt to actuality by means of laughter, and now everything takes place within this contradiction. His enthusiasm is too intense, his sympathy too deep, his love too burning, his heart too warm to be able to express himself in any other way than by contradiction."<sup>29</sup>

For A, if he truly was granted laughter on his side, laughter does not necessarily serve "on his side" in any sense of control or alliance, but rather results from the situation of his continuing subjective break with actuality. In this vein, A's laughter marks his navigation

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

of his space of continuing subjective contradiction, not a clear tool for him to wield for some sense of resolution or absolution.

In this vein, it is fitting to link Kierkegaard's passage of gods' laughter, which is the final passage in the *Diapsalmata*, with the first passage, as Kierkegaard's notes insist "The first  $\delta\iota\alpha\psi$  is really the task of the entire work, which is not resolved until the last words of the sermon."<sup>30</sup> In the opening passage, A likens the poet's work to the production of sweet music through a suffering that is missed and misunderstood by the public who enjoys the poetry.<sup>31</sup> Because poetry is such a torture and a conduit for misunderstanding, A concludes, "...I would rather be a swineherd out on Amager and be understood by swine than be a poet and be misunderstood by people."<sup>32</sup> If we connect the last passage with the first, as Kierkegaard suggests, one potential resolution to poetry's misunderstood pain that has been found by A is his turn to laughter. But seen through the clown passage, laughter is no less likely to be misinterpreted, and A continues to navigate a situation of contradiction as laughter lingers only ambiguously "on his side".

Kierkegaard's passages on laughter indicate that the site of humor is a site of ambiguity and surprise, even when associated with the laughter of the gods or the role of the clown. When humor seems to be on your side, the laughter still may be at your expense, as with the ambiguous laughter of the gods. Additionally, a humorous position and practice may result in unintended or even dangerous results, as with the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

misunderstanding between the clown, the audience, and the fire that likely consumed them. The allegiance of humor is thus never fully granted, or at least never granted without the risk of backfiring, as it is always capable of unanticipated results.

Considering this instability of humor provides a challenge to discussions about the usage of humor for oppression and amelioration. If humor is only ever ambiguously on anyone's side, then it is important to consider how humor might take on a political life that exceeds an association between humorfulness, humorlessness, and empowered or disempowered social groups. In this dissertation I will both consider and push against accounts that reduce humor to a calculable practice in the context of its social and political practice, arguing instead that humor is an unstable politics that requires a consideration of the social, political, emotional, and embodied dynamics that contribute to the practice of humor both through subjects and beyond their intentions. Humor is thus a practice that carries a specific power of indirect engagement, but also a continued risk of backfire and unexpected results.

### Reflections on Laughing Time Away and Going Viral

Over the course of writing this dissertation, I too have attempted to inhabit the space of the clown and see what happens when I take up laughter "on my side." In this dissertation I will often focus on the space where theory informs concrete examples, and concrete examples inform theory to explain key nuances of humorwork such as the techniques and significance of its practice, its relationship to a power-laden social world, and its potential unruliness and ways of bending back against the humor-making subject. I am also writing from a place of hands-on experience with humorwork informed by the

many ways I have personally and politically attempted to create humor to share with specific online communities and especially the mass social media platform Twitter. I thus find it helpful in this moment to reflect upon my own practice of humor, and consider what I have learned over the course of three years of attempting to practice as a more public humorist beyond just living as a funny person day-by-day.

I use the phrase humorwork, introduced in Chapter V, to center humor as a practice tied to subjects who inhabit a social and political world. Whereas mainstream approaches in humor studies focus on humor as a depoliticized linguistic structure, I instead use humorwork to emphasize that humor in many social and political contexts cannot be separated from the relationship between a subject and the political world in which they live. I also use humorwork to take up insights from humor studies scholars who focus on the operations of humor to consider how people practice humor politically rather than focusing on laughter as a locus of resistance. Through this focus, I am interested in considering humorwork as a way that people practice humor to indirectly reappropriate and transform words, phrases, images, and situations for political ends. Though I emphasize in Chapter VI that humorwork can be practiced for both the aims of furthering oppression and seeking amelioration for marginalized groups, I conclude in Chapter VII that the practice of humor, even though tied to a subject, also can take on a life beyond their expectations and intentions. I thus introduce humorwork as a complicated field of practice commonly used in political life that aims to indirectly transform political speech, images, and situations from multiple vantage points, while also maintaining the instability that this work can go awry.

Many of my insights into humorwork have occurred first-hand through practice. Since summer 2015 I have not only conducted literature reviews, planned arguments, revised those arguments, and shared them for others through presentations. I have also attempted to hone my own craft of humor, see if I could improve my ability to make jokes, and consider the meaning and risks of sharing my humor through direct humor practice. To that end, the simplest way to practice humor in a social context without spending too many of the hours I needed for writing, teaching, and (admittedly too much) academic service was to create my own humorous Twitter account. As a social media platform, Twitter is considered to be a form of “microblogging,” meaning that rather than writing out longer essays like those found in blogging and online thinkpieces, the platform is instead constrained to mostly humorous text and jokes, humorous images and memes, and humorous interactions with others. Specifically, Twitter has a 280 character limit (when I started it was 140) with the ability to “thread” posts (called “tweets”) together into connected statements, resulting in a platform that favors pithiness over absolute clarity and comprehensiveness. Though on the negative end this may encourage Twitter to often be a more shallow platform conducive to shouting and misunderstandings, the character limit also makes it especially interesting for considering the constrained craft of humor as it is signal-boosted to large audiences, shared or ignored based on this uptake, and frequently misunderstood or reappropriated through humorous possibilities.

I began my account by simply choosing a niche that I thought would be a good fit for “writing what I know,” so to speak, through the medium of humor. I chose to write jokes from the standpoint of being a trans academic, hoping to be relatable to both

academics, people interested in theory beyond the academy, and trans people. When I started my account, I adopted the anonymous handle Trans Lady Academic and the tag @transtheory, already hinting at a humorous juxtaposition between the history of theory happening about and beyond the access of trans people, in contrast to my humor style which sometimes dips into complicated theory references but mostly stays at the level of mundane experience. Since then, I have deanonymized my account and taken up the tag @amymarv, and though the online space is still distinct from my in-person personality and comportments towards others, it has added an interesting dynamic where who I am becomes more involved in different uptakes and interactions with my humor. Practicing humor has indicated to me that it is important to pay attention not only to the process and skill through which I make it. It is also crucial to consider the social world within which I practice humor, its uptake by potential situated interlocutors, and my continued involvement with the life of a joke as an embodied, emotional subject. This is one of the main points my dissertation will make, namely that attempts to depoliticize, desituate, and reduce humor from its social and political context fail to account for the complexity of humor as a practice.

My experience with practicing humor, as emphasized by Kierkegaard, frequently yields unclear results including receptions of my humor by others that I did not initially anticipate. Sometimes I have made a joke and someone connected with it, but because they interpreted the joke in a way that I did not anticipate and may not even understand. In this way, the construction and ongoing life of a joke that I have shared is not some rigid calculable process that starts with the creation of a joke and ends with sharing it, but rather an ongoing situation that may thwart my intentions and expectations. As I have

moved more towards both practicing humor on Twitter and expressing more serious and often professional thoughts, I have also had to deal with the complications of sometimes having my non-humorous expressions interpreted as humor, and sometimes my humor interpreted as more straightforward non-humorous expressions. This is another key emphasis in my dissertation. In addition to situating humor in its social and political context, it is also necessary to consider the ways in which the practice of humor is often unstable, resulting in misinterpretations, jokes that backfire, and results that were not anticipated by the person who made the humor. Though humor often carries on a life beyond the subject who initially produced it, it also remains connected with its creator, sometimes even twisting into a creation they no longer recognize or understand.

These instabilities of practicing humor were a key part of my experience with making and sharing a viral meme on May 7, 2018. Rather than create a whole new framework for my joke, I instead took up a template I had occasionally seen several people base their jokes on. In this case it was a reappropriation of an image of a man in a lab coat and glasses gesturing towards a yellow butterfly and asking, “Is this a pigeon?” taken from the Japanese anime television series *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird* from the 1990s. The image had circulated across the Internet for over a decade, but reached peak popularity in May 2018 in a specific form focusing on misrecognition. Focusing on the funny misrecognition of a butterfly as a pigeon, heightened by the man’s appearance as an expert through his lab coat, people on the Internet started labeling the man, the object he is referring to, and the mistaken identification.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jacob Shamslan, “The 'Is This a Pigeon?' Meme is Super Relatable for People Who Have No Idea What They're Doing,” *Insider*, May 7, 2018,



One example of this was one iteration of the meme labeling the scientist “Me,” the butterfly he is gesturing towards as “refreshing Twitter every two minutes in an hour,” and his misrecognition as “Is this working on my book.”<sup>34</sup> Another by poet J. Jennifer Espinoza takes a more existential approach labeling the mistaken man as “my body,” the butterfly gestured to as “any slightly uncomfortable physical sensation,” and the misrecognition as “Is this death.”<sup>35</sup> The meme has also taken the form of emphasizing a political misrecognition, as seen in a version labeling the man as “straights” (referring to straight people), the misrecognized object as “being asked not to use slurs,” and the misrecognition as “Is this oppression?”.<sup>36</sup> In addition to self-referential humor, the meme template has thus also fostered a deeper focus on the difficulty of being a body in space, and matters of political privilege and resulting misunderstanding, indicating the potential communication through the meme that retains its humor but is also not simply reducible to “just a joke.”

While teaching my Transgender Studies course, I was interested in discussing the subject of backlash with students, and found the meme to be a fun way to address some of the reactions to trans lives that we encountered in the ballooned-up fears of news

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<http://www.thisisinsider.com/is-this-a-pigeon-butterfly-anime-meme-calls-out-confused-people-2018-5/>.

<sup>34</sup> Catapult, Twitter post, May 2, 2018, 9:08 a.m., <https://twitter.com/CatapultStory/status/991711108284071938/>.

<sup>35</sup> J. Jennifer Espinoza, Twitter post, May 1, 2018, 11:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/sadqueer4life/status/991379614147559424/>.

<sup>36</sup> Emmerliss. April 9 2018, 3:12a.m., <pic.twitter.com/vYrRowNjFY/>.

personality Tucker Carlson,<sup>37</sup> the outcries of media personality Alex Jones<sup>38</sup> and academic personality Jordan Peterson,<sup>39</sup> and the reverence for science over politics emphasized by Alice Dreger.<sup>40</sup> In response I tried my hand at my own butterfly misrecognition joke, labeling the man as “cis [non-trans] society,” the misunderstood object as “trans people having a backbone about anything at all,” and the misrecognition as “Is this destroying my free speech?” My audience on Twitter is primarily trans people and their allies, so this was mostly intended as a shared source of humor for them and for my class based on the topic we were discussing. Despite studying humor myself, the uptake of a humorous post on the Internet is heavily contingent based on time of day, day of the week, who happens to be around, and what the mood of the day is in various circles, so I tend to think some jokes I make have the elements to go “viral,” but it is never a sure thing, at least from my platform of a mere few-thousand. Though I have passed 1000 likes (a unit of Internet community approval) on Twitter posts before, this particular butterfly meme iteration that I made took off beyond my expectations (though by no means even close to the high numbers some posts get), currently sitting at around

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<sup>37</sup> Tucker Carlson, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, “California Nursing Homes in the Middle of Transgender Pronoun Fight,” aired August 28, 2017, on Fox News.

<sup>38</sup> Alex Jones, *The Alex Jones Show*, “Thursday 2/8/18,” aired February 8, 2018 on InfoWars.

<sup>39</sup> Jordan Peterson, *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, “Genders, Rights and Freedom of Speech,” panel hosted by Steve Paikin, Ontario Educational Communications Authority, aired October 27, 2016 on TVOntario, <https://www.tvo.org//video/programs/the-agenda-with-steve-paikin/genders-rights-and-freedom-of-speech/>.

<sup>40</sup> Alice Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and One Scholar's Search for Justice* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

13k likes and 4.1k shares, including a life beyond my initial posting (such as screenshots shared on other social media communities) that I cannot fully track.

Resonating with a lot of people both in my direct following audience and their circles caused the meme to be increasingly shared beyond these circles, entering a sphere of reception that I did not expect and for whom the meme was not immediately prepared to meet through shared understanding. Already, I had taken an approach that would minimize potential misunderstandings or disingenuous engagements with my critical humorous emphasis on a common pattern of reaction to trans people trying to find a place in public (and private) life. For example, I made sure to label the man of misrecognition as “cis society” rather than “cis people” to avoid the objection that I was making an overgeneralization that unfairly included too many individuals.<sup>41</sup> Though I understood myself to be operating in the realm of humor, I was also aware that I was also engaging critically with the world in a way that is susceptible to challenge and even harassment if I attract too much attention, although I was luckily not brought into the latter situation in this specific case.

Reactions to my viral humor, though largely positive, also brought some negative responses. Usually I ignore these, especially when they are unclear or miss my point, but since this was my first time going properly (if modestly) viral I wanted to see what would happen if I engaged and responded. Some of these I met with humor. For example, when one person said the image should be flipped, by which they meant that trans people are always quick to jump on a free speech defense of anything, I responded by taking up the

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<sup>41</sup> Amy Marvin, Twitter post, May 7, 2018, 10:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/amyrmav/status/993536368197255168/>.

ambiguity of “flipping the image” and used an Internet browser photo editing program to invert the image and reverse it as if seen in a mirror rather than coherently switching the meme’s labels as requested. I was also asked to defend my “argument,” attempting to strip my meme from a more indirect humorous realm of approximation and exaggeration and hyperbole and play, instead attempting to engage with my modest meme as if I had fully argued my case through a set of premises. Despite the situation from which I made my humor and the shared understanding I drew from for my audience, my humor was taken up and engaged with in ways that did not match my intentions or expectations.

The instability of my meme’s life was not necessarily tied to negative interpretations, but also more neutral or positive reactions from others. The UK website *Pink News* wrote an entire piece on my meme, initially celebrating its contribution but also making sure to pair it with trans-skeptical conversations in the UK that I did not have in mind when I made my piece of humor. The title already began this distortion, describing my work with the headline, “This viral meme explains exactly what it’s like to be transgender and proud.” Though this headline is positioning itself as supportive, it mischaracterizes my humor, which is not focused on the subject of pride, let alone explaining exactly what that is like. Though I am briefly quoted (and was not quoted at all when the article was initially posted), the article also frames my humor as in reaction to studies showing trans people have the brains of the gender they “identify as” (I am vocally against these sorts of brain-sex theories), the *Genderquake* series in the UK (which I have not been able to watch yet as of writing this dissertation), gender critical or anti-trans radical feminist thinkers and activists in the UK (who I was not thinking of when making the meme), and Australian academic Sheila Jeffreys (who I was not

responding to at all).<sup>42</sup> The original situation of my humor gets elided as a different media context and a different international location takes up my humor as positive but different from specific focus on appeals to free speech as a form of reductive backlash in class. In the context of the news beat and reporters attempting to find viral humor to write about, even under the positive (but distorting) lens of mainstream LGBT news media, I again find myself and my humor misrecognized, my whole experience of going viral refracted in the prism of a butterfly misrecognition meme.

Despite the frequent misrecognition and misinterpretation of my humorwork, it is difficult for me to separate myself from the ongoing life of the joke, as if it was a self-contained object that no longer has anything to do with me after I released it into the world. I found myself constantly perplexed, uncomfortable, and hesitant about the uptake of my humor, and frustrated with people who did not understand my intentions, all the while unable to shake my connection to the ways in which interpretations and interactions went awry. Through practicing humor I was thus also caught up in the life of my humor beyond me, with my emotions heavily invested in my confrontation with uptakes of my humor that I did not understand or agree with.

Beyond Kierkegaard, but attuned to his insights on the difficulty of having humor on one's side, this is the complex and unstable situation from which I understand practicing humor. First, humor is a way through which I engage with the world and others rather than distance myself, addressing current events in my own life and beyond

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<sup>42</sup> Josh Jackman, "This Viral Meme Explains Exactly What It's Like to Be Transgender and Proud," *Pink News*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/05/08/this-viral-meme-explains-exactly-what-its-like-to-be-transgender-and-proud/>.

through a practice of reappropriating and transforming images and phrases, moving through the possibilities of language and images beyond direct interpretation. Second, I practice humor not only through a series of calculable processes upon language and images, but also within a broader social context including the world I live in with others and the social and political histories and present informing this world. Third, my use of humor brings me into a situation of instability in relation to the ongoing life of the joke, which I remain in contact with despite all manner of different interpretations, misunderstandings, and misrecognitions against my intentions. If humor is ever on my side, it is not on my side in the sense of ownership or victory, but rather through bringing me into this situation of humorous uncertainty.

#### In on the Joke: Situating Humor

Despite these insights from my everyday offline and online practice of humor, considerations of the subject, as I detail in this dissertation, are often quick to distance humor as a practice from the social and political world within which it is created and shared among situated subjects. In more popular discussions of humor, it is often distanced from engagement with the world through the insistence that it operates as “just a joke” or “just intended to be funny” or “not serious.” More scholarly discussions of humor often focus on it in relation to the specific mechanics, processes, and techniques of how humor operates at the expense of situating it within the subjects who produce it and who are situated in a specific location in relation to power. These narrowed lenses through which to understand humor often bracket out the more situated practice of humor

in relation to the world, making it difficult to center a social and political understanding of humor.

In this dissertation, I argue for a feminist understanding of humor as a situated practice of reappropriation and transformation undertaken by a subject within a social world. When related to politics, as it often is, humor takes the distinct form of an unstable politics because indirect methods of transforming existing images, speech, and situations also open practices of humor up to interpretations and effects outside the scope of its intentions. I distinguish my feminist social and political philosophy of humor from other feminist approaches that focus on laughter by instead focusing on practice. To that end, I refer to the situated, unstable practice of humor as humorwork. This feminist understanding of humorwork is not only helpful by considering feminist humor as an important social and political practice, but also by directly countering attempts to depoliticize humor and excuse its role in buttressing the everyday life of counter-ameliorative power. By focusing on the process of humor, the subject who produces it, their social and political world, the affects circulated through political humor, and the politics of popular and scholarly discourse around humor, I hope to push against a reductive understanding of humor, the trivializing gesture of “it’s just a joke,” and towards an approach that continues to hold subjects responsible and connected to (if not always blameable) for the social and political life of their humorwork, despite its many instabilities in uptake and continued transformation.

Chapters II and III engage with contemporary developments in humor studies and philosophy of humor to argue that they have bracketed out or reduced social and political concerns about humor, arguing instead for a more complex theory of the political effects

humor in public. In Chapter II, “The Balderdash of the Other Woman: Exiling Feminist Philosophy from Jest,” I begin by focusing on contemporary interdisciplinary humor studies. I argue that despite the wide range of approaches that humor studies offers, the field primarily focuses on the mechanics of humor or the ineffectiveness of humor upon the world with the results of bracketing out social and political considerations of humor. In Chapter III, “Laughing and Not Being Normative: Humor as a Social and Political Restriction of Public Space,” I focus more specifically on the history of philosophical approaches to humor and the attempt to divide theories of humor into different and often competing categories. I argue the focus on incongruity, initially proposed by philosophers and then taken up as a primary explanation of humor by both philosophers and the wider field of humor studies, has bracketed out theories of social and political humor with the effect of philosophers proposing a limited, depoliticized individualist ethics of humor. In contrast, I argue for an updated theory of social and political humor as a potential restriction of public space. This approach focuses on the role of humor and laughter in silencing and shutting down appeals by marginalized people to existence in public space through the humorous circulation of dominant norms.

Chapter IV and Chapter V focus specifically on updating feminist theories of laughter to encompass a more specific focus on humor in practice, which I call humorwork. In Chapter IV, “From Laughter to Practice: An Argument for a Concrete Feminist Philosophy of Humor,” I bring together the rich process-focused approach of humor studies with the political focus on humor in feminist theories of laughter to argue for a feminist theory focused on specific, concrete practices of humor. I articulate this theory further in Chapter V, “Medusa’s War Machine: Kristeva, Wittig, and Humorwork



in Feminist Practice,” describing humorwork as a practice through which existing words, phrases, images, and situations can have their elements reappropriated and transformed, representing an indirect engagement. I argue that humorwork encompasses a range of potential activities with different effects upon its subject, ranging from political to banal and bizarre or absurdist.

Chapters VI and VII work towards complicating the ways in which humor can be taken up and the instabilities latent in humorwork as a political practice. In Chapter VI, “Humor as Counterameliorative Practice,” focuses on both the practice of humorwork as it is used for oppressive rather than feminist aims and the affective life of humor in political circulation. In contrast to more individual and stereotype-focused theories of racist humor, I argue for a more complicated emphasis on racist humorwork as it circulates negative affects stuck to bodies in a racist social world. The practice of racist (and more broadly counterameliorative) humorwork thus both draws from ongoing racism in society but also the affective life of this racism. This indicates that humorwork is not necessarily a feminist act, but also that even antifeminist and racist practices of humorwork still operate in an engaged, social and political world in which affects are circulated.

Chapter VII, “Humorwork as Unstable Politics,” goes beyond the complicated reality that humor can be used for many political ends by emphasizing that attempts to practice political humorwork often go awry and against intentions when taken up and circulated by others. Humor is thus not only a site of calculation, but also a complex situation, in which an embodied subject who creates humor is continuously tied to the often unstable life of their work. I conclude that humorwork represents an unstable

politics that can be taken up for feminist aims of amelioration even as it engages more indirectly than direct debate or action, and remains unstable in relation to its reception and potential humorous transformation in circulation by others.

By focusing on humor, I am interested more broadly in an approach to feminist social and political philosophy that center the potential instabilities, misunderstandings, and unseen transformations possible in feminist activism and political life more broadly. Humorwork is a field of practice that depends upon the many open, indirect avenues of engagement in political life when they are taken up and recast, and it is important to consider the possibilities and effects of more indirect, unstable forms of politics for a comprehensive understanding of power, oppression, and resistance. I am also hoping for a refined understanding and appreciation for the position of the feminist humorist, who I return to in the Conclusion, who is capable of a complex, tricky, and often unstable engagement with a world shaped by patriarchy through a refusal to engage directly on the terms of the world projected by dominant social norms. By doing this, I also hope this dissertation makes my own experience practicing humor as a feminist philosopher more intelligible and compelling. Having humor “on my side,” as indicated by my experience going viral, is rife with instability in outcome and effects but also allows me an expanded range of possibilities through which I can interact both critically and with others in on the joke.

CHAPTER II  
THE BALDERDASH OF THE OTHER WOMAN:  
EXILING CONTINENTAL FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY FROM JEST

Author Meets Comics: Interventions of a Humorless Feminist Millennial

In a 2014 special titled “I’m Sorry You Feel That Way,” comedian Bill Burr, maintaining an affinity with the prickly pod inhabiting his surname, focuses his ire on the humorless masses. Specifically, the Burr attempts to provide a warning against hastily shutting down “offensive” jokes by instead discussing the technical merits of the joke. The specific joke he considers was a single sentence written by a waitress on a bar’s chalkboard, proclaiming, “We like our beer the way we like our violence: domestic.” Burr defends the joke by emphasizing its successful linguistic construction, insisting, “That’s a great fuckin’ joke. There is zero fat on that. You need every word of that joke. You take one word out, it doesn’t work. Perfect joke.” He then suggests that it is absurd for the waitress and manager of the bar to be fired over the joke, since it cannot cause someone to engage in social violence.<sup>43</sup> Burr’s defense of the domestic violence joke suggests that humor should be analyzed in relation to its technical merits rather than any (questionably) attributed social effects.

Perhaps it is appropriate that during an oncoming chill of humorlessness the word “Burr” would appear in the intervals between chattering teeth and shuddering lips, but

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Burr, *I’m Sorry You Feel That Way*, (Burbank, CA: New Wave Entertainment Television, 2014), Netflix streaming.

Burr is not the only comedian who has prophesized the end times of humor. On a recent radio show Jerry Seinfeld explained why he, like fellow comedians Chris Rock and Larry the Cable Guy, has ceased performing for colleges. Seinfeld asserts that students are not only too politically correct, but are also hurting comedy by deploying politically correct words they do not understand, explaining, “They just want to use these words: ‘That’s racist;’ ‘That’s sexist;’ ‘That’s prejudice. They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”<sup>44</sup> Seinfeld reports that even his own daughter has succumbed to millennial obsessions with inane politically-correct speech , recounting, “My wife says to her, ‘Well, you know, in the next couple years, I think maybe you’re going to want to be hanging around the city more on the weekends, so you can see boys. You know what my daughter says? She says, ‘That’s sexist.’” In contrast to the unmeasured speech of politically-correct millennials, Seinfeld emphasizes his measured, skillful focus on the craft of humor. “I talk about the subjects I talk about because for some reason I can make them funny. The ones I can’t make funny, you don’t hear.”<sup>45</sup> In this context, it could be that jokes have no time for the space taken up by political correctness. When asked about his humorous put-downs of women during recent presidential primary debates, Donald Trump responded, “I’ve been challenged by so many people. I frankly don’t have time for political correctness. And to be honest with you, the country doesn’t have time either....We don’t win anymore. We lose to China. We lose to Mexico....We lose to

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<sup>44</sup> Dana Rose Falcone, “Jerry Seinfeld: Politically Correct College Students 'Don't Know What the Hell They're Talking About,’” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 8, 2012, <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/06/08/jerry-seinfeld-politically-correct-college-campuses/>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

everybody."<sup>46</sup> Disdain for humorless millennials thus stretches into the realm of politics, or at least what serves as such during the 2015-2016 election cycle.

Burr, Seinfeld, and Trump find another potential ally in a September 2015 *Atlantic* article titled "That's Not Funny!: Today's College Can't Seem to Take a Joke." Looking at the recruiting process for comedians on college campuses, the article speculates that college revolutions in the 1960s gave rise to a generation of "social-justice warriors" who reject free speech in the name of a "culture war" that must eliminate language to maintain stability.<sup>47</sup> The article laments that jokes which "include observations about power and sex and even rape" and present "certain ugly and possibly immutable truths" can no longer find shelter among college millennials who desire a "less cruel" world that does not favor the powerful. Now that college campuses have become pristine millennial bastions that privilege "the ideological bandwagon" and stifle "questioning the platform's core ideals," Flanagan laments that free comedy can only find expression among racist frat bros rather than their proper station among the free play of ideas. Flanagan concludes,

But they are jokes, not lessons from the gender-studies classroom. Their first objective is to be funny, not to service any philosophical ideal. They go where comedy always wants to go, to the darkness, and they sucker-punch you with a laugh when you don't think you should laugh... Drive those ideas underground, especially the dark ones, and they fester.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Matt Taibbi, "Donald Trump Just Stopped Being Funny," *Rolling Stone*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/donald-trump-just-stopped-being-funny-20150821/>.

<sup>47</sup> Flanagan.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Flanagan thus adds to Burr's frustration that "Everybody's getting in trouble because of these god damn groups" that call out jokes,<sup>49</sup> arguing that once millennial (and perhaps feminist) sanctimoniousness has driven humor out of its proper playful place of free speech, it finds shelter in the University's id as incarnated in frat houses. Perhaps by seizing the means of joke production, humorless millennials thus foster the seeds of their own destruction once the proletariat decides to rise up and proliferate the comedy of the commons.

Beneath many of these concerns are also fears about the relationship between humor and feminism. Feminists are likely among the "god damn groups" that nettle Burr so much by calling out domestic violence jokes, and the critiques offered by Seinfeld's daughter could very well be influenced by feminism since she challenges assumptions that tether her life to boys. Feminism has indeed often been casted as the epitome of humorlessness,<sup>50</sup> let alone claims by such public figures as Christopher Hitchens that women have less of an affinity for humor than men.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast, Anca Parvulescu identifies a rich link between feminism and laughter,<sup>52</sup> noting that continental feminist philosophy in particular has often engaged with the subject of laughter,<sup>53</sup> and concluding that the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be called "the

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<sup>49</sup> Burr.

<sup>50</sup> Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 3-7.

<sup>51</sup> Hitchens.

<sup>52</sup> Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 101.

laughing feminist century.”<sup>54</sup> Celebrated feminist texts such as Helene Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”<sup>55</sup> and Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*<sup>56</sup> have stressed relationships between gender, laughter, jokes, humor, subjectivity, and social norms. Additionally, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* famously turned to parody as an example of subversive feminist practice,<sup>57</sup> Monique Wittig’s novel *Les Guérillères* frequently features the women laughing,<sup>58</sup> and *A Question of Silence* directed by Marleen Gorris centers on a group of women who defiantly laugh in the face of the law.<sup>59</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this tradition has continued, with Parvulescu’s genealogy of laughter in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*, José Esteban Muñoz’s writings on practices of terrorist drag through disidentifications,<sup>60</sup> and Cynthia Willett’s work on comedy as an alternative to the destructive logic and hubris of American imperialism.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 117.

<sup>55</sup> Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-893.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. Peter Owen (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Marleen Gorris, *A Question of Silence* (Clerkenwell Close, London: Cinema of Women, 1982), VHS.

<sup>60</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry:’ Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 79-90.

<sup>61</sup> Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and*

In contrast to Burr, each of these continental feminist projects emphasize that practices of humor cannot be severed from their relationship to gendered networks of norms and their relationships to power and subjectivity. Some poststructuralist writers such as Didier Eribon focus specifically on the dialectic between heterosexist norms and subjectivity by stressing that subjects are formed within a power-laden linguistic network which is called forth by humorous caricatures of gay people in painful ways.<sup>62</sup> Other writers in continental feminist philosophy frame humor as a way through which subjects can subversively challenge norms, as found in the work of Irigaray,<sup>63</sup> Kristeva,<sup>64</sup> and Cixous.<sup>65</sup> Because humor and laughter are rich phenomena that necessitate an intricate consideration of relationships between social norms, language, embodiment, power, gender, race, and subjectivity, it is not surprising that continental feminist philosophy has taken these subjects up as a rich source of scholarship. In my own experience as a continental feminist philosopher, it is a rewardingly tricky subject demanding a level of intricacy and care that often pushes me to the edge of my abilities as a writer and thinker.

But we cannot claim that continental feminist philosophy is the only area of study to have enjoyed a laughing twentieth century. During this time, and especially moving

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*Freedom* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 56, 70-71.

<sup>63</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 162-163.

<sup>64</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 225.

<sup>65</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 888.



forward from the 1970s, there has also been a growing body of academic work which is now more centralized under the heading of Humor Studies. There are no self-standing academic departments called Humor Studies to save this author should she not be one of the chosen ones to join the faculty of any philosophy departments, but participation in humor studies as an interdisciplinary endeavor has drastically increased during the latter half of the twentieth century, including participation by philosophers, computer scientists, linguists, cognitive scientists, and scholars in the social sciences. The International Society for Humor Studies, founded in 1988, serves as the central organization for humor scholars. However, though the Society has held 27 annual conferences as of 2016,<sup>66</sup> and published over 500 articles and book reviews in their journal HUMOR,<sup>67</sup> none of these articles focus on the work of Butler, Irigaray, Cixous, or Kristeva.<sup>68</sup>

In this chapter, I want to make clear that feminist continental philosophy, despite already engaging in topics such as laughter and humor, is an outsider to prominent methodologies in humor studies due to its unique emphasis on relationships between power structures, norms, subjectivity, and social effects of language. Or, to put it more bluntly, I will suggest that feminist continental philosophy is a strange, oddball position

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<sup>66</sup> International Society for Humor Studies, “International Humor Conferences,” International Society for Humor Studies web site, last accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.humorstudies.org/ConferCenter.htm/>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., “HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research,” International Society for Humor Studies web site, last accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.humorstudies.org/JournalCenter.htm/>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., “HUMOR, Published Articles in HUMOR, 1988-2015.” International Society for Humor Studies web site, last accessed January 4, 2016, [http://www.humorstudies.org/ISHS%20Documents/Humor1988\\_2015.pdf?submit3=Articles+Published+in+Humor%2C+1988-2015/](http://www.humorstudies.org/ISHS%20Documents/Humor1988_2015.pdf?submit3=Articles+Published+in+Humor%2C+1988-2015/).

to take up in relation to approaches of humor theory that are close to being canonized in humor studies (assuming they are not already fully enshrined). While this might seem fully acceptable to feminist continental philosophers, since it just means that both areas of study could occur separately, I argue that the exile of continental feminist philosophy from mainstream theories of jest also entails a refusal to center the complicated social effects of humorous language in favor of privileging the abstract craft of humor and humorous wordplay. This movement thus risks sanctioning arguments such as Burr's, in which the social effects of a sexist joke are dismissed as absurd in comparison to an admiration of the joke's construction.

I begin this argument by explaining why the influential prejudiced norm theory based on empirical humor research is not sufficient for commitments in continental feminist philosophy to the relationship between language, situation, subjectivity, and power. Next, I will describe Victor Raskin's and Salvatore Attardo's influential theories of humor and their bracketing of relationships between humor, power, and subjectivity, following this with Christie Davies' related explicit separation of humor from power and restriction of humor pluralism. I end by suggesting that feminist continental philosophy's estranged position betrays a larger movement away from centering humor's social effects, which is a story I will elaborate upon in Chapter III.

#### Empirical Considerations: Why Isn't the Author in a Lab Coat?

While the author would certainly make full use of a laboratory and a team of scientists if this was supplied, it is necessary to acknowledge that the question of humor's social and political effects can be considered through empirical studies, and the

Humanities tends to get the overwrought end of Occam's razor compared to STEM or even Sociology research. Hence, a consideration of empirical research is necessary to show that feminist continental philosophy has something here to offer through its methodological commitments that is not already covered by existing empirical studies.

Looking at empirical discussions of humor's social effects through frameworks of studying the relationship between humor and prejudice, or in terms of "harmless humor" versus "aggressive humor" throws a useful wrench into straightforward assertions that humor has social effects. In the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, Megan Strain associates harmless humor with jokes such as puns that promote amusement, positive interactions with others, and may defuse otherwise tense situations. Harmless humor has been shown to improve relationships with others and allow people to cope with otherwise difficult circumstances.<sup>69</sup> Generally, this insight seems to accord with my approach, as I doubt most feminist poststructuralists would argue that *all* jokes carry harmful social effects. For example, consider:

Q: What do you call a pile of kittens?

A: A meowntain.<sup>70</sup>

I thus concur that it seems heuristically useful to separate jokes about adorable kittens from jokes that invoke racism or sexism.

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<sup>69</sup> Megan Strain, "Aggressive and Harmless Humor," in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 1:16.

<sup>70</sup> Frog, *Frog Meets Superman: Recycled Jokes for Kids*. (Eugene, OR: self-published joke book zine, July 2015).

Aggressive humor, which Strain characterizes as “much more straightforward in terms of its meaning,”<sup>71</sup> is defined by its use “to ridicule or mock a target, which is most often a person or a group.”<sup>72</sup> Strain considers specific studies conducted by psychologists Leslie Janes and James Olsen, that suggest practices of aggressive humor can cause witnesses to conform to social norms due to fears of failure or rejection, restricting themselves from actions that may make them stand out and also get targeted by negative humor.<sup>73</sup> Because witnessing aggressive humor results in individuals modifying their behavior, aggressive humor can thus be linked to social effects of conformity.<sup>74</sup> Aggressive humor can also serve as an agent against conformity and stereotypes, as seen in satirical shows such as *The Daily Show* and *Key and Peele* which use humor to shatter entrenched social norms and media messages, though Strain concludes that aggressive humor is more commonly used against disenfranchised groups to perpetuate “negative attitudes or the expression of prejudice.”<sup>75</sup>

However, Strain also identifies studies indicating that exposure to aggressive humor only uniquely influences people already high in prejudice towards a particular group.<sup>76</sup> This is explained in more detail in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* entry on

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<sup>71</sup> Strain, 16.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Leslie M. Janes and James M. Olson, “Jeer Pressure: The Behavioral Effects of Observing Ridicule of Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, no. 4 (2000): 476.

<sup>74</sup> Strain, 17.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

“Humor and Prejudice,” in which Thomas Ford emphasizes that disparagement humor seems more likely to enable certain preexisting prejudices to be released rather than creating new prejudices.<sup>77</sup> That is, if I hear a joke targeting people who consider pizza in the Pacific Northwest to be the best iteration of pizza, the joke is only more likely to escalate prejudice against such people if I already harbor a prejudice against these poor, misguided souls. Ford’s encyclopedia article is primarily influenced by Ford’s and Mark A. Ferguson’s “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory” in 2004, which is of particular note because it overviews research on disparagement humor from the 1970s to the mid-aughts and introduces a prejudiced norm theory that has been taken up by a large range of contemporary empirical studies on disparagement humor, and has been cited around 63 times.<sup>78</sup> Ford and Ferguson are critical of earlier studies in the 90’s that found disparagement to have social effects such as enhancing stereotypes because “they both lack nonhumorous control conditions that are necessary to make conclusions about the unique effects of humor above and beyond mere disparagement.”<sup>79</sup> That is to say, the studies were not set up in a way to highlight that disparagement humor *qua* humorousness can cause social effects distinct from any

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas E. Ford, “Humor and Prejudice,” in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 2: 595.

<sup>78</sup> Web of Science, “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory Full Record,” Thomson Reuters, accessed January 4, 2016, [http://apps.webofknowledge.com/full\\_record.do?product=UA&search\\_mode=GeneralSearch&qid=3&SID=2BkyYk7DBcRkIYsMUXi&page=1&doc=3/](http://apps.webofknowledge.com/full_record.do?product=UA&search_mode=GeneralSearch&qid=3&SID=2BkyYk7DBcRkIYsMUXi&page=1&doc=3/).

<sup>79</sup> Ford, Thomas E. and Mark A. Ferguson, “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 80.

other social messages. For example, the studies left little recourse to say that a sexist joke does anything unique in comparison to a sexist image or song when reinforcing stereotypes.

In contrast, Ford and Ferguson point to empirical studies that result in a more nuanced perspective on particular social effects of particular jokes when they control for the specific effects of humorous forms of disparagement. The authors emphasize that these studies suggest that disparagement humor only causes changes in behavior among subjects who are already hostile against a specific group. Otherwise, previous studies show “no evidence that exposure to disparagement humor uniquely affects stable, internal knowledge structures, such as stereotypes and attitudes toward the targeted group.”<sup>80</sup>

In this context Ford and Ferguson introduce a prejudiced norm theory of humor, explaining,

Our theory delineates the psychological processes that mediate the effects of disparagement humor on tolerance of discrimination; it also specifies variables that potentially moderate those effects. The theory addresses the case in which a person finds him or herself in a social context in which he or she is an intended recipient of disparagement humor.<sup>81</sup>

The prejudiced norm theory emphasizes that the “levity” offered by humor is actually the projection of a localized norm insisting disparaging statements or actions need not be taken seriously or criticized as serious statements.<sup>82</sup> However, those already high in prejudice are more likely to disregard the localization of this norm to a humorous context,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 83.

and interpret its suspension of criticism as a social sanction for their prejudiced beliefs.<sup>83</sup> Ford and Ferguson stress this is the reasons for humor's particular power over the prejudiced.

Viewed from the perspective of prejudiced norm theory, Burr's shift to considering the humorous mechanisms located in the restaurant domestic abuse joke and ignoring the joke's social effects appears more defensible. Burr emphasizes that jokes about domestic abuse are not going to cause any man to attack his partner any more than simply seeing an anti-domestic violence billboard on the road is likely to stop him if he has already been pushed towards such violence, and for this reason punishing a domestic violence joke in the space of a bar is ridiculous.<sup>84</sup> Prejudiced norm theory would likely suggest, meditating on empirical data, that those people most affected by a domestic violence joke will already be those highly disposed towards domestic violence anyway. From this, we might conclude that it is prejudice and a propensity towards sexist violence that must be targeted rather than the humor. Hence, the humorless feminist millennials fail to serve anyone by campaigning against mere jests – they are only jokes, after all! Perhaps at this moment we could grab a pint, shrug off questionable bar slogans, and breathe a sigh of relief.

However, these may not be the effects we are looking for. The studies that Ford and Ferguson have in mind primarily involve exposing a group of people to disparagement humor stimuli and then observing their effects. For example, men

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>84</sup> Burr.

recorded to be high in hostile sexism were uniquely affected by disparagement humor, as after exposure in a controlled environment to a series of sexist jokes they felt less guilt and shame when imagining themselves engaged in sexist behaviors.<sup>85</sup> This is certainly a useful, empirical, and testable approach of interest to scientists and humor theorists, as it offers key considerations for theorizing humor's social operations.

However, this approach to humor's social effects is also limited. First, it mainly singles out a subject and their relationship with norms in a straightforward causal relationship rather than considering how subjects and situations have already been constituted by norms or may be more deeply and subtly affected by them. Ford and Ferguson back up their theory, which they primarily describe as a causal account, by drawing from studies that expose participants to sexist humor and then rate their tolerance of a subsequent sexist scene.<sup>86</sup> This is an important and intriguing way of gauging humor's social effects but restricts the analysis to a controlled study of individual participant responses to stimuli. Perhaps understood from the restricted standpoint of cause and effect, we could be permissive of the bar's domestic violence joke since it is only likely to influence those who have a higher propensity to engage in domestic violence anyway, even though one could still be hesitant to admit of any joke that could potentially be part of this domestic violence loop should be avoided.

However, one intervention from a continental feminist stance would also likely peer behind the scenes and consider how the creation of the joke in the bar has already

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<sup>85</sup> Ford and Ferguson, 81.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



been an effect of the relationship between language, norms, and spaces. What are the dynamics of a space that calls for this particular joke, stating, “We like our beer the way we like our violence: domestic?”<sup>87</sup> How has language already been socially arranged such that this joke can be written in chalk in space, and what norms have called for domestic beer to be linked with domestic violence in this way? Likely, the shared word “domestic” permitted a link to be made between domestic beer and domestic violence. But domestic also calls forth an array of possible phrases: domestic work, domestic policy, domestic partnership, domestic terrorism, domestic tranquility. Why should the bar’s beer be in allegiance with domestic violence but not domestic terrorism or domestic labor? There is something about the joke and its relationship to the norms of space that permitted some words instead of others, indicating a deeper link between humor and social norms than straightforward, individual cause and effect. And this is the kind of missing emphasis that, as I suggested in the Introduction, would be demanded by the methodologies of continental feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, Kristeva, and Butler.

Ford does emphasize that humor is influenced by social norms and causes localized suspensions of these norms,<sup>88</sup> so the problem is not that the prejudiced norm theory avoids discussing the social aspects of humor altogether. The individual in empirical laboratory studies is very much embedded within society when suspending criticism in the face of a joke. Additionally, Ford and Ferguson mention that certain phrases are more likely to be objected to than others based on their extremity,<sup>89</sup> which

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<sup>87</sup> Burr.

<sup>88</sup> Ford, 594-595.

<sup>89</sup> Ford and Ferguson, 88.

likely rules out “domestic terrorism” as an easy source of humor in my question above. But the studies themselves do not delve into the effects of humor vis-à-vis the construction of spaces via power-laden social norms and the ways in which norms have already played a part in the constitution of subjects as they arrive to whatever scene, bar or not. That is, there is something deeper to be said beyond empirical studies of how so-and-so felt after exposure to such-and-such joke in a very limited timeframe about the ways in which humor practices are deployed and deeply affect us based on our embeddedness and constitution within a power-laden social world. And from Chapter IV onwards, I will show how feminist continental philosophy encourages such a deeper engagement with humor’s social effects.

Additionally, when Ford and Ferguson refer to the “targets” of disparaging humor, what they have in mind is specifically someone who is told the disparaging joke and not specifically someone who is the *target* (intentionally or unintentionally) of such a joke. Hence, Strain’s emphasis on the ways people targeted by hostile humor modify their behaviors,<sup>90</sup> as discussed in Leslie Janes’ and James Olson’s 2000 empirical studies on “Jeer Pressure,” is a significant aspect of humor’s social effects left out by Ford’s and Ferguson’s prejudiced norm theory. Janes’ and Olson’s analysis is useful for considering humor’s effects of silencing and constraining both speech and actions by those targeted,<sup>91</sup> and hence contribute to the necessity of delving into humor, norms, and the construction of spaces. When comparing domestic beer to domestic violence, how might this restrict

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<sup>90</sup> Strain, 17.

<sup>91</sup> Janes and Olson, 483-484.

the range of speech and action in the bar, especially by patrons who have experienced it firsthand? And how does this link to continental feminist concerns with subjectivation, that is, the ways in which language and norms constitute who we are even as we participate in them and rework them? The prejudiced norm theory is silent on this.

Finally, though the prejudiced norm theory emphasizes particular aspects of how humor works by emphasizing humor's ability to project a space where criticisms are uniquely suspended and by tying the practice of humor to identity and social norms, contemporary humor theory has largely distanced prejudice and power from humor's essential operations. As will be explained in the rest of this chapter, core essentialist approaches to humor such as those found in Victor Raskin's script semantic theory and Raskin's and Salvatore Attardo's general theory of verbal humor has staved off a consideration of humor's relationship to power, prejudice, social norms, and subjectivity, instead calling for an investigation of idealized subjects who navigate a purified linguistic network shorn from any power-laden social context.

For these reasons, I will not investigate humor's social effects through the lens of empirical social sciences or psychology, and instead will endeavor to provide a feminist philosophical account of humor's social effects that ties humor's operations to subjectivation, social norms, and language. Because this will involve critiquing the arc of humor studies theorizing over time and its movement away from incorporating social effects as a key part of understanding how humor works, I will primarily be operating at the register of theory rather than provided the kind of straightforward synthesis of empirical works on humor's social effects that could be augmented with a laboratory. Though I will soon show that feminist continental philosophy is largely unwelcome in

mainstream humor theory, it will also serve as the primary way through which I deepen considerations of humor's social effects from Chapter IV onwards as we move far beyond the constraints of the prejudiced norm theory into deeper considerations of power, language, and subjectivity.

### Social Scripts without Social Effects

While Ford's and Ferguson's prejudiced norm theory has been enshrined as the key approach to disparaging humor in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, it is not a forerunning theory in contemporary humor studies on the topic of humor's core characteristics and operations. Ford and Ferguson look at a history of empirical studies primarily concerned with the relationship between humor and social effects.<sup>92</sup>

Contemporary humor theory that deals with the question of how humor works, in contrast, has arisen within a context that prioritizes linguistic structures over both social structures and subjectivity. Such approaches have been largely shaped by linguist Victor Raskin's *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, published in 1985. In a 2004 retrospective piece, sociologist Christie Davies highlights the book's groundbreaking and essential contributions to humor studies research, placing Raskin among "the masters of other disciplines such as Emil [sic] Durkheim, John Maynard Keynes, or Mary Douglas."<sup>93</sup> In the book, Raskin proposes a semantic scripts theory of verbal humor that attempts to

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<sup>92</sup> Ford and Ferguson, 79-81.

<sup>93</sup> Christie Davies, "Victor Raskin on Jokes," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* 17, no. 4 (2004): 373-374.

model a native speaker's competence with humor recognition.<sup>94</sup> Raskin's approach is classified as an essentialist approach to humor, since it is concerned with the necessary and sufficient conditions that makes a text a joke instead of some other linguistic form.<sup>95</sup> The semantic scripts theory proposes that humor results from specific interactions between two components of language: semantic scripts and combinatorial rules. Semantic scripts consist of "a large chunk of information" which "surround[s]" a particular word or "is evoked by it."<sup>96</sup> These semantic scripts are also a "cognitive structure" which a native speaker internalizes, ultimately representing aspects of the speaker's surrounding world.<sup>97</sup> And each script is made of a series of words ("lexical nodes") which are connected through "semantic links" representing the speaker's internalization of a meaningful link between these nodes. Thus sets up the machinery of a purely linguistic mind in its ordinary operation. Raskin's subject is composed of internalized semantic scripts and linguistic rules, and this subject's engagement with language occurs primarily as a semantic assembly line for processing information.

Raskin argues that a text meets the necessary conditions to be a joke if it is both "compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts" and if these two scripts are "opposite."<sup>98</sup> These conflicting scripts often contain a "trigger" consisting of some

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<sup>94</sup> Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), 59.

<sup>95</sup> Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (New York, NY: Walter De Gruyter, 1994), 1.

<sup>96</sup> Raskin, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 99.

ambiguity or contradiction that shifts the interpretation provided by an initial script to a conflicting one,<sup>99</sup> juxtaposing opposing scripts to create an “unreal” or “incompatible” situation.<sup>100</sup> While combinatorial rules would ordinarily attempt to fix this situation in “*bona-fide* communication,” the behavior of play<sup>101</sup> permits the suspension of these rules and a recognition of the joke’s “*non-bona-fide*” mood and its goal not to “convey information” but to cause laughter.<sup>102</sup> In this way, the semantic theory of humor explains jokes as an interaction between incongruous linguistic scripts in the service of play and laughter.

In this context, it is useful to consider Salvatore Attardo’s evaluation of the semantic script theory of humor (SSTH) as a “necessary idealization.”<sup>103</sup> Attardo writes,

The SSTH models the humorous competence of an idealized speaker/hearer subject who is unaffected by racial or gender biases, undisturbed by scatological obscene or disgusting materials, not subject to boredom, and, most importantly, has never “heard it before” when presented with a joke.<sup>104</sup>

Raskin does emphasize the contextual features of language, but he does this to stave off theories of linguistics that consider the meaning of each sentence in isolation<sup>105</sup> rather than to embed language into the context of a social world laden with norms and power.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>103</sup> Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, 197.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Raskin, 62-63, 67.

Additionally, Raskin does discuss sexual and ethnic humor in the form of “mythological scripts,” which deploy deprecatory or disparaging scripts that trade on inaccurate stereotypes or assumptions, and hence are mythological due to their failure to accurately represent a speaker’s world.<sup>106</sup> While this can open up Raskin’s semantic script theory of humor to a consideration of disparaging or aggressive humor, it does not fundamentally incorporate such humor into its theory of humor’s operations in the way that Ford and Ferguson’s prejudice norm theory does when it emphasizes humor’s ability to suspend social criticism. Instead, humor related to problematic social norms involves simply a different kind of script which is fed into a similar machinery of the linguistic subject as would any other script in any other joke text. Furthermore, the framework of mythological scripts in combination with Raskin’s description of humor as non-bona-fide may shorn joke content from stereotypes altogether, as Davies suggests the framework offers a path for humor studies away from tying jokes to their social weight).<sup>107</sup> Because of its idealized, linguistic subject, Raskin’s approach is unable to conceive of the sort of subject who has been shaped by and lives within a world of deeply entrenched social norms, and hence cannot grant the kinds of humor they would engage in and be engaged by their full social dimensions. This subject of humor is thus highly incompatible with approaches to language in feminist continental philosophy, which frequently trouble the sovereignty of linguistic propositions,<sup>108</sup> bring to light the complex relationship between

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<sup>106</sup> Raskin, 180.

<sup>107</sup> Davies, “Victor Raskin on Jokes,” 375.

<sup>108</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 24-26.

language and subjectivation within power-laden linguistic networks,<sup>109</sup> and emphasize relationships between sex and differential access to discourse.<sup>110</sup>

Raskin's linguistic subject is also the subject who has continued on in the expanded general verbal theory of humor (GTVH), developed by Raskin and Attardo in 1991<sup>111</sup> to augment script-based semantics by emphasizing such additional knowledge resources for humor as language verbalization, narrative strategy, target, situation, and logical mechanism.<sup>112</sup> While Attardo's and Raskin's GTVH is developed from Raskin's semantic script theory of humor, and the authors emphasize that it shares an essentialist approach by focusing on precisely what humor is, both authors also stress that the newer GTVH is comparatively "less linguistics-based" than Raskin's and better accommodates interdisciplinary contributions.<sup>113</sup> The GTVH thus might initially seem promising for a feminist perspective on humor that requires an account of subjectivity situated within power structures. This hopefulness is further augmented by the GTVH's addition of a target knowledge resource emphasizing that humor may have a target or "butt" which is assailed by stereotypes or mythical scripts, or which serve as broader "ideological

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<sup>109</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 196-198.

<sup>110</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 164.

<sup>111</sup> Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, "Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* 4, no. 3-4 (1991): 293-347.

<sup>112</sup> Salvatore Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001), 22.

<sup>113</sup> Attardo and Raskin, 330.



targets” without a clear constituency.<sup>114</sup> Could the move from the SSTH to the GTVH provide a BFF for power-conscious feminist theories of humor?

Unfortunately, feminists are left with a BRB at best, or most likely a TTYL or even a GTFO for the more radically inclined.<sup>115</sup> Though the general theory of verbal humor includes targets as a key element for jokes, all of the knowledge resources are placed into a hierarchy which emphasizes the role of script opposition as most primary when present, logical mechanisms as second-most primary, and target as the fourth-highest knowledge resource of humor out of six when it is present in a particular joke.<sup>116</sup> While providing a more complex, malleable, and general formula for understanding humor, the general theory of verbal humor thus continues to prioritize script oppositions and an expanded version of combinatorial rules as the primary forces driving humor. Additionally, the “target” knowledge resource is just this – an emphasis on the *targets* of humor rather than an analysis of deeper relationships of power. Our attention is not even drawn to the social situation of joke-tellers who target others, which is at least pointed to by Ford and Ferguson’s prejudiced norm theory. Feminist post-structuralism could thus conceivably be integrated into the general theoretical matrix of the general theory of verbal humor, but only as a plug-in or extension is installed into a core, defining architecture. The GTVH continues to center an idealized approach, which privileges

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<sup>114</sup> Attardo, *Humorous Texts*, 24.

<sup>115</sup> The author here has turned miscreant and is playing with current Internet acronyms. BFF refers to “best friend forever,” while “BRB” means “be right back” and “TTYL” translates into “talk to you later.” The author will leave researching the meaning of “GTFO” to the reader’s discretion.

<sup>116</sup> Raskin and Attardo, 325.

studying the essential components of humor competence rather than humor's relationship with power. Even the situation knowledge resource focuses on the situation of humor as a series of "props" which occur within the text rather than any sort of broader social situatedness that shapes the elements of a humorous text. In his 2001 book *Humorous Texts* Attardo even comments that the situation knowledge resource, consisting of what the joke is about, has been the subject of "virtually no research." He speculates that this knowledge resource would involve a series of lists mentioned in a text rather than connections to larger social networks, let alone subjects and subjectivity.<sup>117</sup> Given the general theory of verbal humor's purified, positivistic methodology, I could see and enjoy a cyborg fusion of feminist poststructuralism and mainstream humor theory, but adopting the GTVH's framework without serious revision and caution would force a feminist post-structuralist approach into a derivative position.

#### Christie Davies and the Balderdash of "the Other"

Furthermore, opening the general theory of verbal humor to interdisciplinary engagements does not entail the sort of pluralism that would permit a feminist post-structuralist collaboration or intervention. In their 1991 article, Raskin and Attardo suggest a number of ways in which various disciplines can specifically contribute to the general theory of verbal humor's development, including linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, mathematics, sociology, rhetoric, political science, history, literary studies, folklore, and computer science.<sup>118</sup> In this context, Raskin and Attardo do

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<sup>117</sup> Attardo, *Humorous Texts*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> Raskin and Attardo, 330.

mention linking humor to a “circulation of power” as a potential contribution to the general theory of verbal humor that falls specifically under developing the target resource, bestowing this task upon political science specifically.<sup>119</sup> One could suggest that here feminist poststructuralism can perhaps worm its way in as an area of study that can contribute towards elaborating gendered circulations of power in humor.

But 10 years later it is not a political scientist but sociologist Christie Davies<sup>120</sup> who is mentioned in Attardo’s *Humorous Texts* as a key contributor to the “target” knowledge resource.<sup>121</sup> Just because an author powerfully crafts an analysis of humor and its relation to society does not mean that this will emphasize humor’s power-laden qualities. In contrast, Davies does all he can to emphasize that imbuing humor with the power to effect social change is a false position. In his earlier book *Jokes and their Relation to Society*, Davies considers differences between jokes about stupidity and jokes about caniness in ethnic humor. Stupidity jokes, Davies concludes, involves a practice of one community laughing at the distorted practices of a periphery group located in proximity to them.<sup>122</sup> Davies associates canny jokes, in contrast, with a more subversive practice of comically undermining the capitalist ethos of “thrift, self-control, and rational

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Sadly, Christie Davies passed away while this dissertation was being written, but his work has remained influential for discussing the cultural and social life of humor. Though I take a critical stance towards his work in this chapter, I am grateful to have read his work and to have met him in person.

<sup>121</sup> Attardo, *Humorous Texts*, 24.

<sup>122</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and their Relations to Society* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 2, 13.

calculation.”<sup>123</sup> While both arcs of Davies’ analysis seem like they could enable a link between humor, norms, and social effects, Davies explicitly sever these connections. Stupidity jokes are not a practice of hatred or alienation by one group against another, but instead a non-hostile means through which societies define who they are based on their location to other societies,<sup>124</sup> ultimately “laughing at themselves as seen in a distorted mirror.”<sup>125</sup> Davies also stresses that even humor targeting political regimes, such as those made by citizens of the Soviet Union against their government, generally have no influence on subverting or undermining existing political orders.<sup>126</sup> Hence in this earlier work Davies already emphasizes skepticism towards strong associations between humor and social effects.

In *Jokes and Targets*, Davies carries this skepticism further by specifying that jokes accomplish very little. Davies explicitly writes, “Jokes have no consequences for society as a whole,”<sup>127</sup> and asserts that “It is a foolish sentimental myth that an entire oppressive political order could be brought down by humor.”<sup>128</sup> Davies also states that jokes accomplish nothing morally, and can neither cause harm or amelioration in a

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>127</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 266, 211.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 246.

society.<sup>129</sup> Consequently, Davies believes that attempts to link jokes causally with a reinforcement of social orders is “meaningless,” and he concludes that jokes are merely a “thermometer” that express the status of culture rather than a “thermostat” which could adjust society in some pragmatic way.<sup>130</sup> Davies is correct that humor is unlikely to bring down an entire social order by itself, but his position also throws the notion that humor can have any deep, lasting social effects into doubt. If this leaves you unconvinced that Davies’ approach poses a particular problem for feminist continental philosophy, at one point he suggests that a theory referring to the creation of groups as “an exotic ‘other’” is merely invoking gobbledygook in contrast to his more grounded approach to ethnic humor.<sup>131</sup> If Davies considers a discussion of exoticization and othering to be methodological gobbledygook, this suggests that he would find such approaches to language, norms, sex, and subjectivity as Irigaray’s, Kristeva’s, or Butler’s to be problematically baffling.

Davies’ move towards distancing humor from power runs into problems when he turns his analysis to the social meaning of blonde jokes in *Jokes and Targets*. In the book, Davies broadens his “center-periphery” approach to ‘stupidity’ ethnic humor into a “mind-over-matter model,”<sup>132</sup> in which people are considered stupid if their work or life is associated with materiality or working upon the earth as opposed to occupations or

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 67.

ways of life that are assumed to involve more thought.<sup>133</sup> Davies uses this characterization to create a history of blonde jokes, which he asserts migrated to the UK as jokes about women from Essex and took on a class dimension by considering their association with material, working-class occupations.<sup>134</sup> In addition to this class dimension, Davies notes that blonde jokes are also based on physical attractiveness<sup>135</sup> and the “universal desirability of blondes,” which brings into play sexual scripts specifically.<sup>136</sup> In this context, blonde jokes do not only represent the element of social class through the associations between blonde women and stupidity, but also bring stupidity into play because blonde women are associated with the material in the form of an unthinking use of their body for sex.<sup>137</sup>

Here Davies does not at all link his analysis to feminist research that might further explain the relationship between blonde jokes and power, instead preferring to carry over a center-periphery model of ethnic humor that he had already decoupled from hostility and alienation. Note that he mentions sexual scripts and sex in relation to blonde jokes, but does not mention *sexism*, let alone patriarchy. Davies does not acknowledge the role of sexism at all, and does not think that these jokes have much of an effect on society.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 111.

Perhaps he would admit to a friendly feminist augmentation of his work that allows us to further consider blonde jokes as a thermometer for existing sexism, but not a thermostat that affects societal sexism in any way. But Davies' side-remarks about humor methodologies suggest that even bringing in a Beauvoirian description of women as the Other<sup>138</sup> in this context could be a threatening amount of "gobbledygook," let alone what he might see as Irigaray's "gobbledygook" of the other woman, Wittig's Trojan nonsense, Kristeva's revolution in rubbish language, or Butler's bafflegabs that matter. But such accounts, rescued from external dismissal, could do much for enriching an account of blonde jokes by including subjects that Davies does not discuss, such as the relationship between blonde jokes and sexist power, the effects of blonde jokes on subjects called out by their use, and the sexist norms enabling such jokes to achieve circulation beyond an account such as Davies' that distances materiality and embodiment from gendered power relationships.

Interestingly, Davies comes closest to theorizing the relationship between humor and power when discussing humor that targets gay men. Davies links jokes about gay men to a prejudicial association between "homosexuality" and bestiality,<sup>139</sup> or to an obsession with masculine dominance that links penetration, domination, and becoming like women.<sup>140</sup> Davies even states that such jokes cannot be understood apart from

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<sup>138</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 6.

<sup>139</sup> Davies, *Jokes and Targets*, 154.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

disapproval of same-sex attraction,<sup>141</sup> and stresses that the distinction between penetrator and penetrated reflects “patterns of social domination.”<sup>142</sup> Davies also explicitly ties anxieties about male passivity<sup>143</sup> and views of “homosexuality” as an abomination<sup>144</sup> to these jokes, and discusses masculinity as both compulsory and a privilege in society.<sup>145</sup> In this context, Davies even restores subversive gay humor with some of its teeth, noting that camp and “outrageous effeminate humor or the humor of drag queens” contest hegemonic masculinity among both straight and gay men.<sup>146</sup> Davies would still likely fall back on his metaphor that humor is a thermometer rather than a thermostat, but here the thermometer is most strongly linked to the power behind the scenes that determine the climate than we find with Davies’ discussion of blonde jokes without sexism.

Eribon’s poststructuralist account of humor provides a powerful counter and complement to Davies’ discussion of jokes targeting gay men. Eribon is interested in the relationship between discourse and power, which brings him to an explicit consideration of humor in the context of insult. Eribon points out that gay people “live in a world of insults,” and these insults preexist them in a way that invests insult with the “constitutive...power of language.”<sup>147</sup> Eribon identifies insults as performative in that

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>147</sup> Eribon, 56.



they can allow the insulter to attain power over their target and also is able to performatively assign a place for gay people even before they are conscious of having such a place.<sup>148</sup> Insult thus involves an intricate interplay between language, power, and performativity that gives it a prominent role in constituting what the gay self means for both oneself and society.<sup>149</sup>

In this context, Eribon asserts that humorous caricatures are able to draw from this constituting power of insult, as well as “the mental schemas that produce laughter at the sight of gay people,” in order to serve as a “group portrait” of gay people as “monstrous or ridiculous.”<sup>150</sup> These caricatures can thus be considered image-based analogues to Freud’s description of the joke “as a sort of outlet for hostile impulses.”<sup>151</sup> The function of laughter in the caricature also encourages a gay person who is in hiding to laugh at the figure presented in the effort of distancing, though this only means that they are engaging in self-ridicule.<sup>152</sup> In this way, the caricature also blocks solidarity and encourages shame.<sup>153</sup> Eribon’s description provides a useful account of how laughter specifically can enact a “symbolic violence”<sup>154</sup> upon a social group through the relationship between

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 79.

power, discourse, and performativity. But he also suggests a means of amelioration from caricatures through solidarity,<sup>155</sup> and hence resistance. Eribon's poststructuralist account thus critically centers the social effects of humor, revealing a complex thermostat after all.

Of course, Raskin's and Attardo's approaches to humor are not the only ones, and humor is a diverse and often eclectic field. Attending the 2015 International Humor Studies Society Conference in Oakland, for example, permitted me to attend a panel consisting of Pixar employees, take part in a panel stressing the relationship between humor and embodied cognition by drawing from work in cognitive science, and receive comments from *New Yorker* cartoon editor Robert Mankoff, who also presented later.

In light of this diverse field, it is unsurprising that formidable critiques have been formulated against the general theory of verbal humor. One of the most promising critiques is provided by Graeme Ritchie, a computer scientist and friendly critic of both Raskin's script-based theories of humor and Raskin's and Attardo's general theory of verbal humor. However, Ritchie's favored solution maintains a family resemblance with the general theory of verbal humor by emphasizing abstract language over social effects, since he turns to computer programs as the primary route through which to understand how humor works. For example, he turns to the Joke Analysis and Production Engine (JAPE) which was designed to create humorous puns based on programmed "properties and relationships."<sup>156</sup> One joke created by JAPE was:

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>156</sup> Graeme Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 147.

What kind of murderer has fibre?

A cereal killer.<sup>157</sup>

This has been analyzed as:

“There is a compound noun phrase (*serial killer*) such that its first word has a homophone (*cereal*). Substituting the homophone into the phrase (*cereal killer*) produces a phrase which can be used as the answer to a question which asks for something which shares the semantic properties of the original phrase (*serial killer*) and the homophone (*cereal*).”<sup>158</sup>

This account is abstracted in the form of a "schema," consisting of "a network of constraints between words, parts of words, phrases, and lexical entries."<sup>159</sup> The schema provides direction for the program to substitute appropriate homonyms, which is cross-referenced with a dictionary search to locate appropriate words.<sup>160</sup> In this way, JAPE is able to work with a “library of routines” to create puns.<sup>161</sup> Ritchie’s alternative account thus represents an approach that is perhaps even more incompatible with feminist continental philosophy, as social norms, subjectivity, and power find no place in this particular iteration of computer programming. Even Davies probably is probably more tolerable of theories that discuss the Other than a machine that can only receive the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

feedback of binary code. In later chapters we will refer to feminist approaches to humor that lie on the periphery of humor studies, but the point here is that it is unlikely feminist continental philosophy will ever find its way to the center without seriously losing itself.

### Bill Burr's Buried Argument

Recall that Burr deemphasized the social and political aspects of the domestic violence bar joke to instead admire the joke's elegant structure. Burr's analysis of the domestic violence joke thus seems to share with leading theoretical approaches in humor studies an affinity for turning away from the social and political dimensions of humor to study idealized and mechanical humor construction rather than power relationships. This does not mean that contemporary humor studies lacks valuable insights on its own terms, and we will return to the possibilities offered by Delia Chiaro's, Janet Bing's, and Joanne Scheibman's work on humor theory as a bridge between humor theory and feminist poststructuralism that can provide more exciting avenues for collaboration. What this chapter does explicitly articulate is that leading theoretical approaches in humor studies place feminist poststructuralism in a necessarily "Other" position in relation to the rest of humor research, always at risk of being dismissed as "gobbledygook." But consciously knowing that feminist poststructuralism is a stranger to mainstream humor research can also be powerfully twisted into the insight that feminist poststructuralism can provide a viewpoint on humor which *transforms* our particular understanding of humor practices. In the later chapters, I will endeavor to construct these insights in their strongest form by emphasizing the unique abilities of feminist continental philosophy to acknowledge the social and political ambivalence of humor in its most unstable practices.

But for now, this chapter has merely alienated feminist continental philosophy from the more stabilized path of contemporary humor studies to call attention to a dire need for explicitly considering where we want to go from here. To review, we have alienated feminist continental philosophy from not only empirical research on humor's social effects, but also contemporary theories of humor from the vantage points of linguistics, "pluralism," sociology, and computer science. But this alienation is quite useful, as it also stresses that feminist continental philosophy cannot easily venture on the path away from humor's social effects like much of contemporary humor studies' core theories of how humor works.

I suggest that as feminists we require a theory of social and political humor that will consciously shake contemporary humor theories to their core by centering a consideration of social norms, subjectivation, power, and social situatedness in relation to humor. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, linking humor, power, and hierarchy in philosophical considerations of humor stretches back to canonical Western philosophers such as Plato, Hobbes, and Rousseau, and also to philosophers taken up in continental traditions of philosophy such as Bergson. I justify this next step by looking at how theories of humor and power have become boxed into a limited category, preventing contemporary works in the philosophy of humor from achieving the feminist goals I have just laid out in this paragraph. However, far from signaling the necessity of returning to older philosophies of humor, I will emphasize that they simply will not do anymore because of the rigid model of humor and power as entrenchment that they set forth. Here, in the gap left by both old and contemporary philosophies of humor, we will explore the topography of existing feminist theories of humor and work through them to craft a

feminist poststructuralist philosophy of humor that can stand strong in its exiled position outside (but nonetheless attentive to) contemporary humor research. To avoid the laughing feminist twentieth century from becoming the self-contained or drowned twenty-first, it will be useful to look at theories of humor and power from the history of philosophy that have been successfully boxed-in and thrown into a dusty corner.

## CHAPTER III

### LAUGHING AND NOT BEING NORMATIVE:

#### HUMOR AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESTRICTION OF PUBLIC SPACE

##### Rousseau, Rape, and Humor Restricting Space

To recap, in the previous chapter, I began by looking at the open and undecided question of humor's social effects in popular media. While there are helpful empirical studies of humor's social effects, I have emphasized that these fail to look behind the scenes at the social norms that humor deploys vis-a-vis relationships between language, power, and hierarchy. Dominant theories in humor studies such as the general theory of verbal humor frequently bracket out humor's social effects in an effort to understand how precisely humor works, treating these two considerations as if they are distinct pursuits. Finally, humor's social effects are directly denied by Davies' theory of disparagement humor, which I challenged through recourse to Eribon's discussion of caricature, interpellation, and subjectivation. The aim of the previous chapter was thus to show that the problem of humor's social effects has not been given the attention it deserves in humor theory, and I suggested that a continental feminist approach will be more fruitful for addressing complex interplays of humor and power.

This chapter argues, *contra* a contemporary (and boring) centering of individual ethics in the philosophy of humor, that the social and political features of humor as practiced in public space should be centered rather than cast aside. In short, what we require is a social and political philosophy of humor. Whereas the purpose of

contemporary humor ethics so far has been to point out the ways that humor's practice by individuals can be unethical, I argue instead for a feminist social and political philosophy of humor and laughter that situates the operations and effects of laughter within the context of larger relationships with systematic inequality, cultural norms, and their effects on people's lives and deaths. Though I will be working my way through the shortcomings of existing feminist approaches to laughter, it is my contention in this chapter and moving onwards that feminist poststructuralism will be a robust toolkit (later, I will escalate the bland "robust" with Monique Wittig's more exciting "war machine") through which this may be accomplished.

Earlier theories of humor and laughter, for example, not only mention the use of laughter to signify superiority in relationship to others, but also the powerful role of laughter in public space through its specific mechanisms and their effects. Consider, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy of humor and laughter, which is not discussed in most overviews of humor theory. In *Emile's* sections explaining the ideal 'education' of women, Rousseau employs tactics designed to silence women and girls in public and private space. For example, he asserts that women are completely dependent on men and their judgments<sup>162</sup> that girls must be acclimated to constraint because their life will necessarily involve being "enslaved" to a specific etiquette and "the wills of others,"<sup>163</sup> and that women can create neither "works of genius"<sup>164</sup> nor engage in

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<sup>162</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *From Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 364.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.



science.<sup>165</sup> In this way, Rousseau constructs a framework within which women and girls are unable to speak outside of the judgments, wills, and discourses of men. Mary

Wollstonecraft summarizes these views, writing,

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her *natural* cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself.<sup>166</sup>

Wollstonecraft here recognizes that Rousseau's ideal world is one in which women have no aims outside of serving men, nullifying their other possibilities in public and private space.

Within his general project of denying women space, Rousseau attempts to nullify women's self-claims and experiences by suggesting that rape is logically impossible. After associating men with reason and women with modesty, Rousseau asserts that "[n]ature and reason" go against the act of rape because rape involves men attacking their "companion" and threatening fatherhood.<sup>167</sup> He also asserts that women can defend themselves and suggests that when a woman is raped it must have been permitted, writing, "For the attacker to be victorious, the one who is attacked must permit or arrange it..."<sup>168</sup> This causes him to suggest that "[t]he freest and sweetest of all acts," meaning

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>166</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, The Rights of Women*, ed, D. L. MacDonald and Kathleen Scherf (Petersborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), 134.

<sup>167</sup> Rousseau, 359.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

penis-in-vagina sex, "does not admit of real violence,"<sup>169</sup> resulting in a denial of rape.

Rape thus becomes an action that is "logically incoherent" in Rousseau's framework.<sup>170</sup>

This denial leads Rousseau to write,

"If fewer acts of rape are cited in our day, this is surely not because men are more temperate but because they are less credulous, and such a complaint, which previously would have persuaded simple peoples, in our days would succeed only in attracting the laughter of mockers. It is more advantageous to keep quiet."<sup>171</sup>

Rousseau believes he has shown that men, who are reasonable, do not rape women and hence any reports by women that they have been raped are not credible to the extent that they should be targeted by laughter and mockery. In this case, laughter serves as a means of restricting women's claims both in and about public and private space.

This relationship between the "laughter of mockers" and women's ability to inhabit space is clarified when looking at Rousseau's discussion of laughter earlier in *Emile*. He writes,

All children are afraid of masks. I begin by showing Emile a mask with a pleasant face. Next someone in his presence puts this mask over his face. I start to laugh; everybody laughs; and the child laughs like the others. Little by little I accustom him to less pleasant masks and finally to hideous faces. If I have arranged my gradation well, far from being frightened by the last mask, he will laugh at it as at the first. After that I no longer fear that he can be frightened by masks."<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> John Darling and Maaïke Van De Pijpekamp, "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 42, no. 4 (1994): 127.

<sup>171</sup> Rousseau, 360.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 63.

Rousseau also indicates that laughter can be similarly used to ease fears of the dark.<sup>173</sup> In these sections, Rousseau is acknowledging that laughter is both a way to deny the ability of entities outside of oneself to cause an effect on its own terms against one's wishes (beholding a frightful mask and being confronted with fear), and a way to change the terms of that presentation such that the response to the object can be controlled (beholding a frightful mask and not experiencing it as a confrontation after laughing at it). This imbues laughter with not only an ethics of individual relationships between human and mask, or man and woman, but also results in a relationship of power-over. Rousseau's suggested response to rape follows a similar pattern: it is prescribed that women who say they have been raped should not be listened to on their own terms, such that instead (like the mask) women have any intentions outside of what men want to hear trivialized through laughter. Here laughter is designed as the ultimate seal upon the voice and space of women who were raped: any argument or evidence against Rousseau's denial of rape becomes not worth being engaged on its terms, and hence is trivialized through the practice of laughter.

Combined with Rousseau's other suggestions about curtailing women's ability to inhabit public and private space, the "laughter of mockers" that Rousseau describes is thus a powerful regulative tool used to restrict the ability of women and girls to speak and inhabit space on their own terms. In this context, humor is not only an example of Rousseau's failure to consider laughter's (refusing to consider that it is right to listen to

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 135.

women) but also an example of laughter that is political, effecting a restriction of women in public space.

The relationship between humor and public space is a live topic past Rousseau and the nineteenth century and into our current era of edgy comedians. In 2012 comedian Daniel Tosh was credited with telling a rape joke and then responding to a woman “heckler” at his show with, “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...”<sup>174</sup> The following year, featured among the media exposing a gang rape cover-up for football players in Steubenville was a video showing a group of students laughing about the rape and making jokes that the girl was “deader than Obi Wan Kenobi after Darth Vader cut his head off,” and laughing while saying, “Is she gonna feel it? She’s dead!”<sup>175</sup> As bell hooks argues in response to Eddie Murphy’s 1987 comedy special *Raw*, humor and laughter can also present black women’s bodies as threatening to black men’s autonomy, to the extent that “women’s personhood must be erased,” seeking to silence black women in relation to black men while simultaneously doubling back and objectifying the black men telling the jokes.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Amy Odell, "Comedy Club Owner Says Daniel Tosh Incident Has Been Misunderstood," *BuzzFeed*, July 10, 2012. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/amyodell/comedy-club-owner-says-daniel-tosh-incident-has-be/>.

<sup>175</sup> Julia Dahl, “Video Depicts Teens Laughing About Alleged Sexual Assault Victim: ‘She is so Raped Right Now,’” *CBS News*, January 4, 2013, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/video-depicts-teens-laughing-about-alleged-sexual-assault-victim-she-is-so-raped-right-now/>.

<sup>176</sup> bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy,” in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Ataria Books, 2004), 117.

Though each of these cases, ranging from Rousseau to contemporary deployments of disparaging laughter and humor about rape, invoke relationships in public (and private) space, I will argue in this chapter that contemporary philosophy of humor often turns away from the social and political effects of humor in favor of individualist ethics. In contrast to this, I emphasize that humor has an important role to play in the politics of public space, using transphobic laughter and humor as an example. To establish this, after a brief reflection on the term “humor,” I begin by emphasizing the preference for a humor ethics over a social and political philosophy of humor in three leading approaches to the philosophy of humor by Noël Carroll, John Morreall, and the tag-team of Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams. I then trace this practice to a preference for grouping theories of humor into categories and discounting those that center power and hierarchy under the name of aggressive, disparagement, or superiority theories. I conclude by discussing misogyny and transmisogyny through Kate Manne, Talia Bettcher, Viviane Namaste, and Sara Ahmed to center a social and political approach to humor and laughter that also considers cultural emotions. This work indicates that more work is required for a social and political feminist philosophy for the practice of humor, and what I will describe as humorwork.

### Constellations, Crazy Quilts, and Cluster You-Know-Whats

Before discussing the history of humor in philosophy, it is necessary to address the fact that many of the authors do not use the term ‘humor,’ especially since it was not until the late seventeenth century that terms such as “humor” and “amusement” were

given their current sense of funniness or a disposition to laughter.<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, as philosophers of humor John Morreall and John Lippitt note, even the term “humor” itself has often been used in ways which refer to varying phenomena.<sup>178</sup> Morreall, Lippitt, and many other scholars engaging in cross-disciplinary research (including the journal *HUMOR*) thus often use the term “humor” in the “broadest sense”<sup>179</sup> or as a “general umbrella term” to refer to “what is perceived, thought of, or experienced, as funny or amusing.”<sup>180</sup> In this chapter and onward, I will be referring to humor in this umbrella sense, although I will specify when I am referring to a particular author’s non-general use of the term.

It is also important to not hastily subsume “laughter” under the category of ‘humor,’ since laughter can be triggered without being identified as humorous, as is the case with certain instances of neurological damage, neurodegenerative diseases, and seizures.<sup>181</sup> However, though many of the philosophers below refer to laughter rather than humor, Morreall stresses that these theories can still be relevantly referred to under the “new” and “culturally variable” terms of humor and amusement because these terms

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<sup>177</sup> John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 58.

<sup>178</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 64; John Lippitt, “Humour,” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David E. Cooper (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 199.

<sup>179</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 64.

<sup>180</sup> Lippitt, 199.

<sup>181</sup> Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 21.

involve a crucially similar investigation of “the inclination to laugh.”<sup>182</sup> Hence, the contemporary usage of “humor” as a general term is not perfect, and must be employed with caution, but it is a useful working model for a pluralist study of humor that works against a tradition of various cordoned-off perspectives developing their own theories of humor without surveying the field. An optimist might thus refer to humor studies as involving a ‘constellation’ of terms, while it is probably more accurate to refer to the field as a ‘crazy-quilt.’ Throughout this chapter and others, I will thus embrace this conceptually broad and sometimes historically idiosyncratic approach to the field of “humor.”

#### Power in a Box: Why a Social and Political Philosophy of Humor is Obsolete

Before proposing a renewed social and political theory of humor, I will trace the history through which philosophy has depoliticized the study of humor, and its relationship with the consolidation of humor studies. During the consolidation of humor studies, humor scholars (in our now clarified broad sense of the term humor) noticed over time that approaches to studying humor could be categorized under different approaches or definitions based on different characterizations of humor. While previous philosophers and theorists of humor, including Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and Freud, grouped humor into various kinds, other philosophers set out to group existing theories of humor into categories to better organize and respond to the large range of approaches to humor as a subject of study. Clarifying the taxonomy of not only humor but also approaches to humor theory has been helpful for evaluating different theories of humor that before the

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<sup>182</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 61, 63.

consolidation of humor studies were formed without the consideration of other competing or comparable humor theories.

For example, within the same decade that Freud and Bergson published their accounts of humor, James Sully considered several categories of laughter that carry over to contemporary accounts such as a focus on disparagement (Sully refers to it as “degradation”) and a contrasting theory of incongruity.<sup>183</sup> However, it isn’t until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that philosopher D. H. Monro in *Argument of Laughter* provided the overarching taxonomy that would set the categories for much of humor studies and especially works on the philosophy of humor. Monro himself writes, “There is no lack of books on humour. But as a rule each writer contents himself with developing a theory of his own. The result is that there is no single book which can be recommended to the reader who wants a general survey of all the theories.”<sup>184</sup> Monro’s book attempts to change this trend by categorizing various humor theories. Though Monro’s category of “ambivalence” has since been collapsed into “incongruity” within humor studies at large, his other three categories of superiority, incongruity, and release have continued to be influential. Since this division, other philosophers and theorists have acknowledged or built upon similar divisions among humor theories, including prominent humor linguist

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<sup>183</sup> James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development, and Its Value* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), x-xi.

<sup>184</sup> D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1963), 7.



Victor Raskin,<sup>185</sup> philosopher Noël Carroll,<sup>186</sup> and the especially influential humor philosopher John Morreall.<sup>187</sup>

Because of this categorization work, theorists of humor are now more likely to situate their approaches in relation to other existing approaches to humor, both emphasizing the extent to which their theories are influenced by one or more approaches, and to what extent these approaches are prioritized or developed. If we consider the weight given to each category among contemporary humor scholars, however, the superiority theory maintains only a questionable hold as a priority for humor theories. Looking at the 2014 field-standard-setting tome *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, edited by influential linguist Salvatore Attardo and containing 335 articles by recognized scholars on their areas of humor expertise, there are entries for various categories of humor including “Incongruity and Resolution,” “Release Theories of Humor,” and the post-Monro frequent favorite of “Play and Humor,” with no superiority or disparagement theory to be found. The only prominent place where superiority theory is permitted to make a cameo is in Morreall’s entry on “Philosophy of Humor,” where it is mostly relegated to a past historical perspective that has been refuted.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Raskin, 31.

<sup>186</sup> Carroll, Noël. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>187</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, vii.

<sup>188</sup> John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 2: 566-567.

Morreall also acknowledges that some categories of humor lost considerable influence during the taxonomic process, focusing specifically the relief theory of humor losing uptake by contemporary theorists due to its focus on emotions and complex psychic processes. Though an association between humor and simpler physical and psychological forms of release have persisted, few theories now prioritize relief as humor's core element in comparison to incongruity.<sup>189</sup> While I focus on superiority theory in this chapter, I will also later discuss the connection between power and emotions in social and political humor, so it is important to now note Morreall's hastiness to dispel emotions from relevancy to humor in contrast to its intellectual character.<sup>190</sup>

The ghost of superiority theory does make its way into entries such as "Aggressive and Harmless Humor," which as I argued in the previous chapter takes a non-systemic individualist approach to such uses of humor, but superiority theory itself has lost its mark upon the field. Why should a category of humor often taken to include influential contributors as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Bergson fall into such disregard? As I will argue below, the centrality of humor's politics and social relationships of power to superiority theories of humor was gradually placed into the box of "superiority theory," considered as an obsolete category to understand the core operations of humor. While other theories such as incongruity took center stage, the inseparability of power

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<sup>189</sup> Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," 568.

<sup>190</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 101.

from superiority theories of humor caused these theories to lose influence during humor's categorization and subsequent consolidation as humor studies and philosophy of humor.

Following the categorization of humor theories, philosophers of humor have often divided humor theories into general categories to emphasize each theory's inability to stand as the sole or primary explanation of humor, with each category failing to integrate some critical feature of how humor operates when considered in isolation. Morreall, for example, critiques superiority theory for its inability to explain all instances of humor,<sup>191</sup> along with incongruity theory for failing to explain all instances of laughter (though he notes it may cover all humor).<sup>192</sup> He also critiques relief or release theories for depending on overly complex models of the psyche.<sup>193</sup> Carroll likewise critiques superiority theories for failing to set up superiority as a necessary condition of all or most humor,<sup>194</sup> incongruity theories for providing a necessary but not always sufficient condition of humor,<sup>195</sup> and release theories for being overly complex.<sup>196</sup> The third in this triad of professionally influential contemporary humor philosophers, a unit consisting of a three people, is the work of Hurley, Dennett, and Adams in *Inside Jokes*. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams run through humor theorists to argue that superiority theories fail to explain

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<sup>191</sup> John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1983), 13.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>194</sup> Carroll, 11

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

humor's mechanism and evolutionary justification,<sup>197</sup> emphasize that incongruity theories (though promising) lack explanatory power for why particular instances of incongruity or frame-shifting are funny,<sup>198</sup> and argue release theories fail to account for jokes without emotionally charged subject matter.<sup>199</sup> These contemporary humor philosophers thus envision humor as a multidimensional phenomenon that earlier theorists thought they could explain through limited (and limiting) attempts to capture its essence without considering the work of other humor theorists.

From this failure, Morreall, Carroll, and Hurley et al. seek to build a better theory that will include the strongest insights on humor while discarding the weaker ones.<sup>200</sup> However, just like the bracketing of systematic social and political concerns from general theories of humor studies that I discussed in the previous chapter, the focus of humor philosophers on the necessary features of humor has displaced the earlier focus on power and hierarchy found in earlier superiority theories to the periphery of humor theory. Because superiority theories of humor have been dismissed for failing to account for the necessary features of humor's operations as distinguished from social arrangements, their concern with power and hierarchy also risks getting dismissed to the periphery of humor theory. This also risks leaving social and political philosophies of humor behind if humor

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<sup>197</sup> Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 42-43.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>200</sup> Carroll, 37; Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 26; Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 57.

theories continue to focus on the mechanics and necessary/sufficient conditions of humor at the expense of centering humor's social and political importance.

What I am arguing here is not for a naive return to superiority theory in the vein of Rousseau or Hobbes or Plato, but instead an updated theory of humor that takes into account its distinct operations as humor while also centering its relationship to power. For example, I do not dispute that the superiority theories of old may fall laughably short when explaining much nonsense humor and jokes that do not seem to exclusively depend on social and political work, such as:

Did you hear about the business that runs on clouds?

One could say that it's seeking the accumululus of capital!<sup>201</sup>

In this case, it seems reasonable to follow philosophers such as Carroll who might suggest that it trades on the comic amusement of juxtaposing business, clouds, cumulus, and accumulation rather than an assertion of superiority or disparagement.<sup>202</sup> However, there is more at stake in the categorization of humor and the prioritization of its depoliticized operations than retiring some of the dustier theories to the attic so they stop taking up undue space in comprehensive analyses or encyclopedias on the subject. When humor theorists depoliticize humor or treat its politics as secondary, they lose grasp of humor's distinct social and political practices, including its relationship with inequality and power.

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<sup>201</sup> The author accepts all the blame for this joke.

<sup>202</sup> Carroll, 16.

In the previous chapter, in addition to opposing my “feminist balderdash” with Christie Davies’ assertion that humor is apolitical, I discussed influential contemporary theories such as Raskin’s and Attardo’s that deemphasize the relationships between social hierarchies and jest. It may thus be tempting to blame the linguists for contemporary disassociations between humor and power, but I am now building on my argument from the previous chapter to propose that philosophers are equally accountable for depoliticizing humor in favor of prioritizing the operations of incongruity theory.

Considered as a matter of the history of philosophy, the relationship between philosophy and the depoliticization of humor is old. In *Critique of Judgement* Immanuel Kant, often characterized as among the originators of incongruity theory,<sup>203</sup> suggests that jest effects a situation in which the understanding is thwarted and relaxes from its expectations, resulting in a bodily “slackening” and a “vibration of our organs” that both balances and promotes health in the body. Laughter, similarly, involves the dissipation of an expectation caused by absurdity into nothing, encouraging the production of “an equilibrium of the vital forces” in the body.<sup>204</sup>

If laughter involves a bodily dissipation of expectation and absurdity into “nothing,” this risks casting laughter as a momentary release that does not have any lasting epistemological effects, let alone social effects. In this context, Kant’s specification that laughter is triggered by a dissipation of expectation marks him as one of the earliest incongruity theorists of humor, since he classifies humor as an incongruity

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<sup>203</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 10; Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 47.

<sup>204</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 202-203.

between an expectation of the understanding and the material of the jest.<sup>205</sup> Kant's focus on humor's ability to dissipate expectations has also led him to be associated with relief theories of humor, which stress humor as a form of relief from tension.<sup>206</sup> Kant thus put forth an influential theory of humor that, in contrast to older superiority theories, focuses on the dissipation of humor's content rather than its effects or relationship to social hierarchies.

Following this Kantian trend, contemporary works in philosophy of language have also led to an association between humor and non-effect. For example, H. P. Grice's discussion of his cooperative principle in "Logic and Conversation," consisting of quantity, quality, relation, and manner in speech,<sup>207</sup> has influenced much of contemporary humor studies. Humor theorists of language have worked to more explicitly tie Grice's framework to humorous language, distinguishing between language's usual *bona-fide* course<sup>208</sup> and contrasting this with a *non-bona-fide* practice of speech as humor (in which the usual straightforward, economic, and cooperative mode of language is transgressed). In this framework, *non-bona-fide* humorous speech also involves the dissipation of language's goal to convey information, as it now aims for play and laughter.<sup>209</sup> Hence, while Grice himself does not consider the question of whether or not humor is a device

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<sup>205</sup> Kant, 203.

<sup>206</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 15-16.

<sup>207</sup> H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics: Speech Acts*, ed. Peter Cole and J. L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 3: 45-46.

<sup>208</sup> Raskin, 88-89.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

for carrying effects or whether humor can be connected to social hierarchy, distinctions in humor studies between *bona-fide* speech as a way to carry information and *non-bona-fide* as a noneffective, humorous mode of speech has casted Grice's philosophy of language in the service of a socially noneffective theory of humor.

Whereas superiority and disparagement theories as a group have been categorized as obsolete due to their inability to provide necessary conditions of humor, Kant's engagement in socially non-effective incongruity theory and Grice's influence on *non-bona-fide* humor have helped shape humor studies as an interdisciplinary area of research. In philosophy, John Morreall, Noël Carroll, and Hurley et al. have accepted incongruity theory as the most compelling contemporary approach to humor.<sup>210</sup> In wider humor studies, Raskin's and Attardo's general theory of verbal humor provides a linguistic spin on incongruity theory through an emphasis on oppositions in script-based semantics.<sup>211</sup> This marks a significant movement away from superiority or disparagement theories, which may have an enshrined place in the recorded history of humor theory, but only as a now-obsolete stage towards depoliticized incongruities. The history of the depoliticization and the noneffectiveness of humor in humor studies thus serves as an important influence for its contemporary consolidation, marking the moment where humor studies "grew up" from idiosyncratic theories that were not in conversation with each other into a lively taxonomy favoring humor's operations but no longer centering its social relationships.

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<sup>210</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50-52; Carroll, 48; Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 60.

<sup>211</sup> Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 86.



## The Result: Contemporary Humor Ethics without Politics

The depoliticization of humor theories has resulted in contemporary philosophies of humor failing to account for humor's social and political power, causing them to instead prioritize an individualistic ethics of unwarranted disengagement or individual intentions that cannot account for humor's continued relationship with inequality and public space. In this section I look at Morreall's, Carroll's, and Hurley et al. specifically, as their prioritization of incongruity theory fails to account for humor's social and political effects.

First, Morreall's project of building a better philosophy of humor causes his ethics of humor to focus on disengagement rather than its political effects. Pulling together a range of humor theories but prioritizing incongruity theories, Morreall asserts that humor consists of cognitive shifts that disengage people from "conceptual and practical concerns."<sup>212</sup> Because Morreall attributes this interplay of expectation and changing perceptions to the intellect and rationality, he argues that humor is not emotional because it disengages us from a situation rather than encouraging emotional involvement.<sup>213</sup> Morreall also argues that humor is not performative, since jokes "suspend the guidelines of pragmatics" and use words for the sake of intellectual pleasure and entertainment rather than causing actions or beliefs.<sup>214</sup> Morreall's approach to humor thus reflects the

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<sup>212</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-36.

preference for characterizing humor as primarily disengagement and incongruity (in the mode of cognitive/intellectual shifts) over a more involved relationship with power.

This emphasis on humor as intellectual non-engagement influences Morreall's turn toward humor ethics at the expense of humor politics. After labeling much of the literature on the maliciousness of racist and sexist jokes as "naïve,"<sup>215</sup> and dismissing examples of humor as racist or sexist,<sup>216</sup> Morreall instead refers to his theory of humor as disengagement to suggest that the ethics of humor is related to humor's potential for promoting irresponsibility,<sup>217</sup> desensitization,<sup>218</sup> and temporarily removing harmful stereotypes from moral scrutiny.<sup>219</sup> Morreall does acknowledge social hierarchies in the context of stereotypes, as he finds it objectionable for people with social power to perpetuate harmful stereotypes through jokes about the less powerful.<sup>220</sup> However, this remains secondary to his focus on humor as an act of distancing, and for his theory humor primarily errs when used to insensitively disengage from the real harmful effects of existing stereotypes.

Returning to the passage from Rousseau on the "laughter of mockers" from the beginning of this chapter, Morreall's position would hold that laughter targeted at women

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 98-101.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 110.

to silence their stories is unethical because it intellectually distances an amused person from a woman's reports of rape. This intellectual distancing reflects the worst aspects of humor's "anesthesia of the heart,"<sup>221</sup> a phrase Morreall borrows from Bergson to emphasize humor's potential for unethical distancing.<sup>222</sup> However, this approach to humor ethics also fails to acknowledge the potential of humor and laughter to not only sit back and allow existing stereotypes to function, but also work within a larger network of power and hierarchical relationships that the practice of humor can perpetuate or even produce in novel ways. That is to say that centering humor as a practice of distancing and disengagement misses its productive deployment in a social world of unequal power relations, charging Rousseau with a mere insensitivity when his proposed laughter would actively uphold misogyny.

Feminists have often emphasized that interactions between men and women are both produced and productive of larger inequalities in society, ranging from economic relationships<sup>223</sup> to sexual harassment<sup>224</sup> and rape culture.<sup>225</sup> Initially, Morreall's grasp of

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<sup>221</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 30.

<sup>222</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: MacMillan, 1914), 5.

<sup>223</sup> See Pat Mainardi, "The Politics of Housework," in *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), 83.

<sup>224</sup> See Dierdre Davis, "The Harm That Has No Name: Street Harassment, Embodiment, and African American Women," in *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism*, ed. Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 214.

<sup>225</sup> See Jackson Katz, *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2006), 149.

laughter and humor seems to parallel Rousseau's as the former refers to distancing and the latter refers to a boy overcoming his fears of a mask. However, Rousseau's distinct emphasis on education involves the boy engaging with the situation of laughter by actively bolstering himself over the mask rather than using laughter to promote an existing stereotype. After all, the initial situation prior to the laughter risks being one of fear, and Rousseau intends to escalate the boy beyond this moment. Rousseau's superiority theory thus distinctly suggests that laughter is engaged with a situation rather than merely intellectually disengaged, and hence his shift towards laughter and rape is productive of power relations rather than merely acquiescing to existing norms.

Though an appeal to existing sexist norms is certainly part of Rousseau's emphasis on laughter against claims of rape, laughter is also related to his active production of rape (and specifically women's naming of it) as a contradiction, and the use of laughter is among a constellation of practices attempting to enshrine a denial of women's voices into the fabric of social reality. In this context, Moira Gatens asserts that Rousseau's *Emile* strives to deny women from any "entry into civic life" which remains the province of men.<sup>226</sup> Laughter in this instance is thus not merely an act of unethical distancing between individuals that falls back on existing stereotypes, but also a reinforcement of the social and political power that men hold over women in a patriarchal society (both ours and in Rousseau's framework of society). Morreall's ethics of humor this misses a crucial link between humor, laughter, and the engaged reinforcement of patriarchy.

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<sup>226</sup> Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13.

Carroll's ethics of humor, like Morreall's, emphasizes incongruity, but also fails to account for the social and political effects of humor by focusing too heavily on the humorist's intentions at the expense of considering humor's larger relationship with power. Carroll distinguishes himself from Morreall's intellectual distancing approach to humor by instead asserting that humor (or his preferred term of "comic amusement" via perceived incongruity) is emotional<sup>227</sup> in addition to engaging cognition.<sup>228</sup> When discussing the ethics of humor, Carroll also acknowledges that humor can enforce problematic social norms<sup>229</sup> and asserts that the context and intentions of a joke can make it moral or immoral.<sup>230</sup> Carroll's approach may thus seem initially more promising for a social and political consideration of humor than Morreall's, since his emphasis on incongruity does not exclude a larger social context of power relations beyond the play of stereotypes.

However, Carroll's theory of humor loses its potential for a social and political account when he tethers humor's correct interpretation to the humorist's intentions. Morreall stresses that humor allows people "to entertain emotions towards fictional beings that we would not mobilize for their comparable real-world counterparts,"<sup>231</sup> which means that humor can entertain hypothetical situations that should not be

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<sup>227</sup> Carroll, 55.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

interpreted directly, giving joke tellers the benefit of a doubt when they seem to be making ethically dubious claims. Carroll seeks to maintain a “moderate moralism” towards humor which simultaneously acknowledges that intentionally vilifying humor and humor that promotes harmful stereotypes or indifference can be immoral,<sup>232</sup> while also calling for caution because any given joke may be more sophisticated in its target than it initially seems.<sup>233</sup> In this context, Carroll suggests that jokes which seem to play into harmful societal norms should not be straightforwardly interpreted as such if there are other non-offensive possibilities for their interpretation.<sup>234</sup> This emphasis on the fictional, suspended aspects of humor combined with a suggestion to seek alternative intentions of seemingly unethical or harmful humor results in an appeal to the humorist’s intentions beyond straight-forward interpretations.

Carroll’s focus on the intentions of individual joke-tellers falls short of a social and political analysis of humor when he specifically considers a rape joke as his example. He references the following joke formulation:

M (a well-known female celebrity, widely rumored to be sexually hyperactive) visits a hockey team. When she emerges, she complains she has been gang raped; to which the narrator responds, “Wishful thinking.”<sup>235</sup>

While Carroll does acknowledge that at first glance this joke seems to play into sexist assumptions, he suggests that because this laughter of mockers can be plausibly

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 93.

interpreted as centered around the “hypocrisy” of a woman who is attempting to cover up her hypersexuality by lying about gang rape<sup>236</sup> we should cease any potential indignation and instead figure out the intended target of ridicule. To do otherwise would restrict the joke to an interpretation as sexist, which Carroll stresses would be only one intention among many possible intentions.<sup>237</sup> Carroll thus asks us to center the teller of the rape joke, who may have intended to reference rape in the service of a more important insight about hypocrisy and suddenly finds himself beset by “hasty” accusations of sexism.

Momentarily suspending my rage that Carroll and his editors would see fit to refer to a joke about a woman lying about rape as unrelated to sexism and sexist assumptions, Carroll’s example indicates a total failure to adequately account for social and political concerns due to his restriction of humor ethics to fictional suspension, ambiguous interpretations, and individual intentions. Carroll’s ethics of humor prioritizes charity towards the individual joke teller’s intentions, but any theory of social hierarchy (I have feminism and patriarchy in mind here) does not require intent to establish a reference or reinforcement of inequality and oppressive norms. In fact, feminist philosophers such as Carole Pateman<sup>238</sup> and philosophers of race such as Charles Mills<sup>239</sup> have argued that an appeal to supposedly benevolent intentions and to well-

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> See Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 93-94.

<sup>239</sup> See Mills, Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 18.

meaning ignorance can perpetuate systems of racism and sexism. The rape joke teller can reinforce social norms and hierarchies regardless of their individual understanding or intentions for the joke, and may even be deploying a self-deluding sleight of hand by asserting otherwise. Carroll's individualist ethics, like Morreall's, is thus unable to conceive of humor's more complicated relationships with social structures of power, let alone patriarchy.

Finally, the humor ethics of Hurley, Dennett, and Adams initially seems to accommodate for a social and political philosophy of humor more than Morreall and Carroll, but they too ultimately lose sight of humor's power by emphasizing that humor's social use is only tertiary to humor's central purpose as an evolutionary reward for cognitive debugging. The trio suggests that humor is an "*AI-complete problem*," meaning that humor can only be understood if we can make "an artificial agent that *really* thinks."<sup>240</sup> Understanding humor in its robustness is thus a project of capturing a person with a potent theory of mind. Hurley et al., like Morreall and Carroll, linger on incongruity theory and distinctly attempt to shift from Raskin's and Attardo's script- or frame-reliant theory of humor by pointing towards a less cumbersome model of "*just-in-time spreading activation*."<sup>241</sup> Finding their way in between Morreall's intellectual humor and Carroll's attribution of humor to emotion, Hurley et al. link humor with the feeling of mirth,<sup>242</sup> and argue that this emotion can serve as a rational motivation for human

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<sup>240</sup> Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 4-5.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



survival and reproduction, constitutive of an “epistemic emotion.”<sup>243</sup> In this context, Hurley et al. attempt to provide an evolutionary rationale for humor, arguing that humor is a practice of “debugging” our delusive false assumptions through the reward of mirthful pleasure upon discovering a mistake.<sup>244</sup> Hurley et al. thus provide a theory that not only builds upon humor studies in key ways, but also suggests why we might have humor to begin with.

In this context, the philosophical triad articulates explicit feminist considerations. Turning to the question of why gender differences exist in relation to humor, Hurley et al. assert that disparities between humor production in men and women are ultimately socially influenced.<sup>245</sup> Men have effected a situation in which they are seen as more capable via wit in contrast to women as subservient “appreciators of men’s wit,” and Hurley et al. consider this all the more reason “to applaud the women who brave the stand-up stage, despite this social force.”<sup>246</sup> The team thus seems willing to embrace a feminist expansion of who is permitted to tell jokes.

Despite this brief feminist message, the trio is less impressive when (briefly) theorizing humor’s relationship to power and hierarchy. They assert that humor is indeed deployed to point out another’s deficiencies to cast “the humorist *and the addressed audience*” as superior, harkening back to the claims of superiority and disparagement

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 296.

theories.<sup>247</sup> However, this use of humor is “not its original or even secondary purpose,”<sup>248</sup> and hence not central in comparison to an embodied mind’s evolutionary enjoyment of debugging its own mistakes. Similarly, when considering humor’s deployment as a social corrective, Hurley et al. emphasize that it mostly serves to “point our mistakes” in what amounts to a gentle encouragement that others revise their behaviors.<sup>249</sup> In focusing on humor as an AI-complete problem, their approach has effectively been to build a purpose for humor from the ground up for an embodied individual who is only secondarily a creature brought up into a social and hierarchical world.

Hurley et al.’s attempts at a social and political philosophy is thus only an afterthought to their typical focus on variations of incongruity theory, and is at best skeletal and gestural. In contrast, I am interested in a social and political philosophy of humor that centers the power and hierarchical relationships of our social world first, and takes this seriously as a core (and not merely secondary or tertiary) lens of approach to the subject. Rousseau’s laughter of mockers may indeed be attempting to “correct” women’s self-assertions and recruit others to laugh along as well, but this occurs in a complicated relationship with norms and patriarchy that cannot be adequately explicated when the politics of humor is displaced to the backburner of the analysis. Likewise, if considered as a social corrective, Rousseau’s scenario plugs into larger systematic forces and more precise operations of social power than a simple gentle encouragement. Hurley

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

et al.'s account is thus only adequate for a reader satisfied by the faintest gestures to a person's wider social world.

For these reasons, I am unsatisfied with contemporary comprehensive philosophies of humor that have formed alongside the consolidation of humor studies and its taxonomies. In keeping with the general state of the field, they tend to prioritize the legacy of non-effective humor linked with the history of depoliticized incongruity theories at the expense of centering the relationship between humor and power.

### When Power was Free to Laugh: Revisiting Superiority Theory

What, then, does it look like when theories of humor center power and social relationships? In this section I look at the humor theories grouped under "superiority" and "disparagement" as important historical examples that are nonetheless limited for a contemporary feminist social and political philosophy of humor. The reason why I find this useful is that in contrast to contemporary humor philosophy, the theories grouped under the rubric of disparagement of superiority theory centered power. Morreall traces superiority theory back to Plato's *Philebus*<sup>250</sup> due to Socrates' discussion of laughter as a device through which people can level down "the ridiculous," those inferior and viceful others who prop themselves up through imagined wealth, beauty, or superiority.<sup>251</sup> Morreall lists Aristotle as a similarly superiority-focused philosopher of humor<sup>252</sup> due to

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<sup>250</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 4; Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 4; John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>251</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Dorothea Frede, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 438.

<sup>252</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 5.

his emphasis on comedy involving “an imitation of men worse than average” on account of their “ludicrous” ugliness.<sup>253</sup> While this approach falls prey to the cluster of critiques that would lump in Plato’s and Aristotle’s insights with the broader failure to identify the proper necessary conditions of humor, Aristotle shares with Plato the characterization of comedy and laughter as targeted at inferior persons, and hence an emphasis on the relationship between humor, power, and social order. In this view it is not only that I laugh to simply disparage you or cast myself as superior, but also because you turn against the order of things in ways I find positively laughable. Why should you have that crooked smile, those awkward gestures, and insipid goals? It is all very ridiculous in comparison to the rest of the human and natural order, you are ridiculous in turn, and I cast my laughter upon you so you are marked as laughable. Or: I am laughed at, I have done wrong, I represent foolishness, and I am laughed at in turn. In this context, the analysis of humor in some of its oldest accounts cannot be cleaved from an analysis of social dynamics and power.

In modern philosophy, Hobbes discusses power-laden laughter in the context of feelings of superiority that accompany laughing at others.<sup>254</sup> Hobbes is thus often framed as the quintessential superiority theorist due to his emphasis on humor as a passion radiating from superiority and triumph.<sup>255</sup> The Hobbesian view presents a laugh that

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<sup>253</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle: Selected Works*, 3rd edition, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle and Lloyd P. Gerson (Des Moines, IA: Peripatetic Press, 1991), 651.

<sup>254</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 125.

<sup>255</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 6; Carroll, 16.

revels in its power. I have triumphed over you, and laughter's levity lifts me above your feebleness to truly delight in my magnificence.

In these cases, though Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes emphasize relationships of power that may tie to a social order or hierarchy, but they do not explicitly discuss larger social structures. However, Bergson, who is frequently discussed in the context of both superiority theory and his own distinct mechanical theory of humor,<sup>256</sup> explicitly frames humor as a practice of societal policing. Though Morreall appropriates Bergson's emphasis on humor as an "anesthesia of the heart,"<sup>257</sup> Bergson also distinctly emphasizes humor as a force of social correction against those who become rigid and nonadaptable in the context of society and life in general.<sup>258</sup> Looking through Bergsonian eyes, when encountered by clockwork souls, absentminded ticks, and simulacrums in human drag, society imbues us with laughter in the name of life so to avoid its reduction to repetitious mechanism. And if we find ourselves repetitive, constantly repeating ourselves, saying the same message over and over again, laughter serves as punishment for turning against vitality. Bergson thus presents humor here as the operation through which society molds its subjects and their gestures towards a more socially acceptable, even if supposedly more vital, way of being. Bergson's approach thus deploys laughter and humor as tools for mass social correction, with each laugh and giggle serving as a defense mechanism to protect the vital social organism.

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<sup>256</sup> See Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 54-55.

<sup>257</sup> Bergson, 5.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

In each of these approaches, there is a richer topography centering power, hierarchy, and social control than the box of superiority can contain. These theories are not solely about one person mistreating another, but also a more robust way of situating humor in a social world with others involving differences in power and differing placements according to the social order. In this context, it is useful to consider that superiority theory is not a static, dead, category, but in rather the origins of a social and political philosophy that was too quickly confined to humor studies' attic. By locking these theories into such a general grouping, their complicated and differing approaches to humor's power lose due consideration.

However, this does not mean that my turn towards a feminist social and political philosophy of humor requires directly returning to these old philosophies of humor. While I find their emphasis on humor and power relations useful, none of these theories focus on gender and patriarchy to an extent that would be satisfying for a feminist theorist. The social and political philosophy of humor from Plato to Bergson also seems at best neutral and at worst enthusiastic about humor as a means of establishing unequal power relationships or reinforcement of the status quo. Bergson, for example, seems positively excited that humor as a means for social control can rightly contest automatism in favor of life.<sup>259</sup> In contrast, my feminist perspective leads me to be more suspicious about top-down deployments of social correctives, given the extent to which patriarchy has shaped a sexist social order.

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 32.

For this reason, as an example of more contemporary considerations of humor and its power, I will turn to feminist and transfeminist theory to consider the social and political effects of humor when deployed on the stage of stand-up comedy and in public space. Doing this will not only help work towards an explicit feminist social and political consideration of humor, but also indicate that such a feminist social and political philosophy of humor needs to go farther into considering humor's operations and transform the landscape of humor studies even in the realm of incongruous acts and wordplay.

#### Laughter and Misogyny: Kate Manne and Stand-Up Comedy

In *Down Girl*, Kate Manne sets out to define misogyny as distinct from sexism, objectification, and patriarchy. Specifically, Manne describes sexism as a branch of justification for the oppression of women, misogyny as a branch that enforces the oppression of women, and patriarchal ideology as the underlying systematic ideology of male dominance over women that utilizes both sexism and misogyny.<sup>260</sup> In this system, Manne emphasizes that misogyny “functions to enforce and police women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on.”<sup>261</sup> Misogyny is thus the “law enforcement branch”

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<sup>260</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

responding to potential threats to the norms of patriarchy.<sup>262</sup> In addition to including violence and threats, Manne associates with misogyny a long list of actions aiming to punish, deter, or warn, including “ridiculing, humiliating, [and] mocking,” indicating that practices related to laughter could be used for misogyny.<sup>263</sup> I will argue in this section that Manne’s account of misogyny can be used to explain laughter targeting women with more explanatory power through a focus on social and political dynamics than an individualist ethics of humor.

I opened this section with a discussion of Rousseau’s “laughter of mockers,” tying it with the association between rape and laughter by both comedian Daniel Tosh and a student at Steubenville in 2012. Considered in more detail, I will argue here that Tosh’s actions were an instance of misogyny going beyond an individual ethical relationship into a broader system of inequality targeting women for punishment and silencing under patriarchy.

In 2012 comedian Daniel Tosh, star of Comedy Central's then highest rated show Tosh.0, which continued its high ratings streak in 2018,<sup>264</sup> told a rape joke at the Laugh Factory in that was afterwards widely discussed on the Internet. News of the joke broke

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>264</sup> Comedy Central Press, “Comedy Central Finishes March as #1 Non-Sports Network Across Total Day Among Millennial Men and Sees 20% Ratings Jump Among Women 18-49 During 1Q 2018,” Comedy Central, April 3, 2018, <https://press.cc.com/press-release/2018/04/03/press-comedy-central-finishes-march-as-number-1-non-sports-network-across-total-day-and-sees-ratings-jump-among-women/>.



when a woman described her experience attending Tosh's show on Tumblr, a popular (but recently declining) blogging and social networking website, writing,

So Tosh then starts making some very generalizing, declarative statements about rape jokes always being funny, how can a rape joke not be funny, rape is hilarious, etc. I don't know why he was so repetitive about it but I felt provoked because I, for one, DON'T find them funny and never have. So I didn't appreciate Daniel Tosh (or anyone!) telling me I should find them funny. So I yelled out, "Actually, rape jokes are never funny!"<sup>265</sup>

After this, Tosh responded with, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her..."<sup>266</sup> She then left the show while the audience watched and laughed at her. Her challenge to Tosh's attempt to cast rape jokes as universally funny was thus responded to by "the laugh of mockers" encountered through Rousseau, this time laden with violence through its threatening style of targeting in front of a hostile audience, her disagreement trivialized as not worth confronting on its own terms. The woman who objected to Tosh, explaining her decision to speak out against his assertion that rape jokes are funny, wrote,

I did it because, even though being "disruptive" is against my nature, I felt that sitting there and saying nothing, or leaving quietly, would have been against my values as a person and as a woman. I don't sit there while someone tells me how I should feel about something as profound and damaging as rape.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> breakfastcookie, "So a Girl Walks into a Comedy Club....," Cookies for Breakfast, Tumblr, last modified July 2012, <http://breakfastcookie.tumblr.com/post/26879625651/so-a-girl-walksinto-a-comedy-club/>.

<sup>266</sup> The owner of the Laugh Factory, Jamie Masada, later claimed, "Daniel [Tosh] came in, and he said, 'Well it sounds like she's been raped by five guys' — something like that. I really didn't hear properly." See Odell. Even if we were to believe Masada, who disputes what the woman said while admitting he did not hear it very well, such a joke was still used to silence the woman who spoke out and trivialize the actuality of rape and the speech of victims of rape.

<sup>267</sup> breakfastcookie.

And yet, her attempt to break the silence about rape in the comedy club was shifted back into silence when Tosh and his audience joined in laughter against her words.

In this instance, Tosh is not using laughter to explicitly assert that claims of having been raped should be silenced as lies in the same way as Rousseau, but his technique of humor nonetheless silences the actuality of rape. By claiming that rape jokes are always funny, Tosh is condoning his following action of using a joke about a woman being raped to silence her words. He is also trivializing, through this violent joke, the fact that rape is already used to silence and restrict the lives of women, presenting the idea itself of a woman being raped into silence as something for the audience to laugh at.

Additionally, Tosh is condoning jokes such as the one given during his comedy special,

*Happy Thoughts:*

I play practical jokes on [my sister] constantly though. I got her so good a few weeks ago. I replaced her pepper spray with silly string. Anyway, that night she got raped. And she called me the next day going, “You son of a bitch! You got me so good!...As soon as I started spraying him in the face I’m like DANIEL! This is gonna really hurt!”<sup>268</sup>

A significant element of this joke involves the simultaneous presentation of a casual reaction to a practical joke with the seriousness of rape. However, laughing at a juxtaposition between rape and triviality, which may initially seem edgy or transgressive, does not confront the actuality that rape is already often trivialized and dismissed.

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<sup>268</sup> Daniel Tosh,. *Daniel Tosh: Happy Thoughts* (New York: Comedy Central, 2011), DVD.

Through his joke, Tosh is reinforcing already existing patterns that result in the silencing of women who were raped and silence about rape in general.

At the time popular comedian Louis C.K., who later himself admitted to sexual misconduct against women comedians in the form of ejaculating in front of them,<sup>269</sup> was asked to weigh in on the Tosh controversy by fellow male comedian Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*. C. K. remarked,

“I’ve read some blogs during this whole thing that enlightened me about some things I didn’t know. This woman said how rape is something that polices women’s lives. They have a narrow corridor that they can’t go out late, they can’t go to certain neighborhoods, they can’t dress a certain way, ‘cause they might get...so that’s now part of me now...”<sup>270</sup>

C. K. remained silent about women also getting policed when interacting with predatory comedians like himself. Nevertheless, C. K.’s response began to acknowledge that jokes about rape can be silencing and contribute to the silencing of the actuality of rape and the threats of rape that women must deal with every day.

In the same interview, though C. K. criticizes the inability of stand-up comedians to take criticism, he also claims that “any joke about anything bad is great,” including rape. Earlier in the interview C. K. emphasizes the importance of dialogue, conversation, and listening, so it could be that he believed jokes about bad topics that are often not discussed are great because they use the opportunity that a humor venue offers to open

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<sup>269</sup> Melena Ryzik, Cara Buckley, and Jodi Kantor, “Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/television/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct.html/>.

<sup>270</sup> Louis C. K., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, “Louis C. K.,” hosted by Jon Stewart, aired July 16, 2012 on Comedy Central, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/4per11/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-louis-c-k-/>.

the floor for conversation rather than continue the pattern of silence. However, even this perhaps overly charitable interpretation fails to recognize that the way these jokes are told vary and can often lead to further silence, such as the effect that Tosh's rape joke had in driving the woman who challenged him from the room. C. K.'s defense of Tosh also ignored the complicated ways of jokes and laughter can restrict the terms through which people can speak to begin with, such as when the woman attempted to speak about a subject often pushed into silence in front of a laughing man and his laughing crowd. This lack of complexity is also present in Tosh's apology tweets on Twitter, where he wrote,

all the out of context misquotes aside, i'd like to sincerely apologize" but then clarified his original intention with, "the point i was making before i was heckled is there are awful things in the world but you can still make jokes about them #deadbabies<sup>271</sup>

Even if Tosh intended to be sincere, the point fails to recognize the ability of not only Tosh's and his audience's laughter but also the capacity for the laughter of mockers more broadly to differentially silence groups of people and their experiences.

One response to the discussion of Tosh's joke, made by comedian Dom Irrera, was to remark, "Do you think all the things we say we mean, do you think he really thought that? How stupid is the overreaction to this? You might as well say that about all comedy then."<sup>272</sup> Ironically, Irrera was correct that this critique might be used for a larger critique of comedy, though he intended to join the chorus of people defending comedy from the voices of the outraged. Among the outraged voices of male comedians, the focus

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<sup>271</sup> Daniel Tosh, Twitter post, July 10, 2012, 1:57 p. m., <https://twitter.com/danieltosh/status/222796636559130624/>.

<sup>272</sup> Elex Michaelson, "Daniel Tosh Apologizes for Rape Joke at Laugh Factory," ABC 7 KABC-TV Los Angeles web site, July 11, 2012, <https://abc7.com/archive/8733290/>.

on a misunderstood intention through Tosh, the importance of joking about bad events through C. K., and the distinction between what comedians say and what they mean through Irrera, links back to individualist ethical theories of humor as discussed by Morreall and Carroll. Carroll's interpretation of rape jokes according to the intentions of the joke teller,<sup>273</sup> thus granting Tosh priority over his interpretation over its impact on the woman in the audience. C. K. does acknowledge, like Morreall, that such jokes can signal a problematic distancing between the unaffected comedian and the effect of rape on many women's lives but does not acknowledge that the joke itself could be participating in the silencing oppression imposed by rape culture rather than merely unethically insensitive. Finally, Irrera's words echoes the focus of much of humor theory outside the ethics of humor, namely, that the woman in the audience misunderstood that Tosh's humor is doing something else entirely than creating an ethical or political situation.

The proposed approaches by male comedians and the more sophisticated theoretical frameworks they echo potentially miss the role of misogyny in the situation created by Tosh. The comedian's stage is a space of attention, where the comedian delivers jokes for the varying approval or disapproval of their audience, expressed as roaring laughter, clapping, awkward spare laughter, damning silences, and even more damning booing sounds. This attention and response dynamic centers the people on stage while the audience reacts primarily as a crowd, not intended to draw attention to any individuated person audibly responding in the crowd but instead to continue drawing their attention towards the performer. Hence, heckling from the crowd is usually considered a particularly egregious sin because it disrupts the attention due to the

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<sup>273</sup> Carroll, 95.

comedian and redirects it to a now individualized person who is not due attention standing out from the crowd.

Because of the dynamics of attention in performances of stand-up comedy, Tosh's action of verbally going after and directing his audience to ridicule a heckler from his audience may be considered his right as a performer on stage. At the time comedian Jim Norton took up this perspective by placing blame on the woman heckler, writing on Twitter, "Some attention-seeking woman heckled a comedian, so if anything, she owes him an apology for being a rude brat. #SayYoureSorryToots."<sup>274</sup> It might thus be tempting for some to dismiss Tosh's response as a justified takedown of a heckler that may or may not have gone too far.

Centering the social and political dynamics of the situation reveals the dynamics of misogyny at play in the situation that the conversations of many comedians and the humor theorists they echo have ignored. Tosh was not only a comedian on stage encountering a heckler in a solely one-on-one encounter, but he is also a man taking up the central space of the stand-up comedy stage that has often pushed women out, as indicated by C. K.'s sexual harassment of women stand-up comics. Tosh was also not only a comedian dealing with a rude heckler, but also a man who was met with response by a woman after using his comedy platform to claim all rape jokes as funny in front of her. Finally, Tosh was not only a comedian doing his best to shut down a heckler by turning the crowd against them, but also a man referencing the threat of rape to join others against a woman in his audience. This indicates that the situation of the comedy

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<sup>274</sup> Jim Norton, Twitter post, July 11, 2012, 11:22 a.m., <https://twitter.com/JimNorton/status/223119997881434113>

stage at work here is not a depoliticized situation of “mere comedy,” but instead a place where the silencing dynamics of misogyny are in play to empower Tosh and push a woman who disagrees with him away from the attention of his crowd and out of the room by punishing her with the specifically gendered threat of gang rape.

Tosh’s threat of rape from the comedy stage as a tactic of gendered silencing is a helpful clue that he is exacting misogyny against the woman who spoke against him, but more details are required to detail the specific operations of misogyny in this political situation. In *Down Girl* Manne argues that a key part of the male dominance that fuels misogyny is the differential norm of giving between men and women. Specifically, women are expected to be “human givers” and provide “moral goods and resources” to men as part of their moral and social role in society.<sup>275</sup> Manne emphasizes, “...women are tasked not only with performing certain forms of emotional, social, domestic, sexual, and reproductive labor but are *also* supposed to so in a loving and caring manner or enthusiastic spirit...”<sup>276</sup> While women are expected to primarily give in this way, gender norms often impose expectations that men are entitled to and owed attention, favor, and care from women.<sup>277</sup> When women refuse to play into this entitlement, Manne provides the analogy of a restaurant customer “who expects to not only be treated deferentially - the customer is always right - but also to be served...attentively with a smile.”<sup>278</sup> When

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<sup>275</sup> Manne, 175.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 130.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

not met with the deference and enthusiasm owed to his position, and even more so when expected to give attention and service to women, Manne points out that men often behave like an angry customer who is not given the service they expect from their server.<sup>279</sup> Manne thus emphasizes that when women do not fulfill their roles as “human giver” in relation to entitled men, men often react with overblown frustration, anger, or even heightened violence to reimpose the gendered norms of domination that supposedly entitle them to special service.

Looking back at Tosh’s reaction to the woman “heckler” after considering the dynamics of misogyny indicates that Tosh using gang rape against the woman in his audience who challenged his freewheeling approach to rape jokes was an instance of misogyny. Considering my earlier point that Tosh was not just a comedian on stage, but also a man occupying a position where he is entitled to a specific kind of attention from the audience, the woman was not merely contesting the norms of stand-up comedy but also challenging gender norms, for which she was punished through Tosh’s misogyny. The woman in the audience refused to give to Tosh the approval he was accustomed to not only as a comedian but also as a man who tells rape jokes, and she stood as especially threatening to not only challenging his stand-up comedy practice as a “heckler” but also as a woman directly challenging his right to make rape jokes in front of others. Met with a woman challenging on the stage, the locus of the attention and praise due to him, Tosh lashed out against her with laughter like Rousseau with the mask, reasserting his power to make rape jokes uncontested in the form of a threat punishing a woman for refusing to accept his entitlement to tell and enjoy any kind of joke. The laughter of mockers is thus

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.



a form of misogyny, and a form of social correction following Bergson for women who refuse to toe the line of letting male comedians say whatever they want onstage. Tosh was thus not merely participating in an individual unethical distancing or exercising his right as stand-up comedian against the abstract figure of a heckler as sworn enemy to stand-up comedy, but also directing misogyny against a woman to silence her and invite the crowd to participate in his misogynistic punishment through laughter. Although this analysis does not merely reiterate superiority theories of laughter and humor, it does center power relations to capture a dynamic of laughter and misogyny that has otherwise been ignored or obscured.

By focusing on this dynamic between men and women in the context of laughter and comedy, I am not claiming that the use of laughter by men is essentially oppressive in contrast to the use of laughter by women as essentially aimed at liberation. This would be an obvious simplification, and I will directly challenge theories of humor as primarily liberatory or oppressive in chapters VI and VII. As Kate Manne argues, misogyny not only punishes transgressions from women but also rewards women who successfully practice the norms such as “constancy and loyalty” towards men,<sup>280</sup> and it is thus not surprising if there were also women in the audience joining in laughter against the woman who spoke out against Tosh. Likewise, men may use laughter to stand against misogyny or refuse to laugh altogether and may be met with punishment or ridicule from others as a result. As Manne emphasizes, misogyny is primarily a system aimed at punishing “‘bad’ women” and policing their behavior, which also involves systems of

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

reward for women who conform to the norms of patriarchy and punishment against men who contest or refuse to perpetuate norms of sex inequality.<sup>281</sup> It is thus important to be careful to not be too reductive during an analysis of power and laughter, even while noting pervasive patterns such as the use of humor, laughter, and comedy for misogyny.

Caveats aside, I have aimed to show that Tosh's actions require an understanding of power and social hierarchies to fully capture the dynamics of misogyny involved rather than a focus on apolitical incongruity, individualist distancing, or the humorist's intentions divorced from social and political life. I have also primarily discussed a dynamic of humor and laughter as social and political that took place through a relationship between a person on stage and a person in the audience, so more analysis is required to address the complicated dynamics of humor and power in public and in person beyond stand-up comedy. I will thus focus on the death of Tyra Hunter in the next section to discuss the relationship between laughter, power, and emotion in public space before concluding this chapter.

#### Laughter, Emotions, and the Restriction of Public Space: Transphobic Laughter

Rousseau imagines women who report rape being met with “the laughter of mockers,” and there are more contemporary examples of mockers deploying laughter and humor in reaction to the presence of people who deviate from a norm in public space, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. I focus specifically on trans studies and transfeminism as a branch of feminism located at the intersections between women's and

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

trans liberation, because trans people as a group are frequently met with violent derision and disrespectful humor about their lives.

In trans studies, the death of Tyra Hunter has often been referred to as an example for discussing transphobia in public space.<sup>282</sup> Hunter was a 24-year-old black trans woman who died in 1995 due to violent EMT inaction after she received treatable injuries from a car crash. Instead of giving Hunter emergency medical care, after discovering that Hunter had a penis, the pair of technicians deployed to help her instead exchanged laughter and disparaging jokes about her condition.<sup>283</sup> Hunter's death is thus relevant for considering connections between laughter, gender, and race in public space because EMTs laughed at her body rather than getting her the immediate care she needed to survive a car crash.

Initially, it may be tempting to fall back on individualist humor ethics to account for the unethical use of humor and laughter by EMTs. Under Hurley, Dennett, and Adam's account, the EMTs' humor can be read as a result of their realization that Hunter's body did not conform to their expectations, and the mirth that interrupted her care is a mirthful reward for their thwarted expectations. However, this ignores the larger social context within which trans bodies are reduced to objects of laughter and jest, since

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<sup>282</sup> Richard Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 712.

<sup>283</sup> Scott Bowles, "A Death Robbed of Dignity Mobilizes a Community," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 1995, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1995/12/10/a-death-robbed-of-dignity-mobilizes-a-community/2ca40566-9d67-47a2-80f2-e5756b2753a6/?utm\\_term=.46622b6156a9/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1995/12/10/a-death-robbed-of-dignity-mobilizes-a-community/2ca40566-9d67-47a2-80f2-e5756b2753a6/?utm_term=.46622b6156a9/).

the effects of this laughter, joke-telling, and their resulting violence cannot be understood separately from systematic social inequalities. As a black trans woman, Hunter was already in a precarious position in relation to structural violence and systematic discrimination, and the laughter and joke-telling participated in this dynamic by meeting her threatened life with ridicule rather than with care. Thus, the response of the EMTs is not merely a neutral personal realization that their assumptions were incorrect, but also ties into larger patterns of derision, dehumanization, inequality, and precarity.

Likewise, we might follow Carroll to argue that these EMTs were unethically reinforcing problematic social norms, and that the intention of their laughter and humor is clearly based on transphobic derision based on norms about bodies. However, issues of determining intention aside, this still does not address the operations and effects through which humor was deployed against Hunter and is directed against other trans people in public space. Even when Carroll's questionable focus on intention is bracketed out, his theory, like Hurley et. al's, suffers from a lack of social and political development and is thus unable to think the political practices of humor beyond a rough sketch of individual intention.

Interestingly, Morreall's theory of unethical humor seems to be the most compelling in this context. Morreall focuses on humor and laughter as a potentially unethical practice that distances people from confronting stereotypes or giving proper concern to others. In this context, then, Morreall might argue that the EMTs practiced an unethical distancing through humor and laughter of themselves from Hunter's predicament. This displacement resulted in their lack of attention to Hunter and the care she needed, resulting in her death at the hands of violent negligence. However, Morreall's

argument about unethical humor relies on humor as practice as disengagement. I will argue instead that humor's relationship with transphobia is more active, but to do this I must discuss transphobia and its relationship with humor and laughter in more detail.

To argue that transphobic humor and laughter are more politically engaged than Morreall suggests, I will discuss an instance of a cis (non-trans) person experiencing transphobia, and the role laughter, humor, and mockery played in restricting and endangering their presence in public space. In 2013, director Ali Coates recorded performance artist Signe Pierce walking around Myrtle Beach in South Carolina at night for a short film called *American Reflexx*.<sup>284</sup> The film also involves a social experiment, as Pierce is wearing a reflective mask obscuring her face, a short blue dress, and lime green high heels, with the film centering the reactions of passersby through subtitles and occasional disorienting video edits. Throughout the night Pierce experiences dehumanizing speech, sexual harassment, a violent shove, and the accumulation of a mob that starts following her around from place to place. Due to the combination of her dress, mask, and poses, Pierce's place as a spectacle and target of the crowd is also informed by transphobia as she is frequently called out to be a trans woman or as "really a man."

The context of a cis woman being read as a trans woman is interesting because it means that her body is taken up as a specific kind of problem in public space through both transphobia and misogyny (often called transmisogyny). As Talia Bettcher argues, trans women are often associated with the realm of "make believe," entailing that their identities are seen as a form of dress-up or costume rather than as authentic or "real" as

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<sup>284</sup> Alli Coates, *American Reflexx*, 2013, video streaming, <http://www.americanreflexx.com/>.

part of the “natural attitude” or gender and sex norms.<sup>285</sup> This is interesting in the context of Pierce’s outfit, because her dress combined with her face-obscuring mirror mask signal to the onlookers that she might be in costume and hence actually a man or at least a false woman. Her mode of being in public space is that of someone whose gender is seen to be masquerade or artifice, like a trans woman, and the reaction to her presence in public space is thus a reaction to readings of her gendered style.

In this context, laughter, jeers, and mocking tones are deployed not as a form of disengagement or distancing but instead as part of the crowd’s engaged reaction to Pierce’s presence as costume/trans woman. Borrowing from the old superiority theorists permits a more detailed consideration of this derision than Morreall’s distancing affords, as the laughter of a crowd against Pierce’s presence in public space is not merely turning away but also a shared practice of the crowd attempting to bolster themselves before a trans woman’s unsettling appearance. Recall the discussion from the beginning of this chapter about Rousseau, the mask, and the “laughter of mockers” against women. Like Rousseau’s reflection on the boy and a mask, transphobic laughter appears as a way of disinvesting Pierce’s body of its power to disturb, the crowd raising themselves so far above her that violently pushing her over seems like a permissible response to the public situation of Coates’ appearance. Bergson would distinctly see this form of laughter as a social corrective, as Pierce is being met with mockful scorn and her presence is indicated as unwelcome unless she changes her ways to better fit the regulated gendered ecosystem of public space. Like with misogyny, the intersection between transmisogyny and

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<sup>285</sup> Talia Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 50.

laughter is an interaction between people in a social and political context constituted by imbalances in power.

However, other than Rousseau's sexism and Bergson's emphasis on societal correction through laughter, these approaches to superiority say little about the regulation of *gender* specifically in public space, whether discussing Tosh's misogyny or the laughing misogyny of a transphobic crowd. Furthermore, Rousseau may even approve of such as scornful approach to a woman acting far beyond the brainwashing he wishes for Sophie, and Bergson considers laughter to be a benign social corrective. These theories are thus mostly helpful for drawing out the engaged practice of humor by people and societies, but a more explicit feminist analysis is required to discuss gendered bodily being in this situation of power and laughter in public space.

I thus find it helpful to turn to Viviane Namaste's discussion of genderbashing in *Invisible Lives*, as she focuses specifically on gender, policing, and violence in public and private space. Namaste builds upon discussions of queerbashing against gay men and lesbian women to argue that violence against sexual and gender minorities are often a matter of "policing gender presentation through private and public space."<sup>286</sup> Namaste notes that because sexuality is frequently read off of gender presentation, situations of violence and harassment frequently are based on normative assumptions about gender expression, including the use of pejorative names and slurs that often are used to justify an attack.<sup>287</sup> Because public (and private) space are regulated based on gender norms,

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<sup>286</sup> Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 135-136.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

Namaste asserts that trans people (and especially trans women) have a higher risk of being violently put in check for daring to enter public space.<sup>288</sup>

Namaste's analysis is helpful for understanding both the violent reactions to Pierce's costumed presence in public space and its relationship with laughter, mockery, and humor-making among the crowd. If Pierce is experiencing, as Namaste suggests, a reaction to her presence as someone perceived to be a trans woman in public space, then gender norms also bring Pierce into contact with violence and other forms of expulsion. Namaste focuses specifically on violence and genderbashing as a parallel to queerbashing, but this expulsion need not reach the level of the person who pushed Pierce onto the sidewalk and caused her leg to bleed. Borrowing from the insights of the old superiority theorists and centering the social and political philosophy of humor in the context of feminist analysis, laughter and jeers serve as part of a spectrum of responding to a body marked as having an abnormal gender (and read as like a woman and hence a target for misogyny) when daring to enter policed sites of gender normativity. This analysis shares with Rousseau, Hobbes, Bergson, and others an emphasis on power differentials that influence deployments of laughter and humor. But by centering a feminist (and here transfeminist) critique, this analysis also avoids seeing this form of expulsion as a good for society or the "superior" laughing individuals, instead situating the deployment of laughter, humor, and jeering as part of the fabric of regulated control of space under patriarchy including misogyny and transmisogyny specifically.

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 145.



Returning to Hunter, her death was not only the result of individual unethical applications of humor by the EMTs, but also part of a larger situation of oppression in which people engage with trans lives through derision and ridicule as a common collective practice in public (and private) space. Humor is thus not only a way through which individuals cause each other harm, but also a larger network of people engaging in complicity with (and resistance against) systematic norms that mark some bodies and lives as threatening and not worthy of care. Hunter was not merely laughed at due to the unethical actions of two EMTs, but also the larger society that fosters transphobic expectations and reactions to bodies that do not fit transphobic, racist, and sexist norms, related to the mechanics of misogyny discussed in the previous section.

Hunter's death at the hand of laughing EMTs also indicates the rich social and political emotional life of laughter as it connects with oppression and violence. I mentioned in the previous chapter that along with power, the emotional life of humor has often been decentered to focus instead on less messy necessary and sufficient conditions of humor. Dennett, Hurley, and Adams consider social and political uses of humor to be secondary to its purposes as an evolutionarily developed reward for epistemic debugging.<sup>289</sup> In contrast, the laughing reaction of the EMTs to Hunter as she was dying goes beyond the emphasis on humor as primarily an epistemic emotion to humor in interaction with other emotions as part of a political situation. It is thus useful to expand an account of the relationship between humor and emotions to include emotions other than mirth that are central to understanding the political life of humor. This emotional life

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<sup>289</sup> Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 292.

is already suggested by some historical superiority theories of laughter and humor, such as the emphasis Hobbes gives to the passions as a link between laughter and a distinct feeling of superiority or power over others.<sup>290</sup> Rousseau too suggests that laughter can be used against objects that cause fear to reduce their power, as I have mentioned several times in this chapter. To develop this link between social and political laughter and emotions with an explicitly feminist analysis, I will draw from scholarship on emotions and affect by Sara Ahmed centering emotions, culture, and politics as intertwined.<sup>291</sup>

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed emphasizes that disgust is frequently mediated by cultural meanings of emotions that stick to some objects and people to signify them as dangerous, polluting, sickening, contaminating, and too close for comfort in a way that demands reactions such as expulsion. Ahmed writes,

To name something as disgusting – typically, in the speech act, “That’s disgusting!” – is performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But to say something is disgusting is still to “make something”; it generates a set of effects, which then adhere as a disgusting object.<sup>292</sup>

Ahmed emphasizes that although disgust does not attach to just any object or person, it arises from a fertile ground of norms to performatively name the object or person as disgusting. In this context, disgust relies on the “historicity of signification,” and hence is

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<sup>290</sup> Hobbes, 125.

<sup>291</sup> In this dissertation, I follow Ahmed in using the words “affect” and “emotion” interchangeably, but it is worth noting that many scholars of affect and emotion distinguish these words in different ways.

<sup>292</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 93.

not merely natural but instead accrued through history and culture.<sup>293</sup> Bodies become threatening not in and of themselves, but through “an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs.”<sup>294</sup> The circulation of emotions such as disgust and their stickiness to specific objects and bodies are thus a social relationship based on interaction deserving of political analysis rather than simply attributed to unmediated natural causes, habits, or dispositions.

Ahmed notes that in some cases of disgust, the object or person associated with disgust is seen to be a too close, threatening, and beneath the disgusted. Ahmed writes,

...the bodies of others become the salient object; they are constructed as being hateful and sickening only insofar as they have got too close. They are constructed as non-human, as beneath and below the bodies of the disgusted. Indeed, through the disgust reaction, ‘belowness’ and ‘beneathness’ become properties of their bodies. They embody that which is lower than human or civil life.<sup>295</sup>

With disgust, encountered objects may be encountered as not only bounded outside human and civil life but also below it, with the othered and lowered status of the encountered object combining with the need to remove it from threatening close contact. It is thus not a surprise that the circulation of disgust is also frequently a circulation of dehumanization, neglect, and violence.

The circulation of disgust emotions likely played a role in the death of Hunter, brought about by the EMTs reacting through laughter. If misogyny, as explained by Manne, frames women as human givers owing services to men, transmisogyny also

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 97.

frames trans women in relation to their utility to men and to the larger situation of gender domination, primarily considered conditional or subhuman lives according to expected gender roles. As Bettcher argues, this subordination occurs at the level of ideology with the “natural attitude” that either trivializes all bodies falling outside non-trans norms or casts them as inherently threatening or violent. As Namaste argues, the regulation of trans bodies is also institutionalized in the construction and policing of public space. The bodies of trans women, as indicated by the prevalence with which they are consumed within pornography and pushed into sex work amidst other forms of mass culture marginalization and the frequent denial of material subsistence through expulsion from the labor force, are frequently tethered to the system in which women are punished for not serving the desires of men as human givers.<sup>296</sup> But due to their deviation from norms about women’s bodies and from expectations about the ideal role of women in relationships, trans women are also frequently not granted the “human giver” role described by Manne as a key factor of misogyny. Rather, through the distortions highlighted by Bettcher that enact transphobia as a reductive trivialization and

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<sup>296</sup> According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Inequality, 20% of trans respondents had participated in underground sources of income, including 12% doing sex work for income, with trans women of color most likely to do sex work. One in five (20%) have participated in the underground economy for income at some point in their lives— including 12% who have done sex work in exchange for income—and 9% did so in the past year, with higher rates among women of color. Trans people who did sex work also experienced higher rates of sexual assault (72%) This corresponds with an unemployment rate (15%) nearly triple the employment rate in the U.S. during the survey (5%). See Sandy E. James, Jody L. Herman, Susan Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet, and Ma’ayan Anafi, *The Report of the 2015 U. S. Transgender Survey*, National Center for Transgender Inequality, December 2016, <https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF>, 5, 14.

sexualization of the other, trans women can be appropriated into this role but also easily thrown away as mere refuse, capable of fitting the needs of the patriarchal state and the individual man but also not considered a clearly appropriate choice for the human giver role. Accorded a specific subhuman or outside-human status through ideology and institutions, the bodies and lives of trans women are thus frequently used or expunged from civil society as is convenient for effecting and maintaining dominant gendered power relationships.

The encounter with Hunter's body by the EMTs is thus not merely a reaction to a trans body that is unexpected, but also a reaction fueled through a specific imbalanced gendered economy that centers some gender roles (men) as receiving attention and care in relation to other gender roles (women) that are expected to serve as human givers (via Manne's analysis), with the bodies of trans women frequently serving on an as-needed or as-wanted basis for more underground forms of male desire. An unwanted trans woman, and especially an unexpected and unwanted trans women's body thus circulates through emotions such as disgust, through which any contact with a trans woman might be experienced emotionally as dangerously close such that she must be pushed away as a dangerous outlier of gendered norms. As Namaste emphasizes, this emotional encounter is often not solely about gender, as it may also circulate histories of disgust around black bodies under racism, women's bodies under patriarchy, and sex worker's bodies under sexualized and racialized capitalism.<sup>297</sup> Disgust thus frequently characterizes the cultural circulation of emotions around trans women's bodies, further distributed by productions

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<sup>297</sup> Viviane Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 20, 23.

of mass culture such as *The Jerry Springer Show* that frame the revelation of an unwanted or unknown trans woman as a scene of spectacle and disgust, revealed not to be a human giver but instead an abject form of gender masked through deception.

This relationship between the social and political circulation of disgust explains the social and political deployment of laughter used by the EMTs against Hunter. The realization that someone is a trans woman, whether mistaken or otherwise, carries with it not just shock but also the danger of having been attracted to her or having shared a world with her. This potential reaction of shock and danger also extends to people who may have unexpectedly provided intimacy or care to a trans woman, as is the occupation of EMTs. Ahmed emphasizes that disgust not only involves a contact between the disgusted and the object or other circulated as disgusting, but also a reaction of pushing away. Ahmed writes,

Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. That contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity: it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of 'being offensive', but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive. The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted. As a result, while disgust over takes the body, it also takes over the object that apparently gives rise to it.<sup>298</sup>

In addition to this relationship of contact and closeness Ahmed emphasizes that disgust motivates a relationship of pushing away, following the work of Julia Kristeva on abjection. Circulated through disgust, the presence of the disgusted risks undermining the stable walled-off self of the disgusted subject through its threatening permeability, and thus must be pushed away as abject.<sup>299</sup> Returning to the EMTs, the emotions of disgust

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<sup>298</sup> Ahmed, 85.

<sup>299</sup> Ahmed, 86.

refract the encountered black trans woman into a mode of too-close-and-must-be-pushed-away, not merely the other of experience but also, following Julia Kristeva, the threatening abject whose denial is also the constitution of the man's self as not interacting with a subhuman contingent giver. Transmisogyny here acts as the expulsion of a body that could be co-opted into service but merely on reserve or through sexualized curiosity, generally a danger to the social relations of gender and its connection with intimacy and care, hence circulating as disgust in interaction with a threatening body to be pushed away to preserve the self. Disgust is thus a strong contender to explain the reaction of the EMTs as they refused to do their job of caring for the sick and injured, and instead chose to laugh.

When disgust has been circulated in the contact between a person and a body they hold as threatening, too close, and outside the civil duty to care as occupation, laughter serves as a potentially powerful antidote to the abject encounter. Rousseau framed laughter as a counter to fear in the form of the child encountering a mask, but laughter can no less be used as a response to the too-close and must-be-pushed-away abject encountered through the cultural life of emotions such as disgust. The EMTs, in contact with a black trans woman not experienced as a person but instead as a threatening subhuman presence through the circulation of cultural disgust, were able to change the terms of this contact through the response of laughter and its accompanying mirth and relief. As with Tosh's deployment of laughter for the purposes of misogyny, the EMTs were able to change the terms of the confrontation through the transmisogyny of their laughter. The refracted encounter with Hunter's critically injured living black trans body

through disgust was removed of its threatening too-close contact as the EMTs asserted their power over the situation through laughter.

Earlier I explained that the analysis of Hurley, Dennett, and Adams falls short of capturing the social and political deployment of humor and laughter. In the case of the EMTs, Hurley et. al's analysis of disparaging "humor in modern society" as not serving humor's "original or even secondary purpose"<sup>300</sup> falls even shorter. The EMTs were not solely disparaging through humor to make themselves or an audience look superior,<sup>301</sup> and they were not attempting to "gently encourag[e] revisions of behavior" by intending to correct Hunter's body or very presence in public space.<sup>302</sup> Rather, the EMTs dissolved their duty to provide intimate caring work for the sick and injured through an interaction between laughter and cultural emotions such as disgust. Here laughter and humor are no longer merely epistemic, depending on a cultural knowledge but also an interplay between social power and cultural emotion. Theorizing laughter and humor in a social world thus requires a robust framework that takes the social, political, cultural, and emotional into account without dismissing them as secondary to a more primary individualist nature of laughter and humor. Otherwise, great injustices through laughter such as the EMTs' response to Tyra Hunter cannot be adequately explained in their complexity.

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<sup>300</sup> Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 292.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.



## Finding More Power in Humor

In sum, in this chapter, I have argued that a social and political philosophy of humor has been neglected, and then suggested that feminist philosophy is an apt choice for theorizing humor, power, and hierarchy. To do this, I began by discussing Rousseau's reflections on laughter in *Emile*, which I argue is part of a longstanding (and contemporary) trend of using humor as a force of restriction in public and private space. After this, I turned to popular discussions in the contemporary ethics of humor and emphasized that each lacks a sufficient social and political philosophy of humor that is influenced by their turn away from the social and political philosophy found in the category of "superiority theory." I returned to the theories grouped as superiority, disparagement, or aggression theories of humor and emphasized that they distinctly center the role of power, hierarchical orders, and social control in the context of humor, which is missing from contemporary approaches in the philosophy of humor. I then ended by referring to feminist (and specifically transfeminist) theory to show that the social and political aspects of humor vis-à-vis patriarchy can be understood as an engaged enforcement of gender norms in public (and private) spaces through laughter and humor as violence. My aim with this tome of a chapter was, quite modestly, was to suggest that feminist theory (and philosophy I wager) is crucial for considering social and political dynamics of humor.

However, my final example is also limited. If we focus solely on laughing and humor as a matter of power, hierarchy, emotions, and policing in public and private space, we would only need a social and political philosophy for instances of laughing-at or humor aimed at a target. While this may seem like it is still an obvious win for an

account of social and political philosophy, having this limited focus does little to consider the “purer” and “loftier” types of humor such as wordplay that are held in such high esteem by incongruity theorists and others who tend to sap humor of its power in favor of watching its purified mechanisms dance. Rather than ceding this territory, I aim to argue that a much broader range of humor can be understood in their social and political dimensions. To do this, in the next chapter I will critique the “laughing feminist century” for simultaneously invoking an important space for considering the political potential of feminist laughter and humor while not going far enough to study the specific, detailed operations, techniques, and effects of humor (and what I ultimately refer to as humorwork).

CHAPTER IV  
FROM LAUGHTER TO PRACTICE:  
AN ARGUMENT FOR A CONCRETE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF HUMOR

Feminist Laughter and Resistance on Film and in Text: *A Question of Silence*, Irigaray, Cixous, and Willett

In Chapter II I appealed to Anca Parvulescu's discussion of "the laughing feminist century" in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* to indicate that feminist theory and philosophy provide an approach to humor and laughter that has been neglected in contemporary humor studies.<sup>303</sup> Now that I have critiqued both interdisciplinary humor studies and philosophy of humor specifically for failing to center social and political concerns (let alone feminist concerns) in chapters II and III, I will critically engage with the topography of laughter and humor in feminist theory and feminist philosophy. Specifically I am interested in works of feminist philosophy that interrelate a situated subject with her social and political world in the context of humor. For this reason, I turn to feminist philosophers who consider the social and political possibilities of humor, such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Cynthia Willett.

Even as I appeal to the insights of feminist theory and philosophy of humor, this chapter will ultimately end with the sense that feminist work has yet to tackle an engaged social and political situation of humor. Specifically, I will argue in this chapter that while

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<sup>303</sup> Parvulescu, 117.

existing feminist theories of humor open an important space for laughter's possibilities, they do not go far enough to examine specific practices of humor in social and political life, and hence are unable to respond to Kristeva's charge that subversive speech may be at best an intimate revolt and at worst a collapse into madness before the ordered structure of the (patriarchal) world. To argue this, I begin by discussing relationships between laughter and resistance in the context of Marleen Gorris' film *A Question of Silence*. Then I discuss central feminist theorists and philosophers of laughter who take up its revolutionary promises, including Irigaray, Cixous, and Willett. After this, I critique these theories for lacking a concrete analysis of humor in practice and discuss the work of Julia Kristeva, who introduces both limited and concrete perspectives on subversive speech and laughter. Finally, I suggest that the most important way to update the "laughing feminist century" for contemporary studies of humor is to turn to its concrete practice by a subject in social and political life, which I will explicate as humorwork in the next chapter.

The classic 1982 feminist film *A Question of Silence* directed by Marleen Gorris focuses on a murder committed by a group of women in a shopping mall.<sup>304</sup> At the beginning of the film three women, a waitress named Annie, a secretary named Andrea, and a housewife named Christine, are arrested by police to be confined until their trial. Over time, through conversations by law officials and flashbacks that piece together their story, the timeline of events leading to the murder in the boutique is revealed to the audience. Christine, who is shopping at the boutique with her daughter in a stroller,

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<sup>304</sup> Gorris.

begins to place clothing into her bag while the shopkeeper seems distracted. The male shopkeeper notices the theft, walks over to Christine, grabs her bag, and takes the clothing out, scolding her. But in response, Christine continues taking garments, while the other women in the store watch. The other women join in, taking clothing from the boutique to place in their bags, until Annie, Christine, and Andrea group together around the perplexed boutique owner. Without exchanging a word, Christine eventually slaps him, while the two other women hit him with various objects, as the other women shoppers watch and the audience hears his death yells. Though no women at the scene, including Christine's daughter, tell on the trio of women who killed the man, the police nonetheless find the boutique owner's body having been kicked in and mutilated with his genitals destroyed beyond recognition, and they proceed to bring the women in. This is when the criminal psychologist and main character, Dr. Janine Van Den Bos, is called in to determine the three women's sanity.

When questioning the three women, Van Den Bos has trouble drawing out a satisfying explanation for the collective boutique homicide. Annie continuously talks, but does not provide Van Den Bos with clarifications about why she joined in the murder. Christine, as a sharp contrast, does not talk at all except for occasional drawings of homes and women in them, some depicting a man, woman, and child, and others with women together. Andrea responds to Van Den Bos, but only through challenges to her assumptions about the case and the women involved, constantly perplexing Van Den Bos on the subject of the women's sanity. For example, when Van Den Bos asks if the murder would have happened had the boutique owner been a woman, Andrea states matter of factly that it couldn't have, but Van Den Bos cannot wrap her head around Andrea's

common sense tone about the subject. It isn't until Van Den Bos realizes that there were other women at the scene and she hears about each woman's story that she realizes that they are not insane, but rather responding together to restrictive conditions of patriarchy.

Though Van Den Bos attempts to speak with the women on their own terms, and connects their murder to a situation of oppression experienced by women as a group rather than individual insanity, the male lawyers of the court are convinced the women are insane, putting Van Den Bos herself on trial as she argues face-to-face with a prosecutor who is skeptical of her expertise and conclusions. Over the course of the film Van Den Bos has not only become convinced that the women are not insane, but also takes the stand that their murder was justified by the restrictive conditions of living as women under patriarchy. Despite standing before an all-male panel of judges, going toe-to-toe with an aggressive male prosecutor challenging her expertise, and her husband protesting that her stance was making him look bad, Van Den Bos persists in standing by the women in court. Whereas before she was hired as a woman psychologist to explain the women's insanity before the court of men, now she stands in the face of the institution that hired her, refusing to back down in defending the actions of women that the court has (willfully) refused to understand.

The main moment of laughter in *A Question of Silence* emerges while Van Den Bos is met with the perplexity of the male prosecutor, who insists that gender does not matter for the case and that the women would have also murdered a woman boutique owner. Earlier in the film, the theme of humor showed up, with Annie being asked "Where's your sense of humor?" by a misogynist diner patron. In contrast to this insistence that women fall in line with the sexist laughter of men, the women's laughter

in the film are typically directed against men after they participated in the murder. When Van Den Bos asks Ann why she did not remarry another man instead of living alone, Ann responds to the idea with heavy laughter. And after the murder, Andrea grabs an ice cream cone, gets paid to do sex work while topping the john for her pleasure, and then laughs in his naked face about fucking him for money. Building upon these moments of individual women's laughter, the courtroom is the first scene in the film where all the women laugh together, including Van Den Bos and the defendants but also the other women who were in the boutique but were not caught to stand trial. In response to the perplexed prosecutor stressing gender neutrality, Christine breaks her silence throughout the film to laugh, further irritating and confusing the men of the court. This laughter grows to infectious heights, and Van Den Bos joins with the other women to laugh at her colleagues and their pitiful attempt to instill their limited understanding and the system it has constructed upon all women.

Latent in this film is a meditation on the relationship between laughter and women in society. The context from which the film speaks, as indicated by its title, is one of women's perpetual silence in the face of both sexism from individual men and the way these relationships are integrated into a larger system of patriarchy. Christine, for example, is particularly silent during the Van Den Bos's questioning, and only speaks for the first time after the psychiatrist is convinced that the women are not insane. We learn throughout the course of the film that Christine was a housewife and often condemned to a situation where her words did not matter, and Van Den Bos concludes that Christine has chosen not to speak in a context where her voice has no impact. Despite this longstanding situation of silence, first enforced and then chosen, Christine is one of the first women to

laugh at the law in the courtroom and she appears in the last scene being ushered from the courtroom as she refuses to stop responding to the male prosecutor with uproarious laughter. As Parvulescu emphasizes, this scene exemplifies a laughter that “interrupts, repeats itself, and spreads,” serving as its own “*raison d’etre*” standing apart from the aims of the men in court.<sup>305</sup>

Christine’s relationship between being silenced over the course of her life as a woman and as a housewife, juxtaposed with her chosen silence and reaction through laughter, frames a contrast between the silences imposed by patriarchy with a more disruptive, agential laughter that refuses to speak in its court. Kathleen Rowe’s reading of this moment in *The Unruly Woman* stresses that *A Question of Silence* marks a journey from silence imposed by patriarchy to a chosen silence that refuses patriarchal language, and finally an outpouring of laughter that surmounts both.<sup>306</sup> Laughter erupts in contrast to patriarchy-imposed silence, whether this include small deaths in the sphere of the home or male-imposed institutions such as psychiatry or the law. When the women laugh in the courtroom, the men not only are unable to understand it, but also see it as a disruption of orderly processes of law that needs to be expunged from the court. In the context of a conversation about whether or not the women are sane, laughter is understood by the men of the court as not only disruptive, but also insane.

At the same time that the male lawyers meet the laughter with confusion and censure, it also brings the women together in a distinct way. In the courtroom, it is not

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<sup>305</sup> Parvulescu, 154.

<sup>306</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 12, 15.



only the women defendants who burst into laughter, but also the women participants who are not on trial, and the psychiatrist Van Den Bos herself. At the end of the film the psychiatrist decides against leaving the court with her husband to instead stand among the other women who laughed. In this context, though men are unable to understand the laughter and exile it from their institutional spaces, it brings the women together as the film ends with the promise of something new. Parvulescu notes that the film is “in the spirit of the revolutionary twentieth century” by suspending the question of what the future will look like and instead focusing on the potentiality found within the moment of laughter and coming together.<sup>307</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that laughter is not quite a killing blow to patriarchal institutions in the film. The men are ultimately unable to confront the laughter and expunge the women from the courtroom, and continue their conversation about women without any women present. This signals that though there might be potential for resistance when the women group up at the end of the film, laughter has not brought the institution of the courtroom and the men who oversee it to their destruction in a way that, for example, militant action may have accomplished. Perhaps the context of women grouping together through the resistance of laughter signals that they (the psychiatrist included) may take up more militant action, especially after the male shopkeeper was beaten to death. However, it was not laughter itself that ended the boutique owner’s reign over the dresses of women, but the physical action of women’s fists, feet, and a sharp coat hanger. Despite the important space it opens, whatever possibilities for women’s collective action that laughter has evoked remains unscreened after Gorris’ film

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<sup>307</sup> Parvulescu, 154.

pronounces “The End,” and laughter itself has not proven itself yet as a destroyer of patriarchal worlds. Rowe is correct to note that the film *hints* at the possibility of women banding together to shatter the status quo through laughter,<sup>308</sup> but Gorris does not make this explicit point in the film through her decision not to showcase laughter’s direct destructive powers. It is important and potentially powerful that the women’s laughter has opened a space of collective possibilities, but these possibilities have not been fully explored.

*A Question of Silence*, I suggest, shares a structure with Parvulescu’s emphasis on the “laughing feminist century” by presenting an illustration of what I call revolutionary laughter. This laughter is revolutionary, in that it presents a wholly different and often unrepresentable challenge to the terms of an existing status quo. Though Gorris’ film does not show laughter destroying the world of men, it does bring women towards a new space of standing together in a new space of mutual understanding that hints at revolutionary possibilities. The laughing feminist philosophers I will discuss add to this a revolutionary shattering laughter, suggesting that the threat women’s laughter raises for the status quo does carry a real possibility for dissolving masculine institutions in favor of radically new possibilities. In this context laughter is almost akin to the sirens of legend, in that it meets men (or more accurately the society they have forced upon the world) with an eerie unassimilable sound that ultimately pulverizes them upon the shoals of their folly. Distinctly, this sound is also not necessarily “attractive” and perhaps more powerful for failing to meet expectations of pleasantness, like the piercing, maddening sound of an

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<sup>308</sup> Rowe, 2.

uprooted and angry (wo)mandrake plant, or a sphinx's bloody muzzle after she tires of games. This laughter is thus potentially in kinship with the (unfortunately male) Satan from Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, who champions that laughter can blow human vices and systems "to rags and atoms at a blast," asserting, "Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."<sup>309</sup> Perhaps a stranger is not so different from an other in this regard, as both bring us to a meditation on shattering revolutionary laughter.

Luce Irigaray emphasizes a similar dynamic between silence and the promises of laughter. In texts such as *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray envisions the world that has been constructed by men as a hall of mirrors designed to only reflect a man-made world back to the men who created it. In this display of narcissistic world-building, in which everything is reduced to the masculine-hued same, Irigaray asserts that women in turn can only be reduced to the limited discourse of a male-constructed world. The life- and language-world built by men thus confines women to an otherness that can only haunt a pre-engineered reflective mirror.<sup>310</sup>

In this context, Irigaray suggests that laughter can provide a momentary act of shattering the world of men in hopes that women might architect a world of difference on their own terms. Whereas the discourse of men is stifling and breeds either women's silence or a form of stultified speech that may as well be silence, women's laughter potentially occurs in the service of liberation. In an interview, Irigaray states that her first impulse upon envisioning possibilities for women outside of the masculine imaginary "is

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<sup>309</sup> Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1916), 142.

<sup>310</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 164.

to laugh."<sup>311</sup> In this context, Irigaray links laughter to the first stages of liberation, as it both contrasts with the masculine “seriousness” of meaning” and points beyond “a simple reversal of the masculine position” when properly sustained among women who can share a sense of humor.<sup>312</sup> Irigaray thus fittingly associates laughter with the first clearing of liberation after women’s subjugation,<sup>313</sup> suggesting that laughter is both revolutionary and able to crack the mirror of man to reveal a space beyond his totalizing looking glass. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray goes further to uniquely connect women with the resistant space of laughter, asserting that women’s laughter is related to women’s position “at the threshold of utterance.” In this context, Irigaray imbues women’s distinct ways of chattering, gossiping, laughing, and shouting with a capacity to have “taken over the word and thereby exposed the circularity of ‘male’ discourse, unmask[ing] its rituals and failures.”<sup>314</sup>

Beyond Irigaray’s brief reflection on the revolutionary potential of laughter is Cixous’ more sustained investigation into revolutionary shattering laughter in her essays “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Castration or Decapitation?”. In her earlier “The Laugh of the Medusa, Cixous emphasizes the ability of women to write for themselves in contrast to men’s frequent relegation of women to a “dark” or “unintelligible” position.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>314</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 137-138.

<sup>315</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa, 877-878.

Cixous links women's self-asserted and self-driven writing to feminine embodiment, as a discourse on women's own terms would also be a discourse permitting their bodies to speak, thus "seizing" upon the ability to speak outside masculine discourse. Like Irigaray, Cixous shares a concern with women being able to creatively find their own place beyond the imposed world of men. And like Gorris, laughter indicates a space beyond the understanding and captivation of men.

Along with an opening of women's space and potential for speaking and writing, Cixous sees laughter as an integral moment of revolt away from a male-constructed world. Tapping into the distinctness of feminine embodiment, laughter represents feminine power beyond masculine impositions, insisting "laughs exude from all of our mouths."<sup>316</sup> Here we find Medusa herself, embodying feminine self-assertion, distinction, and laughter. Cixous writes, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."<sup>317</sup> Cixous' Medusa not only represents the feminine laughing on her own terms outside masculine discourse, but also harbors a distinct threat against the world that men have made, with laughter able to pulverize masculine-centric institutions, laws, and "truths."<sup>318</sup> Whereas Bergson (as I discussed in Chapter III) sees laughter as a force for the vitality of a society that Cixous would likely call masculine, the laugh of the Medusa in contrast is able to, as Jack J. Spector puts it, "turn oppressive dogmas about gender upside down."<sup>319</sup> But Spector is

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 878.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 885.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 888.

<sup>319</sup> Jack J. Spector, "Medusa on the Barricades," *American Imago* 53, no. 1 (1996): 42-43.

incorrect to suggest that this would involve a simple turn upside down, or inversion. Like Irigaray, after all, Cixous is concerned about feminine world-making that is not a mere mirror inversion of an existing male order - a true *écriture féminine*. In this way, the laugh of the medusa stressed by Cixous is one of revolutionary shattering laughter, or at least a hint at such if only we were truly able to listen for the Medusa's desettling guffaws.

Likewise, Cixous' "Castration or Decapitation?" meditates on a myth that juxtaposes women's ability to speak with laughter, suggesting that reclaiming women's laughter is a crucial path away from women's stunted growth and enforced misery under patriarchy. In Sun Tse's *The Art of War* he declares that women who laughed at his training orders were mutinous, and carries through with their decapitation and replacement by women more willing to fall in line with his commands.<sup>320</sup> Cixous describes this as an example of a masculine economy of order that forces women to either "lose their heads by the sword" or keep their heads on the condition that they surrender their heads to silence and as an "automaton" for male order.<sup>321</sup> In this context, Cixous shares Irigaray's concerns about masculine seriousness, as "feminine disorder" and "its laughter" stand in direct contrast and serve as a threat to men and their castration complex.<sup>322</sup> In contrast to a masculine order of seriousness that denies women's capacities for action and self-articulation, Cixous promotes women's laughter and humor

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<sup>320</sup> Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 42.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

as a force that “breaks out” and “overflows,” allowing women to carry their loss forward into living on her own terms.<sup>323</sup> Like in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous here emphasizes the revolutionary power of women’s laughter in contrast to a male order built upon the effacement of women. Parvulescu finds great promise in both Cixous’ meditation on laughter, referring to “The Laugh of the Medusa” as “a call or something like a manifesto” for the reader to listen for and hear women’s laughter, and seeing in “Decapitation or Castration?” a powerful “vision of change.”<sup>324</sup> Laughter’s revolutionary shattering potential is also a structure of women’s new possibilities.

Revisiting *A Question of Silence*, Irigaray and Cixous helpfully articulate the space from which women are marking through laughter a subject position that has been heretofore been passed over as insignificant by the institutions of men. The women in the courtroom distinctly laugh *as women* and *against men*, just as they earlier chose specifically to murder a man and Andrea rejects the proposal that they would have killed a woman boutique owner. This laughter also marks a refusal that stretches beyond the court, as the women choose to laugh rather than speak a male-imposed code of law that would mark them as insane, and continues to stamp them as insane by not recognizing their laughter. Finally, the laughter gestures toward a future space of possibilities for women that have not yet arrived under the masculine order. Though the aftermath of the film remains unscreened, one of the most compelling aspects of the film is the curious space of what will happen next once the women have joined together and the question

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>324</sup> Parvulescu, 102-103.

women's silence has been responded to with laughter. The movement of Christine from imposed silence to chosen silence and then to laughter and camaraderie with other women can thus be compared to the manifesto Parvulescu locates in Cixous' "Laugh of the Medusa:" if we truly listen to the women's laughter, what might be the deferred possibility of difference that we hear?

The camaraderie between women found in the film is also worth considering in more detail. In this context, I find it useful to consider Cynthia Willett's distinct emphasis on humor (and specifically comedy) as a relationship of love oriented towards future possibilities beyond entrenched norms. In contrast to the hubris and individualism of an imperialist nation such as the United States, Willett proposes turning towards an ethics of a global, interdependent community.<sup>325</sup> In this context, she asks how such a reconciliation between the United States and the world can occur,<sup>326</sup> or even a reconciliation between humans and other species.<sup>327</sup> Against the American tragedy of unchecked imperialism, Willett proposes that we turn toward the perspectives offered by American comedy.<sup>328</sup> Willett argues the approach of comedy not only stalls hubris through its promotion of "self-humbling laughter," but also aligns with an interdependent or social conception of freedom in contrast to individualism.<sup>329</sup> Romantic comedies, for example, stress a

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<sup>325</sup> Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire*, 29.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>327</sup> Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>328</sup> Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire*, 22.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 35.



principle of Eros, which Willett emphasizes occurs best at “*home*,” or a place of creativity, social freedom, community, and friendship.<sup>330</sup> Willett’s account is thus useful because it provides a hopeful political perspective on the position of comedy. In an essay co-written with Julie Willett (and likely to be followed up in their forthcoming co-written book on the subject), they complicate comedy’s more ambivalent potential for reinforcing norms or subverting the status quo, recognizing that comedy may not always align with *Eros* as a force for feminist good.<sup>331</sup> Nonetheless, the Willetts continue to emphasize comedy and humor’s potential for *Eros*, joy, freedom, and ability to disturb “ready-made norms.”<sup>332</sup>

Rather than characterizing laughter as a force for revolutionary shattering, as seen in the work of Irigaray and Cixous, Willett sees comedy as a practice of laughing-with that presents an alternative beyond the world of capital and imperialist militarism (which, of course, is not wholly separable from patriarchy). Nonetheless, the vision it presents is revolutionary for refashioning a relationship among people, nation-states, and species, even if not expressing the same structure of shattering in the way Irigaray and Cixous describe.

While this may seem at odds with Gorris’ film, it is useful to consider that the women in *A Question of Silence* do not share their laughter with men. It is thus useful to

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>331</sup> Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, “The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter: Bitches, Whores and Other Fumerists,” in *Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture*, ed. Sharon Crasnow and Joanne Waugh (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 25.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 24, 28-29.

consider that laughter may be a distinct force bringing the women of the film together, even as it is not extended to the men who have confined them through patriarchal oppression over the course of their lives. A staging of *A Question of Silence* from the perspective of the Willetts might thus include more togetherness through laughter and less murder and militancy, and specifically highlights the power of revolutionary shattering laughter to bring people together in joy and freedom. Once the men are out of the picture, and the women have been brought together through laughter and a refusal of male-imposed legibility, it is useful to not only wonder about the space of possibility beyond patriarchal norms, but also the construction of that space by women who now stand together rather than divided, silent, and alone. As Annie discovered, the sexist jokes of men in diners have hitherto only upheld their world in various ways; the point of women's laughter is to change it.

#### A Critique of Feminist Laughter: From Promise to Practice

These feminist visions of laughter, humor, and comedy contain compelling insights into humor's potential social and political import. In contrast to the humor ethicists discussed in the previous chapter, Irigaray and Cixous write from a perspective informed by larger structures of power, specifically the construction of the world and its writing by men and for men. Though practicable by an individual woman writer or activist, the practice of *le rire* is a matter of challenging existing patriarchal social structures rather than a mechanism of sheer disengagement, entertainments of fantasy, or a potential reinforcement of an existing stock of stereotypes (see my discussion in Chapter III). In this context, Cixous and Irigaray see contained within laughter a social

and political promise for women that marks a future hope for writing and bringing forth a different feminine paradigm into a totalizing masculine world. Willett also shares with Irigaray and Cixous a social and political interest in the potential for humor and comedy to shift towards an alternative framework of world relations, though she focuses specifically on reconfiguring the imperialist US and destructive relationships between humans and animals. *The laughing feminist century and beyond* thus points distinctly towards laughter, comedy, and humor as a promising social and political intervention into existing social paradigms.

Additionally, these feminist philosophies of humor are precisely those that would be rejected in the contemporary mainstream consolidation of interdisciplinary humor studies. Certainly, these accounts could be plugged into existing humor theories. For example, laughter at the dissonance between patriarchal assumptions, women's experiences of the world, and the necessary actions for achieving women's liberation, can emerge through a sense of incongruity. As I mentioned in Chapter II, prominent humor linguist Victor Raskin argues that laughter is brought about when different understandings of a situation are brought together and pronounced through an "unreal" or "incompatible" situation.<sup>333</sup> Janine Van De Bos's journey from agent of the court towards an identification with women whose oppression will never be recognized by the court's laws certainly places her into a situation of incompatibility between her previous allegiance to a law that cannot understand the resistance of women against the patriarchy through which it was formed. How could Van De Bos not laugh in the courtroom after

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<sup>333</sup> Raskin, 108.

her personal transformation against what it stands for? Christine also responds to the court with laughter, the prosecutor's inability to understand the significance of gender to the murder now derealized after her insights into the injustices of patriarchy after a long sentence of silence in the home.

And yet, the insights of *A Question of Silence* and feminist philosophers of humor and laughter are also simultaneously and of necessity political and contextual rather than demanding that humor be purified of the social and political world within which its practice is situated to achieve a proper understanding. The political emphasis of revolutionary shattering laughter also moves beyond the limitations of older "superiority theories" while distinctly holding together relationships between humor and power. Feminist theorists of humor explicitly articulate the type of power that is of concern (be that a world constructed by phallogocentrism or a nation destroying itself through imperialism), and place humor distinctly on the side of resistance rather than a neutral defense of current social and political relationships. Feminist theorists of humor thus acknowledge a situated and gendered subject, to the extent that they would likely be denounced by Christie Davies (who I introduced in Chapter II) as mere "gobbledygook."<sup>334</sup> The strengths of feminist theories about humor and laughter may thus lead the reader to suspect that I have finally found the social and political theories attuned to the reflections on power, hierarchy, and patriarchy that I have sought after in the previous chapters. If my satisfaction has been attained, then the task now falls on me to simply explain these theories in more detail, articulate their distinctness from existing

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<sup>334</sup> Davies, 103.

prominent research in humor studies in this chapter and perhaps another, and then finally collect my doctorate after brushing off some polished objections and replies. Oh, if only!

However, I cannot help but return to an unsettled question of what precisely the laughter in *A Question of Silence* has to offer intrigued feminists beyond a poignant dynamic between silence, laughter, and the possibilities of a new space. Does laughter still have anything to offer the women after they have banded together and the credits have rolled? Going beyond the initial space of togetherness opened by laughter in the courtroom, what are the specific ways with which women might continue to deploy laughter while engaging with and resisting a patriarchal world? Might there be more or less efficacious practices of this laughter, and how might we determine its continued effects?

*A Question of Silence* highlights a distinct bond shared among the women that also reflects a resistance to constraints and expectations of patriarchy, but the continuing practice of laughter after its conclusion is less clear. At the end of the film, the lawyer joins in with the other women's laughter because she finds a resistant space with them amidst the laughable institutions of men. One could imagine this instance of feminist laughter taking the form of a contagion, marking the women who finally recognize that they should lock arms and carve apart the patriarchal institutions (and men) previously confining them, and perhaps this is a case for *A Question of Silence 2* (perhaps in which the women are visited by Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury and drafted into the endless sequelization of the Marvel cinematic universe). But the bond shared among women is also one that is not understood by the men, despite the film's conclusion of women laughing in solidarity with other women. Their resistant laughter may bring them

together, but this does not mean that patriarchal psychology and law will crumble apart. Additionally, the women's laughter is marked as one of madness. This is part of the male judges' misunderstanding but also a sign that laughter is easier for them to stomach (even in its unease) than a barrage of kicks, as the murdered man at the beginning of the film found out. The laughter of the women in the film and of Medusa herself may thus echo in defiance or solidarity but this does not mean it will itself make the world of men crumble apart. The scene at the end of *A Question of Silence*, just like the reader reaching the end of "The Laugh of the Medusa," leaves patriarchal institutions standing even if laughter contains a promise of more to come. What, then, is the argument for continued laughter after the women have been brought together?

The "laughing woman question" I am leading to with this meditation on the "laughing feminist century" and beyond is an interrogation of laughter's continued revolutionary promise for feminist praxis. Even if feminist forays into humor harbor a social and political consciousness that is lacking in mainstream contemporary humor studies, it is useful to consider in more detail what these practices of humor might specifically look like in their ongoing practices and variations, as well as considering the larger field of humor and laughter as they occur in social and political spaces. When acknowledging a world of power relations and potential actions of resistance, it is important to detail how praxis and process through which humor might be a part of this action beyond focusing on deferred feminist action and a shaking of norms that might occur through women's laughter about their situation. To establish the importance of laughter and humor to feminist liberation, I thus find it useful to consider how precisely laughter, comedy, or humor more broadly serves or sows feminist revolution. I yearn for

a feminist theory of laughter that continues rolling after the final scene from *A Question of Silence*.

To establish that there is more to say about humor's particularities beyond the framework of revolutionary shattering, it is useful to not only look at the strengths of feminist theories of humor but also at their limitations, and I plan to discuss Irigaray, Cixous, and Willett in turn. First, Irigaray focuses on the yet-to-be-seen potential of laughter at the expense of looking more dynamically at its specific and ongoing practice by women. By associating laughter with the first stage of promise for women's liberation, and casting women's laughter with a distinct form of resistance against the universe made by men, she is suggesting that laughter provides a distinct hope for future feminist praxis. However, she only touches very briefly upon what such a praxis looks like beyond its promise. She does not continue her analysis by analyzing particular instances of women utilizing laughter against the world of men, instead gesturing towards its efficacy, and thus makes it difficult to consider laughter beyond its general capacities of disruption.

Suppose that I am to be thrown in prison for spontaneously kicking a man to death in a shop, and I laugh (perhaps with other women) at the man-made law that intends to cast me behind bars or in the middle of a padded cell. From Irigaray's perspective, my laughter marks a promising potentiality for revolution, or disrupts the circularity of men's discourse and institutions, and is perhaps linked with my own position of being a feminine ghost within a masculine system from which I cannot truly be seen or build a world on my own terms. But how precisely might this laugh function to open up this promise, and how might it disrupt entrenched social institutions or even language itself as I continue to engage in its practice? Irigaray leaves me to guess or

cobble together the precise roadmap between laughter and feminist action, which is understandable because she mostly gestures towards laughter as a key to resistance without making it a key, elaborated upon aspect of her own work. I am left properly intrigued, but also to my own devices if I am interested in knowing more about laughter as a specific feminist practice along the road to revolution.

I might expect to find more assistance from Cixous' more explicit and drawn out meditations on figures of laughter such as Medusa or the laughing headless women in *The Art of War*, but even here I am left without a roadmap or demonstration of how precisely laughter is to bring about the revolution, let alone more specific, smaller examples of disrupting the patriarchal order. Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," far from providing the reader a detailed demonstration of laughter's power, spends very little time on the laughter that is supposed to animate its central mythical figure. For instance, Cixous suggests that woman may be able "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter,"<sup>335</sup> but just like our consideration of Irigaray we are left with little detail about how precisely this happens beyond women's unique embodied and discursive situation. The proliferation of possibility beyond phallogocentrism is intriguing, but I want to know more about specific examples of political laughter and humor, their methods, and their particular effects.

In the article's defense, it is about much more than laughter, setting forth the subversive program of *l'écriture féminine* as a way for women "to bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis."<sup>336</sup> Medusa and her laughter thus cannot be

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<sup>335</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 888.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 882.



separated from her prophetic call for women more generally writing on their own terms. Parvulescu herself sets up her analysis of Cixous by framing “Castration or Decapitation?” and its emphasis on the threat of laughter as the beginning for “The Laugh of the Medusa” despite falling later chronologically in Cixous’ corpus.<sup>337</sup> In contrast to the imposed silence of patriarchy in “Castration or Decapitation?” Parvulescu describes “The Laugh of the Medusa” as a call or manifesto for its reader to discover the laughter contained within its pages,<sup>338</sup> with Medusa’s decapitation and transformation into stone highlighting her as a threat that is nonetheless promising to listen for and look towards.<sup>339</sup> In this context, Parvulescu refuses to frame Medusa’s laughter as utopian or a potential weapon of feminist subversion.<sup>340</sup> To weaponize laughter would be to reshape the gift that Medusa offers women into the same masculine tool of control and mastery that should be disrupted and moved beyond. Parvulescu thus suggests, “The point will not be to forensically learn how laughter works so that one can make it work in one’s favor and have the last laugh.”<sup>341</sup> In Parvulescu’s reading, Cixous is offering a vision of laughter that contains a feminist promise yet also avoids utopian leanings through her emphasis on “textual materialism” through women’s writing<sup>342</sup> that nonetheless cannot be reduced to

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<sup>337</sup> Parvulescu, 102.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 106, 107, 109.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

mechanical strategizing. Laughter is an earth-shaking phenomenon for a feminist resistance, but not one that can be reduced in the manner of the humor studies theorists discussed in Chapter II.

Unfortunately, Parvulescu's disdain for weaponizing and strategizing laughter is also one that extends to readers of Cixous who seek more information about analyzing feminist laughter in more detail through specific examples. Parvulescu even specifically laments "the reduction of Cixous' complex and nuanced laughing textual choreography to an argument about the 'subversiveness' of women's humor,"<sup>343</sup> indicating that feminist strategists err when attempting to see in Cixous' work a specifically deployable mode of revolutionary action. *Écriture féminine* may bring to Cixous' text a material dimension, but Parvulescu safeguards laughter itself from being fully weighted down by the practical, preferring to hold it as an irreducible feminine force that remains yet to be seen.<sup>344</sup> Parvulescu's emphasis on the promise of laughter in the context of material textual resistance is also related to her general preference for focusing on studies of feminist laughter over studies of feminist humor. Generally, Parvulescu is interested in theorizing laughter on its own terms outside of any reduction to humor, jokes, or comedy,<sup>345</sup> later insisting "We need to start from laughter, rather than from the joke" to explain such phenomena as women laughing with sexist jokes.<sup>346</sup> Cixous' article thus

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 118.

stands out as especially strong from Parvulescu's point of view if it calls for the reader to seek out Medusa's laughter without reducing it to the strategic, specific controlled subversions of jokes and humor.

Nonetheless, it remains important to Cixous that the tide of laughter represented by the Medusa is able to rattle and shake apart men's discourse and institutions in favor of feminine writing and world-building. Parvulescu compensates for the lack of elaboration about laughter (including more specific examples of its operations) by pointing to laughter's deferred promises as a prophetic strength on the part of Cixous, forcing us to listen for laughter's call and joyfully look towards a vibrant source of life yet to fully echo in this universe of the masculine. As someone interested in direct, on-the-ground feminist practice, and the political potentials of laughter and humor, I am not satisfied with the vision of laughter's promise that Irigaray and Cixous provide. In the previous chapter, I singled out the humor ethicists for depoliticizing laughter by focusing instead on its operations and individualistic effects. Looking to Irigaray and Cixous, the political dimension of laughter disengaging from the logic of patriarchy and masculine discourse is helpfully centered, but more remains to be said about the various specific ways in which women creatively engage with laughter, humor, and the powers of Medusa's promises. I thus prefer to look at laughter (and, as I shall emphasize, humor more broadly) as a way of feminist engagement rather than feminist disengagement, focusing on humor's specific practices of recontextualization and destabilization rather than the deferred possibilities of laughing the world away. To an extent, this puts me in alignment with the weaponization of laughter that Parvulescu admonishes, but I would like to see not just laughter in its disruptiveness or subversiveness but also how it may be

able to (some extent) creatively shape and reshape this world. I thus have a distinct interest in looking at specific examples of humor and the changes humor offers rather than more general promises of disrupting an existing order. As I will explain below, I believe looking to practices of humor rather than laughter provides this generative focus.

For now, I also wish to address Willett's emphasis on comedy and humor providing a social and political ethos for relationships between nation-states and species. Willett's emphasis on the community-leaning *Eros* of comedy seems like it would satisfy my objections to Irigaray, Cixous and Parvulescu. After all, Willett (and her sister) is presenting a way comedy can impress actual changes upon the world through its particular *ethos* of collective cooperation and, which seems to involve a greater emphasis on comedy's creative and concrete import for feminist amelioration. However, the specific methods through which comedy might impress a social and political *ethos* is unclear. Even if Willett is correct that comedy offers a more ameliorative vision than tragedy for worldwide and human relationships it is unclear how precisely comedy impresses itself upon the social world that produces it to effect concrete change. How might comedy be a force that brings women together beyond the ethos it projects? And how might embracing comedy or its ethos effect a lasting change in powerful institutions? Again, I am intrigued and inspired by the promises offered by feminist humor theorists, but I want to know more about humor's concrete practices.

And even if it was clear how embracing comedy as an *ethos* is supposed to work and reach effectiveness, it does not seem necessary or even probable that comedy offers a feminist *ethos* to begin with. In the previous chapter, I discussed the classic 'superiority' theories of laughter and humor that impress a differing *ethos* of exclusion, derision, and

policing public space according to certain (often antifeminist norms). It thus does not seem necessary that comedy, laughter, and humor more broadly produce an *ethos* that is ameliorative for human and extra-human relationships. Bill Burr, for example, expresses a comedic *ethos* of exclusion against “all those goddamn groups” that are sensitive to how language (with the language of comedy itself included) might affect marginalized people.<sup>347</sup> The Willetts may briefly acknowledge that comedy may not necessarily align with feminist goals, but do little to address the potential alliance between comedy and antifeminist aims in detail (or as I call it in Chapter VI, humor’s *counterameliorative* work). Willet’s account, though focused on comedy’s positive contributions, does not illustrate how comedy can form the basis for concrete situations of feminist praxis.

#### Julia Kristeva, Volcanic Practices, and Haunted Clocktowers

At this point, I am tempted to already make the externally critical move of shifting away from meditations on revolutionary laughter and towards an emphasis on concrete deployments of humor. This is where I will end up at the end of the chapter, because I think looking at specific examples of feminist humor and how its practice works will illuminate in more detail the precise ways that feminist humor is useful for liberation against oppressive societal institutions and norms, as well as the risks and limitations that may result from taking up humor as a means for amelioration or even revolution. Otherwise, existing feminist theory, despite opening an important space for considering laughter and humor in general, does not provide enough detail about how

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<sup>347</sup> Burr.

humor is precisely to be efficacious and fails to account for how it operates in action, choosing instead to linger upon more general promises of laughter or comedic *ethos*.

However, feminist philosophy, and feminist poststructuralism specifically, already brings us to this point. Beyond her focus on laughter, Cixous associates women's writings with a subversive effect linked with laughter when deployed in a world fabricated by masculine texts and institutions, referring to *l'écriture féminine* as volcanic. Cixous writes,

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.<sup>348</sup>

In Cixous' framework a truly feminine text irreducible to the masculine, like the laughter that women uniquely generate, represents an inherent subversion against the ossified masculine world.

This framework of women's writing (and especially poetic writing) as disruptive to a masculine social order is shared by Julia Kristeva, who Parvulescu also enshrines as one of the key figures of her "laughing feminist century." Written prior to "The Laugh of the Medusa," Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* nonetheless spends more time discussing the relationship between subversive language and stable language in relation to practices of poetry, laughter, and humor. Kristeva argues that linguistics often fails to account for the speaking subject who produces language<sup>349</sup> instead focusing on the

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<sup>348</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 888.

<sup>349</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double Bind* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 91-92.

symbolic remains of speech while covering over the subject's involvement in language as a process.<sup>350</sup> Kristeva is critical of theories that either lack a subject completely, or rely on a "transcendental ego"<sup>351</sup> that maintains symbolic purity without incorporating a more immanent, desiring subject.<sup>352</sup> In this context, structural linguistics often only addresses the subject to explore purified structures of language, acknowledging linguistic style only in relation to the pure, transcendental ego.<sup>353</sup> By ignoring the subject, structural linguistics only considers signification at the realm of the symbolic and propositions.<sup>354</sup> Even when the subject is given attention, it is often stripped of its drives, with even the unconscious cast as merely "a depository" of symbolic laws and discourse.<sup>355</sup> In this framework, language has been deprived of the flowful and fragmented speaking subject, instead presented as a patch of earth unrelated to any molten semiotic. The subject of these language theories can only be *terra firma*, with symbolic totalization rendering their speech incapable of rupture or the flows of desire.

In contrast with the "symbolic" level of language, which presents language as a set of organized and unchanging "static thoughts" divorced from any signifying

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<sup>350</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 13.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>352</sup> John Lechte, "Transcendence, Fixation, and Belief in the Vicissitudes of the Imaginary," *Parallax* 4, no. 3 (1998): 126.

<sup>353</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 23.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

process,<sup>356</sup> Kristeva puts forward a philosophy of language which highlights the embodied subject's role in processes of signification. Referring to Freudian insights, Kristeva seeks a materialist account of signification that is "based on the subject, his formation, and his corporeal, linguistic, and social dialectic."<sup>357</sup>

To better account for the subject's involvement in signifying processes, Kristeva turns to the linguistic field of "semiotics" which focuses on "signifying practices, such as art, poetry, and myth that are irreducible to the 'language' object."<sup>358</sup> For Kristeva, the signifying process depends upon two "modalities," consisting of both the semiotic and symbolic, whose dialectic is involved in "the signifying process...constitutive of the subject."<sup>359</sup> The mode of the semiotic relates to the drives and the energy that moves throughout the subject's body, with the totality of the drives and their energy forming what Kristeva calls a "chora."<sup>360</sup> This chora, operating in the "rhythmic space" of "rupture and articulations," and involving the process by which "significance is constituted,"<sup>361</sup> acts as the "kinetic functional stage" that precedes the sign.<sup>362</sup> As a contrast to symbolic structural linguistics, Kristeva seeks to return the semiotic, the body,

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 27.



and its drives to the study of language,<sup>363</sup> maintaining both symbolic and semiotic registers of language in their heterogeneity. In making this move, Kristeva is making explicit the particular subversions brought about by poetic speech, and indeed, laughter and jokes.

Parvulescu attributes to Kristeva a similar displacement of laughter as the structure of social change as she associates with Cixous' deferred Medusa. In *Desire in Language* Kristeva identifies the maternal space of the semiotic *chora* as a space of laughter.<sup>364</sup> Laughter can be a practice in addition to a space, as Kristeva associates laughter and wordplay in *Revolution* with “the site of the most radical heterogeneity” maintained through practice.<sup>365</sup> In this context, Kristeva ties her analysis of laughter with her analysis of language by insisting that laughter is connected to the “ephemeral” meanings and excesses of a subject and language still in process.<sup>366</sup> Laughter is also part of a “leap” that instates a “process of social change” within a subject via a “moment of heterogeneous contradiction.”<sup>367</sup> Specifically, Kristeva draws from Freud to stress the difficulty of irrupting laughter into discourse, since it always involves a painful play with prohibition,<sup>368</sup> and the “lifting of prohibitions” always results in the production of “new

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>364</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Tom Gora and Alice Jardine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 284.

<sup>365</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 179-180, 181.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

devices” which “contain the rupture from which laughter bursts forth.”<sup>369</sup> But the upside of this practice is that laughter is ultimately the logic of producing something new.<sup>370</sup> In this association between laughter and a production of the new, Parvulescu asserts that Kristeva links practice with the structure of laughter, as revolutionary discursive practice generally “obeys laughter’s logic and provides the subject with laughter’s advantages.”<sup>371</sup> In this context, Parvulescu associates Kristeva’s laughter with a similar ineffability or evasiveness as Cixous’ account of laughter, stressing that Kristeva’s work tells us “[l]aughter is thus the merely the witness of a process which remains the privileged experience of the ‘artist.’”<sup>372</sup> Like Cixous’ figure of the Medusa, Parvulescu considers Kristeva’s laughter to be a figurehead of feminist praxis rather than laughter as a concrete, meticulous practice to be analyzed in more precise detail.

However, Kristeva’s particular emphasis on subversive semiotic ruptures in supposedly stable discourse provides more promise for looking at laughing practices beyond serving as a model for other forms of feminist praxis or general disruptive practices of speech such as poetry. Consider, for example, the website *Reductress*, which serves a similar function as the parody news website *The Onion* for feminist discourse (and especially contemporary feminist discourse found online). In one article, Lisa

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 224-225.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>371</sup> Parvulescu, 16.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

Mongillo plays on the phrase “a lady in the street and a freak in the sheets” by instead writing on “How to Be a Lady in the Streets and a Haunted Clock Tower in the Sheets.”

The article reads like a warped sex advice column, instructing women how to entertain a man’s family, cultivate romance, dress, and behave at intellectual gatherings, with constant absurd references to horror tropes. For example, Mongillo advises,

IN THE STREETS: Dress with graceful modesty.

IN THE SHEETS: Trap him in a winding staircase of doooooooooooooom. Whatever you wear, make sure it is loose enough to completely hide the actual shape of your body, like a modest kaftan or a toga. But in the bedroom, your man won’t be able to hide when you’ve trapped him in a winding staircase that seems to have no end! For extra fun, throw some spider nests and swarms of bats into the mix.<sup>373</sup>

In this example, Mongillo’s potential success with making laughter is also one of subversive practice, twisting stock phrases and cliché romance columns that instruct women about how to regulate their behavior into an absurdist fanfare of winding staircases and bats. In this context, it is too limiting to frame laughter as primarily a deferred promise of subversive discursive practice when humor itself, like poetry, can directly serve as subversive writing and speech. Like poetry, humor in practice breaks up the supposedly stability of speech (and especially stock patriarchal speech), shaking up platitudes and imposed clichés such as those found in women’s magazines through the injection of playful discursive heterogeneity. Kristeva emphasizes that language is not stable, and humor is one of the practices that reignite the magma underneath ossified discourse, reclaiming language and discourse in its unstable malleability. This link

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<sup>373</sup> Lisa Mongillo, “How to Be a Lady in the Streets and a Haunted Clock Tower in the Sheets,” *Reductress*, June 8, 2015, <http://reductress.com/post/how-to-be-a-lady-in-the-streets-and-a-haunted-clock-tower-in-the-sheets/>.

between humor and practice in Kristeva's thought is distinctly impressive because humor fits into her framework in such concrete ways, linked with the particulars of feminine subjectivity and women's relationship to politics and subversive practice.

Despite both my and Parvulescu's attempt to emphasize Kristeva's work in the context of laughter and humor, it also poses a distinct threat for considering radical humor as effective praxis. Kristeva stands apart from Christie Davies, whose work I discussed in Chapter II, in that she emphasizes the subversive potential of language, and provides a path for situating practices of humor within lively revolts of the speaking subjects who generate it. But she shares with Davies a skepticism and limit to what such subversive practices of speech can potentially accomplish. On one hand, Kristeva's laughter is truly volcanic, retaining the excess of the semiotic and the subject within which it continues to seethe and roil. But this also causes her (unlike Cixous) to cautiously limit the potential of women wielding laughter, suggesting in *About Chinese Women* that women who take up the magmatic chaos of laughter may fall into madness due to women's unstable relationship with the *chora* and the semiotic in contrast to the sanity granted by the constraint of symbolic speech.<sup>374</sup> Kelly Oliver explains that this passage tempers the ability for women specifically to call upon the semiotic's disruptive potential. Oliver writes, "the semiotic threatens women since it cannot 'free' [women] from a symbolic that they have never fully known; but, it 'frees' men from a symbolic that they know all too well."<sup>375</sup> This framework may restrict both the revolution in poetic

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<sup>374</sup> Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), 29-30.

<sup>375</sup> Oliver, 111.

language and revolutionary laughter to men, whereas women “must take the symbolic order very seriously to challenge it.”<sup>376</sup> While feminist philosophers may be tempted to save Kristeva’s subversive practice for women by recasting her association between laughter and madness as a practical suggestion about women needing to engage in serious praxis, Kristeva is also making a claim about women’s embodied, psychical connection with language that essentially challenges women’s access to subversion against the symbolic.

Kristeva’s limitation on laughter falls into general concerns that feminist philosophers have had with the limits Kristeva sets on radical feminist praxis.<sup>377</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, for example, emphasizes that there is a limit to the revolution offered by semiotic language, since subverting the symbolic too much results in “a dissolution of sociality itself,” and the limits of the symbolic can only be changed by gradually pushing it through reform rather than accommodating a more radical upheaval.<sup>378</sup> Butler asserts that Kristeva’s theory of language ultimately “denies the semiotic as an emancipatory ideal” and “concedes that it is a kind of language which never can be consistently maintained,” lest it lead to “psychosis and to the breakdown of cultural life itself.”<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Oliver, 1-2.

<sup>378</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 60.

<sup>379</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 108-109.

Perhaps this limitation of the semiotic is why Kristeva has turned from her earlier work on revolutions in poetic language to a discussion of “tiny revolts.”<sup>380</sup>

Despite these concerns with the limits Kristeva’s theory may or may not place on subversive practices of humor, I find her notion that subversive practice may have limits refreshing in comparison to the general references to the potentiality of laughter hinted at by Irigaray, Cixous, and Willett. Though entirely assenting to Kristeva’s emphasis on the limits of women’s laughing practice would commit me to an essentialist model that bars women from the practice of laughter (which I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter), I do find her emphasis on the limits of laughter refreshing. Kristeva’s more concrete analysis, combined with her emphasis on laughter’s limits, calls for a more careful and localized account of humor’s effectiveness for feminist praxis, pointing towards a more concrete analysis of humor in practice. As indicated by *A Question of Silence*, laughter (and I would suggest humor as well) involves concrete, localized practices that are not covered by embodying laughter through a general model (or myth) of totally revolutionary shattering resistance. The women in *A Question of Silence* may very well have failed to achieve concrete change despite recruiting another to their cause through laughter, and it may be the act of kicking that needs to be proliferated rather than meeting the situation with laughter. Or alternatively, though laughter served as an initial cause for bringing the women together, its continuing effectiveness for feminist revolution remains unclear.

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<sup>380</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2: 5.

Though feminist philosophy has taken a lengthy break from humor (perhaps departing for trendier subjects like tragedy), contemporary humor studies has included recent significant investments in simultaneously theoretical and concrete studies of humor by feminist humor scholars. For example, Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman attempt to draw out potential feminist insights for praxis from contemporary incongruity theory, since the shifts of incongruity theory “provide feminist alternatives to more traditional cultural interpretations.”<sup>381</sup> Ultimately, feminists can refer to the subversive spaces provided by humor to “suggest alternatives to the ‘normal’ world where males predominate.”<sup>382</sup> To show this, Bing and Scheibman frequently draw from sources ranging from feminist graffiti to art by the Guerilla Girls, which I will discuss in more explicit example in the next chapter. The authors prefer to look at concrete subversive practices of humor rather than laughter in a general, broad, and often limitless sense, referring to specific jokes rather than extravagant myths such as the Medusa. They also do this by adapting the methods from the incongruity theory of humor into feminist analysis, centering the relationship between power and the ways humor operates.

I contend that feminist philosophy should join the path of concrete humor if it is to continue the important insights of the laughing feminist century. Specifically, feminist philosophy should emphasize how the practice of humor relates a situated subject to a social and political life of power and its manipulations through language and praxis. That

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<sup>381</sup> Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman, “Blended Spaces as Subversive Feminist Humor,” in *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

is to suggest, feminism does need to learn from many of the more concrete attempts in contemporary humor studies even as it refuses to accept the subordinate role feminist theory has in this discipline. To fail to do this is not only a matter of not fitting developing trends in humor studies, but also to fail to account for the specific practices of humor in social and political life from a feminist perspective. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the practice of humor represents a dynamic set of tools for recontextualizing and transforming a situation for feminist aims through what I call humorwork.

In this chapter, I have considered feminist theories and philosophies of laughter and humor as found in *A Question of Silence* and the works of Irigaray, Cixous, and Willett. Specifically I considered the association between laughter, comedy, and revolution in feminist philosophy, which I critiqued for not going far enough to explain humor's concrete and specific practices. After this I discussed Kristeva's more tempered views on practices of humor and laughter to suggest that feminist philosophy requires a more tempered, concrete account of humor in practice especially as it relates to the subject, their situation, and their engagement in social and political life.

This, of course, does not free us from the important doubt raised by Kristeva's distinct suspicions about subversive discourse and laughter. In the next chapter I will focus on the differences between a subjective, subversive picture of humor offered by Kristeva and Monique Wittig's emphasis on disruptive discourse in public life, finally augmenting the "laughing feminist century" with the powerful concrete descriptions of wordplay found in the work of Bing, Scheibman, and Delia Chiaro.



CHAPTER V  
MEDUSA'S WAR MACHINE:  
KRISTEVA, WITTIG, AND HUMORWORK IN FEMINIST ACTION

Guerilla Girls and the Semiotic

In the previous chapter I worked through existing theories of feminist humor and laughter to emphasize that we need a concrete philosophy of feminist humor. I argued that an emphasis on laughter fails to examine humor as practiced by feminists in a political context, and incorporating the work of feminist humor studies scholars is critical for reaching a more specific understanding of humor's feminist potential.

In the previous chapter I discussed Julia Kristeva as a philosopher who simultaneously expresses the concrete, embodied situation and severe restraints for practicing humor as a form of resistance. The laughing woman presented by Kristeva cannot laugh away the patriarchal world, and she may well stand as a threat to herself or she may fail to actually shift the symbolic with her semiotic fire breathing upon stable speech. In this context, though humor represents a subject's temporary disruption of the static order through semiotic practice, the symbolic structure imposed by men nonetheless underpins this work as part of necessary structures for a socially intelligible world. In Kristeva's picture, laughter and humor teeter-totter between inflaming madness and accomplishing limited concrete effects upon the world and its structures beyond its effect upon the subject.

In this chapter I will finalize the move from abstract revolutionary laughter that I began in the previous chapters by bringing Wittig's materialist view of language to bear on the practice of humor, adding nuance to the capabilities of humor that Kristeva's model of revolutionary practice as semiotic significantly constrains. To accomplish this, I will first discuss Monique Wittig's discussion of language as a Trojan horse to show that feminist disruptions of discourse and situations are not fully covered by the semiotic-upon-symbolic model of laughter and its practice. I then bring in humor scholar Delia Chiaro's discussion of humor preying upon speech and build upon this account by drawing from other feminist humor scholars Janet Bing's and Joanne Scheibman's discussion of humor and political possibilities. This will allow me to consider more directly humor's manipulations as material and concrete disruptions of language, which I will refer to as humorwork to emphasize the engaged interaction between humor and the world. The upshot of this focus is that it discloses the practice of the revolutionary feminist humorist, who experiences the world and its patriarchal structures as fundamentally manipulable in both subtle and overt levels of humor practice, which I will refer to as humorwork, at varying levels of scope and effects. However, this focus on the material and concrete practice of humor also loses the special link between women, feminist practice, and progressive laughter proposed by the philosophers and theorists of revolutionary laughter. The practice and power of the humorwork does not seem limited to practitioners of humor, and may even be a potent tool for the antifeminists and white supremacists of the alt-right. The next chapter will thus build upon this chapter's material and concrete analysis of humorwork, since this power does not seem limited to feminist practitioners of humor.

When we last left off, I considered Kristeva and concrete feminist explorations into the potential manipulations provided by humor. Kristeva distinctly centers the situated force of a subject's semiotic practices, describing the ability of an unstable subject to inject their instability into language, if only for a time. However, this move severely limits humor's potential social and political effects. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Kristeva risks locking subversive practices of laughter into a forbidden practice for female subjects due to its potential maddening effects upon laughing women.<sup>383</sup> Because of this, it is unclear how feminist subversions through humor and laughter are to occur, to the extent that it might even be better if women did not practice humorous resistance at all for reasons of sanity and safety. Kristeva may be suggesting that the subversion of laughter is best left to the men who are more firmly anchored to the symbolic realm that they subvert.

As I also discussed in the previous chapter, feminist humor scholars have considered the more concrete potential of humor to disrupt a situation. Bing and Scheibman specifically focus on the potential for women to latch onto existing sexist situations and project a world of anti-sexist possibility. To better understand this practice, it is helpful to consider their examples. One of Bing's and Scheibman's examples is the suggestion of "calling in queer to work" as a response to the pathologization of queer desire, shifting the psychological classification of "deviant" and "disordered" sexualities into the more absurd context of using this as an excuse to receive paid leave from the workplace.<sup>384</sup> Though this practice is of course restricted in actualization because the

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<sup>383</sup> Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 30.

<sup>384</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 18.

ability to call in sick from work in this way and get paid without getting fired is the privilege of a limited few, the suggestion itself projected a way to turn the scripts of pathologization into unintended consequences that subvert the working world and its dependence on LGBTQ workers.

Another example that Bing and Scheibman draw from is a chart by the Guerilla Girls art activist group that reconfigures the homeland terror alert system introduced by the Bush administration by replacing each threat level with worries about rising sexism and nationalism.<sup>385</sup>

If we consider the specific humor directed at the homeland terror system, the model presented by Bing and Scheibman creates a space of transformed meaning by blending a warning system based on threats to citizens with a concern about threats and obstructions to women's rights. This process, which Bing and Scheibman describes as "conceptual blending" borrowing from the work of Seana Coulson,<sup>386</sup> playfully creates a space where threats to women have now become foregrounded through the reappropriation of the original warning system. Drawing from Coulson's work is crucial because she acknowledges that shifts in language connect with shifts in background knowledge about the world,<sup>387</sup> and that language involved in humor, frame-shifting, and conceptual blending can interact with images and situations.<sup>388</sup>

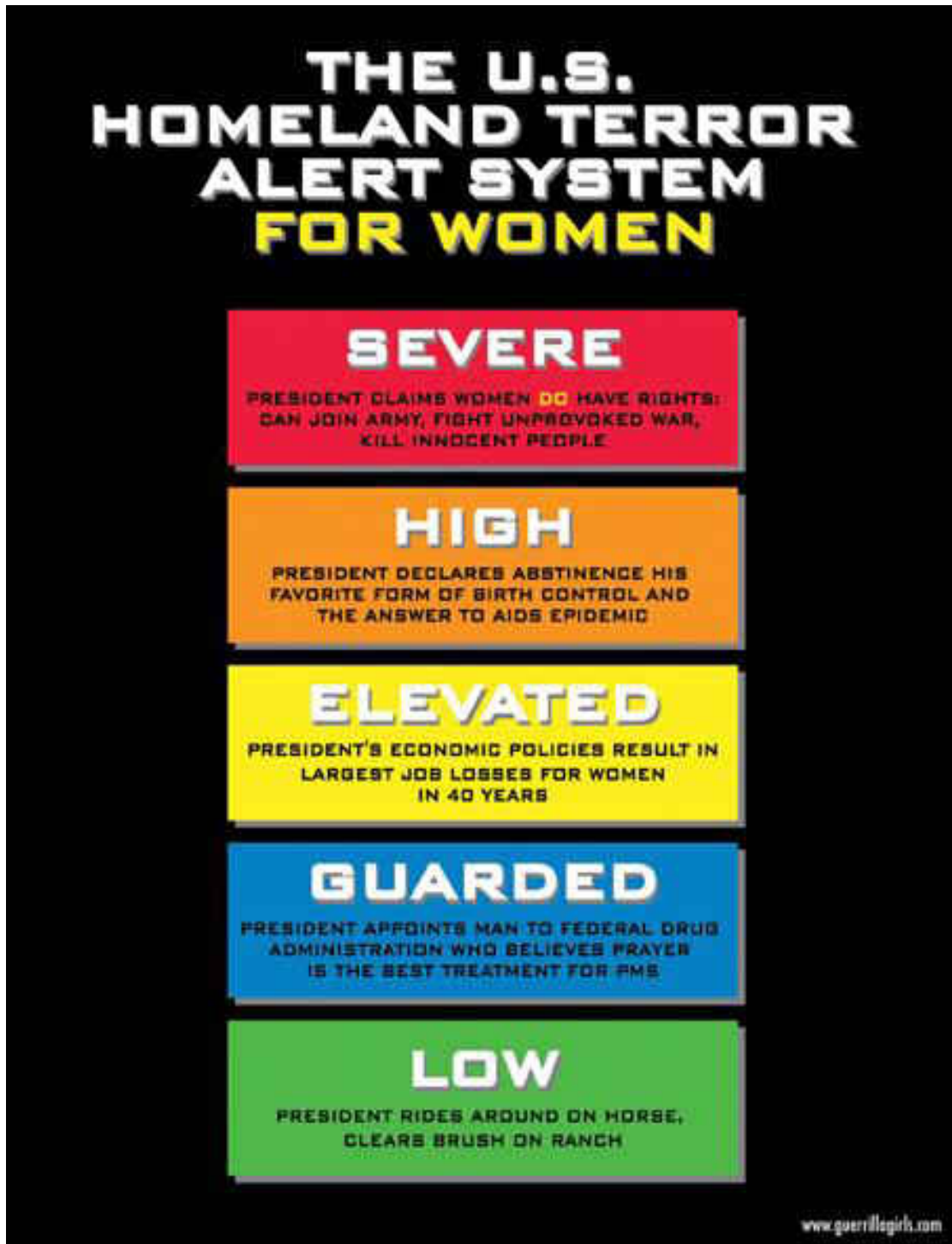
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<sup>385</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 25.

<sup>386</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 26.

<sup>387</sup> Seana Coulson, *Semantic Leaps: Frame-Shifting and Conceptual Blending in Meaning Construction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.



**Figure 1.** Reappropriation and transformation of the U. S. Homeland Terror Alert System by The Guerilla Girls. The Guerilla Girls, “The U.S. Homeland Terror Alert System for Women,” Posters, Stickers, Billboards, Videos, Actions: 1985-2017, 2003, last accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects/>.

Though their reappropriation borrows from the existing structure of the image such that the Guerilla Girls' reiterated chart could have never happened without the Bush Administration creating the existing homeland security threat scale, the Guerilla Girls' reconfiguration simultaneously has been steered against the original intentions of the image. The Department of Homeland Security, created under President George W. Bush, would certainly never center his administration and its platforms as a cause for worry about homeland security (let alone reconfigure the meaning of "homeland security" to center women in the US and internationally), and yet the Guerilla Girls have repurposed the structure of the image to center the administration's policy as a danger. The original context of the image has thus been juxtaposed with a feminist message, and effectively decontextualized and recontextualized against its own aims through humor's ability to transform a situation by reworking its existing framework against its own terms.

On one hand, I find it important to acknowledge that this reappropriation of the W. Bush administration's iconography refuses to engage with the content of the image on its own terms. The Guerilla Girls do not launch into a straightforward public treatise or reasoned procedure of discourse (such as those advocated for by liberals who might disdain, say, punching Nazis in favor of instead defeating them in the combat of debate). The Guerilla Girls do not provide a set of premises and conclusions for why the homeland security office should have instead addressed feminist concerns, or why their set of warnings may be better served by taking the health and safety of women worldwide seriously, which likely would have fallen on unconcerned ears. Instead, the Guerilla Girls effectively prey upon the existing message, addressing its imagery and iconography, and turn away from it by transforming the image itself. I will consider this process in more

detail shortly, but it is useful to point out here that though this practice of reappropriation is more publicly intelligible than Kristeva's focus on humor, it is not a slave to thetic or straightforward symbolic demands. I will refer to this practice as *humorwork* to center the skilled process of recontextualizing an existing message, image, or situation through engaged practice.

Despite this aside into the tricks at the disposal of humorwork, I am convinced that Guerilla Girls' practice of transformation through reappropriation and reworking the existing image is not wholly accounted for by Kristeva's description of semiotic subversion against the concretized symbolic register. While the Guerilla Girls rework the administration's own "terror alert system" through possibilities revealed by its existing structure of color-coded threat levels, the feminist message that is now harbored by the Guerilla Girls' transformed feminist "homeland terror alert system" is understandable as a public critique of the existing regime. Kristeva's emphasis on the subversion of humorous practice and its threat of madness or chaotic semiotic revelry thus seems to mismatch the more overt political alteration of the homeland security system on a public scale. The Guerilla Girls have not tapped into unintelligibility and insanity, and remain in conversation with the public sphere while choosing to engage with the administration's icons through reappropriation and transformation rather than confronting the icon on its own terms through ordered critique or public debate.

I am thus not convinced that all practices of humor will risk throwing women into a revolutionary semiotic insanity, and I suspect that the many women practitioners of humorwork who do not find themselves at the thrall of uncontained semiotic rupture will agree. As with the Guerilla Girls, it strikes me that many women do not slide on the slick

slope towards total semiotic instability when practicing many different kinds of humor, and that even if we granted that women have less symbolic protection than men due to their relationship to a *chora* or some other structural principle of unstable psychology, the reality of feminist political humor seems to go beyond madness while still evading classic liberal (though perhaps often masculine-coded) public debate. Examples such as reappropriating the homeland security terror alert system convey an intelligible engagement rather than a more dichotomous war between the weaponized irrationalism of the semiotic and an intelligible symbolic world of patriarchal order. Women have more tricks up our sleeves, even if we might reserve the right to bare our most serpentine selves and finally return the men to stone.

Of course, administrations change, but feminists continue to practice political and public forms of humorous reappropriation and transformation even during the politically tumultuous and disorientating first days of the Trump administration. In addition to President Donald Trump's racist and enthusiastically ignorant approach to policy, he has expressed extreme sexism towards women with his actions (cf. the reinstatement of the global gag rule) and comments about women. Famously, Trump's statements about women recorded from behind the scenes at a 2005 shooting of the show *Access Hollywood* displayed his virulent and casual sexism. Trump is recorded talking about his sexual advances on a woman, recounting that he "moved on her very heavily" and advising to another man, "Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" when interacting with a woman.<sup>389</sup> After the transcript of Trump's conversation was leaked, feminists

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<sup>389</sup> Donald Trump, in "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html/>.



online and graffiti artists in the street immediately began reappropriating and transforming Trump's now-iconic sexist statement by centering "pussy" in a different light, creating the rallying cry "PUSSY GRABS BACK."<sup>390</sup>

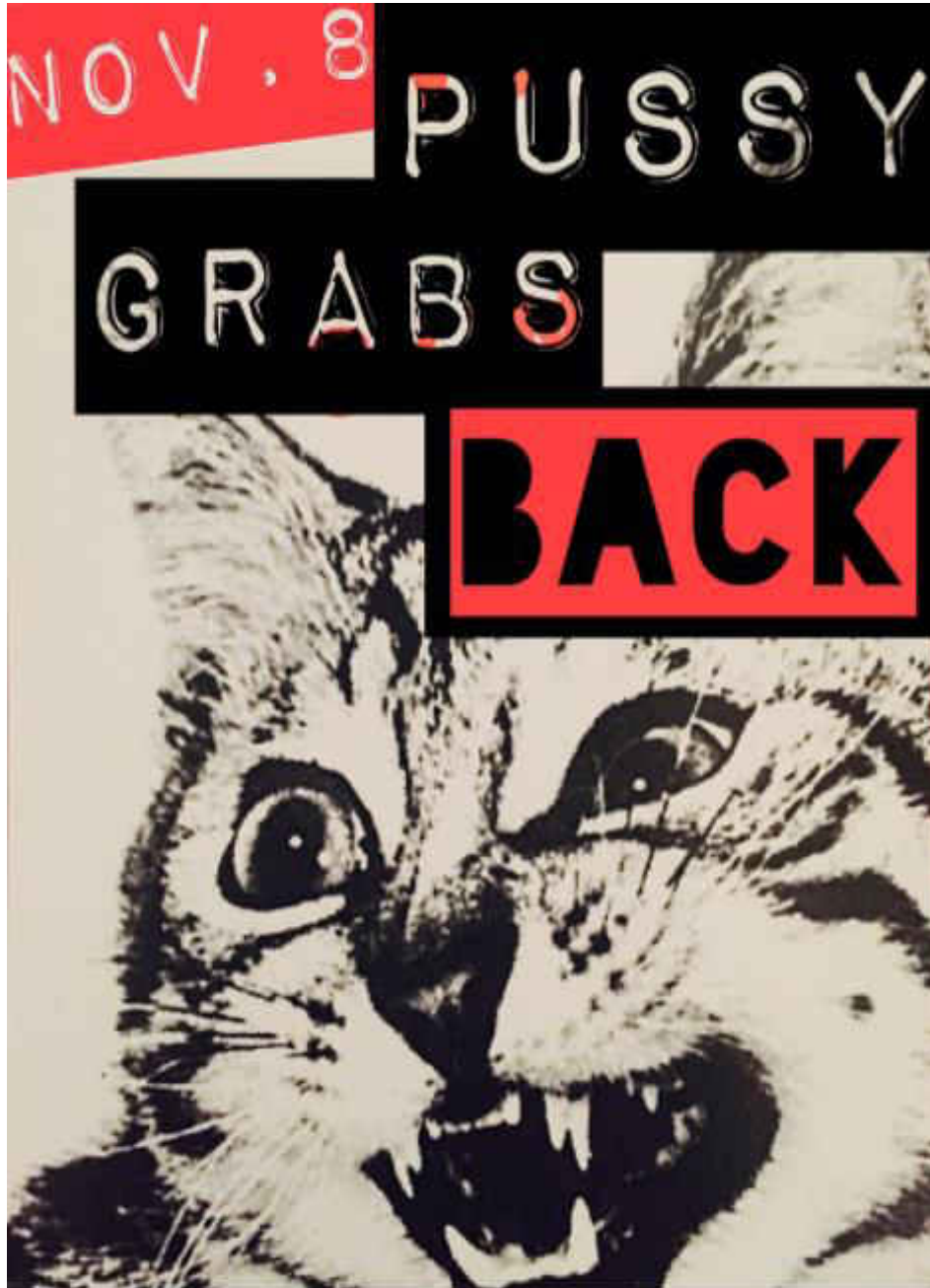
Though there were more direct political responses to Trump's leaked statement, and many feminists engaged in direct, traditional (liberal and/or discursive) critique in addition to physically standing together in the streets, the practice of reappropriation and transformation displayed in the "PUSSY GRABS BACK" slogan introduces a humorwork that engages with Trump's slogan by transforming it against its own terms into the creation of a feminist call for resistance. It takes up Trump's emphasis on pussy and acknowledges the visceral sexism of his support for nonconsensually grabbing women's bodies, but also reappropriates the centrality of "pussy" to effect a transformation towards feminist action against Trump.

This practice of humorwork is both intelligible in public speech and as a public rallying cry. Trump still won the election despite the use of "PUSSY GRABS BACK" to encourage women voting against Trump, but the reappropriation of Trump's "pussy" maintains (and perhaps has increased) in its power. During the record-setting Women's March on Washington and across the globe on January 21st, one of the most iconic symbols of the mass protests was the "pussy hat," simultaneously bringing together the dire circumstances of Trump's "pussy" comment, the rallying reappropriation of "PUSSY GRABS BACK," and a heightened focus on the attack against women's

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<sup>390</sup> Nicole Puglise, "Pussy Grabs Back' Becomes Rallying Cry for Female Rage Against Trump," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/10/donald-trump-pussy-grabs-back-meme-women-twitter/>.

autonomy caused by the threatened access to abortion, contraception, and health services in the United States and globally.



**Figure 2.** “PUSSY GRABS BACK” graphic by Amanda Duarte and Jessica Bennett promoting voting. Amanda Duarte and Jessica Bennett, Twitter post, October 7, 2016, 5:53 p.m., <https://twitter.com/jessicabennett/status/784557297657847808/>.

The humorous reappropriation and transformation of Trump’s slogan is thus, like the Guerilla Girl’s “The U.S. Homeland Terror Alert System for Women,” an intelligible practice even as it powerfully refuses countering Trump’s through polite debate and straightforward, measured discourse. In a few paragraphs I will explain why this refusal is so important, and how this distinguishes humorwork as a political practice (or feminist praxis, to add an additional burden of jargon), but for now I primarily aim to highlight this pattern.



**Figure 3.** “PUSSY GRABS BACK” graffiti on a sidewalk in Eugene, Oregon. Photo taken by the author at the intersection of Blair Ave. and 4th Ave. during winter 2017.

In her book *Memes in Digital Culture* Limor Shifman emphasizes more broadly that humor on the Internet, especially in the form of viral humor and memes (which I will discuss more in Chapter VII), can be used to participate in public and political life as a

practice of expression, communication, and connection. Specifically, Shifman argues that viral humor and memes often serve a variety of goals, ranging from uncoordinated expression to viral and meme coordination in “both in grassroots and top-down campaigns.”<sup>391</sup> Shifman breaks the varieties of political participation through “virals and memes” into three kinds of practices. First, she emphasizes that memes may be used as “forms of persuasion or political advocacy,” including election campaigns and public persuasion. Second, memes may serve as “grassroots action,” coordinating action among citizens that may have otherwise not have taken place or had as much broadcasting power. Third, memes may serve as “modes of expression and public discussion,” providing social and political commentary, a vehicle for sharing opinions and debating, negotiating identity with others, and socially passing time.<sup>392</sup> It is thus limiting to frame humor primarily as a surge of semiotic chaos against the more stable symbolic, since viral humor and humorous memes can be used for a wide range of intelligible, public, and even mundane or trivial expression.

In their essay “Between Feminism and Fun(n)ymism,” Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish connect the public and political practice of humor to women and feminism more specifically. In contrast to the hope that Web 2.0 would provide more agency for women for political self-expression on their own terms or the proposal via H el ene Cixous that women’s writing unleashed would open a voice beyond patriarchal norms, Shifman and Lemish conclude that much of women’s humor and humor distributed to and among

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<sup>391</sup> Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 122.

<sup>392</sup> Shifman, 122-123.

women online is post-feminist humor rather than feminist humor.<sup>393</sup> Whereas feminist humor “includes opposition to the current state of gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping,”<sup>394</sup> post-feminist humor instead shallowly takes up the feminist goal of empowerment devoid of liberatory political aims, instead emphasizing stereotypical individualist consumption.<sup>395</sup> Specifically, when analyzing post-feminist humor in more detail, Shifman and Lemish reported, “. . .the stereotypes underpinning [post-feminist humor] tend to preserve traditional framings of femininity and masculinity, and entrench them even further in more sophisticated and salient ways.”<sup>396</sup> The intersection between capitalism, patriarchy, and mass culture on the Internet thus leads many women to a practice of humor that is not necessarily a revolutionary, embodied, and chaotically risky upsurge against stable speech, but instead may take the form of patriarchal backlash while adopting a feminist, revolutionary guise.

There thus seems to be a wider range of ways in which women and feminists practice humor, and that the effects of this practice are not totally captured by Kristeva’s warnings about women’s humor, and even by her emphasis on semiotic practice upon and within the symbolic register. Humor need not be a play of the revolutionary sensuous nonsense within order, but may also involve an intelligible reappropriation and

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<sup>393</sup> Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, “Between Feminism and Fun(ny)mism,” *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 6 (2010): 886-887.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 873.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 874.

<sup>396</sup> Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, “‘Mars’ and ‘Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-feminist Humor and the Internet,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (2011): 267.

transformation of contexts ranging from political iconography (such as the Homeland Security Terror Alert System) to supposedly off-the-record articulations of desire and conquest (such as Trump's articulation of his desire for sexual assault). As seen with the warning system, or the use of "PUSSY GRABS BACK" and pussy hats, humorwork can be orderly and calculated even as it significantly shifts the icons and speech it preys upon. Such practices of humor, I suggest, challenge Kristeva's location of humorous disruptions (and perhaps even poetic disruptions) at the semiotic register. While some practices of humor and laughter seem to disturb the register of the symbolic and patriarchal/men's speech itself, perhaps including the avant-garde humorous wordplay that preoccupied Kristeva in *Revolution*, the register of the symbolic itself seems open to a rupture that is not covered by a primary focus on semiotic subversions.

#### Symbolic Disturbances: Humor from Derrida to Wittig

In this context, it is useful to consider why Kristeva emphasizes the semiotic in relation to revolutionary poetic language. In addition to her general critiques of linguistics and philosophers of language who ignore the role of the embodied subject who produces language,<sup>397</sup> she also critiques Derrida's emphasis on subversions of speech through *differance*. In *Limited Inc.* and *Of Grammatology* Derrida distinctly emphasizes that speech is not tethered to a particular intention, but instead can be frayed apart and rewoven into different configurations. The author does not control the interpretation of the text, which leads to a proliferation of possibilities for encountering a text in the

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<sup>397</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 15.

author's absence.<sup>398</sup> In contrast, Kristeva's *Revolution* critiques Derrida for featuring the play of language without its embodied force of life. Kristeva argues that Derrida's linguistics gets lost in a "deluge of meaning" that abandons the subject and the material aspects of language, as if the possibilities provided by *differance* only involve a disembodied sovereign reorganizing language as a dead refuse.<sup>399</sup> In this context, Kristeva's emphasis on the semiotic also serves as an endrived emphasis on the subject who speaks by bringing their chaotic semiotic practice of language to the fore rather than hiding the messiness of the psyche in an attempt to understand language in a purified register. Tilottama Rajan suggests that Derrida remains an influence for Kristeva as she continues to borrow from and work upon Derridean insights into repetition through her discussion of rejection, which relocates *differance* in materiality and drives.<sup>400</sup> In this way, Kristeva presents a unique emphasis on poetic language (and indeed humor and laughter) as a motivated practice undertaken by a speaking embodied subject, and her concurrent semiotic and symbolic registers restore this life to discussions of language.

However, given my emphasis earlier that humorwork (including humorwork undertaken by women) need not be a practice that is fundamentally aligned with the semiotic against the symbolic, I suggest that Derrida recognizes a key aspect of play and

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<sup>398</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Alan Bass and Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7-9, 68-69; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 34.

<sup>399</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 142.

<sup>400</sup> Tilottama Rajan, "Trans-Positions of Difference: Kristeva and Post-Structuralism," in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 221.

self-disruption within the more intelligible reaches of language, including the symbolic that Kristeva views as a concretized, rigid surface obscuring (but produced by) semiotic play.<sup>401</sup> Derrida rightly indicates that play and self-disruption can occur in the register that Kristeva associates with the publicly intelligible symbolic, with produced language, text, and iconography prone to profound feats of recontextualization, reappropriation and transformation. Though Kristeva rightly centers the embodied subject as a focus for philosophers' sustained concern, Derrida is also crucially invested in the ways language can become decontextualized, recontextualized, and transformed beyond semiotic disturbances. That is to say, though language disruptions may not be separable from the semiotic ruptures that produce and interrupt language in Kristeva's model, this does not foreclose the additional disruption of language in the realm of the symbolic and public discourse, and hence a disruptive play of language, image, and situation that may be madcap without risking madness. Or, in other words, language is not only ruptured by a one-sided disruption of solidified speech by the endrived forces of the semiotic and its *chora* a la Kristeva, but also may occur primarily within the realm of reworkable and transformable stable speech. Humor may have an affinity for madness, but is capable of wearing many different (sometimes pink-eared) hats.

Beyond Derrida, a more political emphasis on feminist disruptions of symbolic speech that do not depend upon the molten semiotic are found in the work of Monique Wittig. Like Kristeva (and, indeed, Irigaray and Cixous), Wittig shares an interest in the world set forth by men and its resulting discourse, in contrast to the ability of women (or

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<sup>401</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 13.



in Wittig's framework, those classed as women) to forge a world on their own terms. Though Wittig is often rightly distanced from other French feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Kristeva due to disagreements over the ontology of woman, she still distinctly shares an interest in how to shatter the world constructed for women by men.

In this context, Wittig asserts that sex does not exist (at least in its current form) except as the oppressive production of an "ideology of sexual difference,"<sup>402</sup> stressing that this ideology is maintained by "the dominant thought" reinforced by a "body of discourses."<sup>403</sup> Because of these discourses, sex is asserted as natural rather than socially constructed in order to instate "society as heterosexual" and subjugate women to men through marriage,<sup>404</sup> denying the possibility for the class of women to live on their own terms outside of the heterosexual demands of the category of sex. Wittig stresses this category is "totalitarian," enforced through law and violence, and shapes both the body and mind through the control of "all mental production."<sup>405</sup> For Wittig, the heterosexual ideology's silencing language is best understood not as involving a realm of "Irreal Ideals" but instead as enacting "material oppression" and violence upon its subjects.<sup>406</sup> Wittig writes, "These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they

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<sup>402</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms"<sup>407</sup> to the extent that "Outlaw and mad are the names for those who refuse to go by the rules and conventions, as well as for those who refuse to or cannot speak a common language."<sup>408</sup>

Wittig refers to the bundle of discourses that use their totalizing power "materially and actually upon our bodies and our minds" as "the straight mind."<sup>409</sup> The straight mind universalizes itself into "history, social reality, culture, language, and all the subjective phenomenon" and is unable to think outside of its concepts.<sup>410</sup> Wittig asserts that in order to escape the discourse of sexual difference that has been instated by the straight mind such that the class of women can speak outside of it, a revolution must occur at the level of concepts involving "a political semiology" and operating "at the level of language/manifesto" and "language/action" that will "break off the heterosexual contract" and "abolish men and women."<sup>411</sup> In order for women to speak, the totalizing category of sex that subjugates them in a totalizing, heterosexual relationship to the class of men must be destroyed.

For this purpose, and this is the moment I am most interested in for the present task at hand, Wittig introduces what she calls a "war machine," a practice of language that disrupts the discursive order imposed by the class of men. She compares the war

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 30-32.

machine to the figure of the Trojan horse, a statue that was accepted because the Trojans thought they recognized its form, but which led to their ruin when let in the gates.<sup>412</sup>

When considering an existing body of literature, the task of a writer is "either to reproduce existing forms or to create new ones," with language serving as a "raw material" for this purpose.<sup>413</sup> During this process, words can be divested of their typical meaning and re-fashioned to impress a "shock" upon the listener due to the generation of new associations, dispositions, arrangements, and separate uses of words.<sup>414</sup> Under Wittig's framework, these ripples within language have real material effects upon the world because language is a crucial part of the material fabric from which the world is made. This refashioning of words is thus also a refashioning of worlds and their possibilities.

Wittig's figure of the "war machine" metaphor dwells on the politics of this refashioning, which initially covertly and ultimately concretely disrupts the (already politicized) realm of established speech. The material link between word and world causes the disruption and refashioning of words to have material effects upon the existing constructed reality, to the extent that disrupting and reworking language may function as a "war machine" upon the established order. While these war machines may be more blatant, some practices of language disruption like the "Trojan Horse" are initially introduced covertly as a familiar formation but then revealed as overtly revolutionary and shocking. Though Wittig asserts that women's revolutionary disruptions in language are

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 72.

often situated outside dictated arrangements of language such that they may be seen as mad, women (and especially lesbian women), they can nonetheless sow the seeds of revolution by overtly contesting the existing paradigms of the straight mind (or what we might call heteropatriarchy) through language in order to blast it apart from within. In this context, associations between disruptions of the existing order and insanity may come not from the workings of the psyche, but instead from the heteropatriarchal order of the world and its language.

I do not intend to wholly dismiss Kristeva's work by challenging its claim to humor in its entirety. In fact, at the end of this chapter I will explain cases of humor where Kristeva's insights continue to be distinctly helpful and relevant. I find this to be a moderate and accommodating move, since Kristeva's writings on laughter and its practice were often focused on avant-garde poets specifically<sup>415</sup> and hence need a bit more elaboration when solely focused on laughter or humorwork.

It is also important to address that though Wittig does share an interest in laughter through her novel *Les Guérillères*, she does not specifically discuss humor in her work. However, her materialist emphasis on the manipulable fabric of the language produced under the regime of the straight mind and the redeployment of this material language as a war machine against the world-making language of a heteropatriarchal order stands out as a potentially useful framework for humor beyond its semiotic force and beyond a risk of psychic madness (even as the humorist might be labeled mad or outcast through the lens of the straight mind).

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<sup>415</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 185.

In this context, I find it useful to lay down a more concrete formulation of humor's manipulations to both situate my position in relation to Wittig and Kristeva, as well as to fulfill my own mandate from the previous chapter that feminist theories of humor need to be more concrete and specific. In what follows I will thus further specify how humor works in the context of its practices from symbolic to semiotic, and from trivial and outright political to avant-garde and truly loony.

### Specifying Humor's War Machine

I have argued thus far that humor need not lapse into madness to reappropriate and transform existing discourse and imagery. This does not mean that Kristeva is wrong that laughter and humor can be related to madness and the rupture of stable speech through an upsurge of the living endrived body. Rather, I am suggesting there are other practices of humor that do not draw their powers from such an unstable source, instead more firmly anchored in the crust of intelligible (but manipulable) messages. Before I flesh out a topography of humor's varying levels of disruption, I want to further specify humor's ability to prey upon existing discourse and imagery. In short, I am unsatisfied with using a language of humorwork that can only describe vague notions of "reappropriate" and "recontextualize" and "transform" without including more detail about how this happens.

In the effort of further specifying humor's practice, I find it useful to turn to the work of Delia Chiaro. Chiaro is an editor, along with Raffaella Baccolini, of the explicitly feminist volume *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives* volume of humor studies research. In her earlier book *The Language of*

*Jokes*, Chiaro discusses several key operations of humor in the context of word manipulation, explicitly linking humor to laughter<sup>416</sup> but also crucially with wordplay and its practice. She writes, "...[A]ny joke, whether it contains a pun or not, by their very nature of its verbalization, necessarily plays on language."<sup>417</sup> Due to this focus on wordplay, Chiaro thus distinctly centers humor's intricate ability to play with words while avoiding the rigid and abstract schemas of Raskin's and Attardo's general theories of humor that I critiqued in Chapter II. Chiaro places wordplay in motion so to center its dynamism without getting lost in formulating the necessary conditions of humor via scripts and schemas. Importantly for my concern of discussing humorwork in action, she is also interested in concrete deployments of humor and jokes rather than abstract laughter.

Throughout her book, Chiaro mentions several ways jokes play with words, often relying on creating traps, exploiting ambiguity, or otherwise disrupting the context of a situation. Generally, the art of trapping through humor creates or exploits manipulable traps in language to dramatically transform the context of discourse. An example of this is when graffiti is used on existing signs and posters in order to alter the language (by manipulating words and letters) to humorous effect.<sup>418</sup> This is the tactic used by the earlier Guerilla Girls example, as the existing iconography of the poster is used as a trap to bring the Terror Alert System into the context of more feminist aims. In this context,

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<sup>416</sup> Delia Chiaro, *The Language of Jokes: Analysing Verbal Play* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Chiaro writes, "The joker tempers with serious written language in a way which is not immediately obvious, yet which, at the same time, reflects some kind of unseen trap inherent in the original text..."<sup>419</sup> This strategy primarily focuses on reappropriating an already existing artifact or situation.

In other cases, a joke-teller might set up an interactive game of word formation for the recipient that leads them to an unforeseen trap in language.<sup>420</sup> When practicing a trapping technique in the form of luring, the humorist tricks the other party (or parties) into having their discourse twisted away from its original context by luring them into a prepared recontextualization. In grade school I recall minding my own business while enjoying recess when another student asked me if I would sing the song "Yankee Doodle" with an F in front of every word. I of course complied, singing, "Fankie Foodle fent foo fown a-fiding fon fis fony, fe fuck..." while the student went to the nearest adult and told on me for saying the offensive word *fuck*. This resulted in quite a lecture from the recess monitor while the other student had trouble holding in his amused laughter.

Similarly, jokes often create an expectation only to thwart it and lead to a surprising result,<sup>421</sup> such as replacing an expected outcome with a pun.<sup>422</sup> For example, one protest sign attached to a dog during the Women's March on Washington began to ascribe high values to the canine sign-bearer with the message "I WALK AND STAND

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 55.

FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE...” which then leads to the more light-hearted “...- and Sit /  
-and Fetch.”<sup>423</sup>



**Figure 4.** “Protestor pup” photographed by user @arzesux on Twitter during the 2017 Women’s March. Arzesux, Twitter post, January 21, 2017, 12:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/arzesux/status/822905013332799488/>.

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<sup>423</sup> Arzesux, Twitter post, January 21, 2017, 12:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/arzesux/status/822905013332799488/>.



Other jokes, such as prank phone calls may ensnare their marks into manipulative play in ways that are not quite so adorable or delightful for their target. Jokes thus frequently play unfair with expectations and habits,<sup>424</sup> and Chiaro writes, "... all jokes work on opportunity, and surely part of the inventor's skill is to seek out the unseen traps of the language and then exploit them for humorous means."<sup>425</sup>

Another related element of jokes is playing off ambiguity. Chiaro asserts that "lexical play" often involves placing an ambiguous, "two-faced" item within a situation only to have that situation unexpectedly "adapt" to the item itself rather than vice versa.<sup>426</sup> In this way, the clever placement of a linguistic trap can completely recontextualize the situation due to the possibilities offered by ambiguity. A classic feminist example of this is an image of graffiti from the 1970s that targeted a car advertisement. Originally, the ad features a photo and displays the sexist script, "If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched," comparing a woman to a car. In response a woman took of the latent ambiguity of the comparison between women and cars to respond in spray paint, "If this lady was a car she'd run you down."<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Chiaro, 45.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>427</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 23.



**Figure 5.** Car advertisement feminist graffiti photographed by Jill Posener in 1979. Jill Posener, “Fiat/Ad Graffiti,” in *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

Ambiguity is thus exploited as a certain "open-endedness" which "[paves] the way for manipulation."<sup>428</sup> Jokes, in this way, can expose the "two-faced" character of certain texts,<sup>429</sup> even when this has previously gone unnoticed.

Another way that a joke can play with language is through disruption. Sometimes this disruption concerns distinctions between straightforwardness and play. In addition to

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<sup>428</sup> Chiaro, 40.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

the previously mentioned playful manipulation of set slogans and iconography via graffiti, certain jokes begin in a serious manner only to betray their humorous intention in the punchline.<sup>430</sup> There are also jokes that use the technique of trapping to convince the interlocutor that they are in the realm of humorous discourse when in fact the joke ends on a serious note, the unexpected trajectory from humorousness to seriousness becoming itself part of the joke.<sup>431</sup> Chiaro asserts, "...the area in which serious discourse ends and humorous discourse begins is not necessarily well-defined."<sup>432</sup> Even in serious, everyday conversation, jokes are able to change our course "so that an interlude of humorous discourse replaces the serious discourse which had been going on previously,"<sup>433</sup> often resulting in a cascade of jest.<sup>434</sup> Graffiti is again a useful context where the malleability of markers and spray paint in public space permits interesting (and frequently humorous) disruptions of context through words and imagery. In the image below, for example, the phrase "feminism is cancer" is manipulated by crossing out the "is" to replace it with "Fights."

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 105.



**Figure 6.** “Feminism Fights Cancer” graffiti in a coffee shop bathroom. Taken by the author in Eugene, Oregon during spring 2017.

Other times this disruption occurs at the same time as a new context or new message settles into the disrupted space. Even though when a trap is placed, it often makes it so "the text unravels," this disruption is also able to contribute to "overall cohesion,"<sup>435</sup> the disruption completely shifting the text into an unexpected, yet cohesive formations. The Guerilla Girls simultaneously disrupt the messages of the government-issued Terror Warning System while concretizing their own feminist and anti-imperialist message.

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 39.

## Humorwork in Public and Off the Wall

Chiaro's analysis of humorous wordplay are relevant for the interests of both Kristeva and Wittig, as well as the other feminist philosophers discussed in the previous chapter. From a Kristevan perspective, Chiaro's framework is useful for the various ways that concretized language is not so stable, able to be disrupted through deployments of excess in discourse such as playing off of ambiguity. In this way, the open-endedness of humor retains its connection with new possibilities. From a Wittigean perspective, the manipulations of language that occur through humor's techniques of play are distinctly helpful for her emphasis on deploying language as a war machine and Trojan horse. Like the Trojan horse, humor deftly is able to trap and warp the existing structures of language. Finally, humor fits many of the aims that feminist philosophers have in praising laughter, as its ability to bend and trap existing speech opens up distinct new possibilities beyond the existing setup of the world. Several forms of humorwork are thus a potentially potent form of feminist political practice, capable of stretching and bending structures of the world to reveal in new arrangements.

To further specify how humor operates, it is also helpful to discuss the range of its practice from trivial rearrangements, to political transformations, and finally to more semiotic and chaotic modes of practice. Reaching this moment is the main point of the critique of Kristeva earlier in this section, and now it will become apparent that her insights remain relevant rather than cast aside as obsolete.

The first grouping of humor that I find useful to distinguish is banal humor. In this case, neither a Kristevan nor Wittigean perspective on political aesthetics seems to cover

the manipulations made by trivial humor. One example we might consider in this case is a classic joke made by the Joke Analysis Production Engine, mentioned in Chapter II:

Q: What kind of murderer has fibre?

A: A cereal killer.<sup>436</sup>

In this context, Kristeva's emphasis on the flows and surges of embodied drives and the ability of the semiotic to rupture the symbolic stands as too profound in comparison to the blandness of this specific linguistic maneuver in the form of a terrible pun. Likewise, though this passage does play on an existing ambiguity in language that may have passed through undetected in more straightforward contexts, in this context we are dealing with a hobby horse rather than the might of a Wittigean Trojan Horse. As the worst of puns reminds us, not all humor may be primarily a chaotic, semiotic upsurge, or a revolution against racist heteropatriarchy, even if these symbolic displays still retain their connection to heterogeneous, disruptable language.

Consider another trivial joke, which you may blame on the author of this essay:

Q: What do you call a depressed pianist?

A: Chopinhauer.

At best, the ambiguity in the symbols and their phonetics are being revealed, but this mostly occurs in the form of a disruptive triviality. The reason for this is that these jokes only manipulate the least potent ambiguities and detect the most mundane, politically distant traps, as if language is splayed out before the humorist like a quaint skeleton and they are satisfied with merely showing that the elbow looks funny when glued to the forehead of the skull. As such, trivial jokes have the revolutionary might of a ripple in a

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<sup>436</sup> Ritchie, 211.

pond on a summer's day, although they may serve an important role in fostering community through shared laughter.<sup>437</sup>

Second, it is useful to consider more impactful examples of wordplay, which cause the symbolic to fall prey to unseen traps in language that involve significant subversions. The classic example, as seen in Bing's and Scheibman's work,<sup>438</sup> is the car advertisement graffiti that I discussed above. In this context, we may also consider additional signs from recent protests.<sup>439</sup> The "First They Came for..." protest sign held up during protests against Executive Order 13769 issued President Trump against refugees, immigrants, travelers, students, and citizens from predominantly Muslim countries reappropriates and transforms the well-known quote from German pastor Martin Niemöller reflecting on the violent mass murder of political dissidents and marginalized people during Nazi Germany:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.<sup>440</sup>

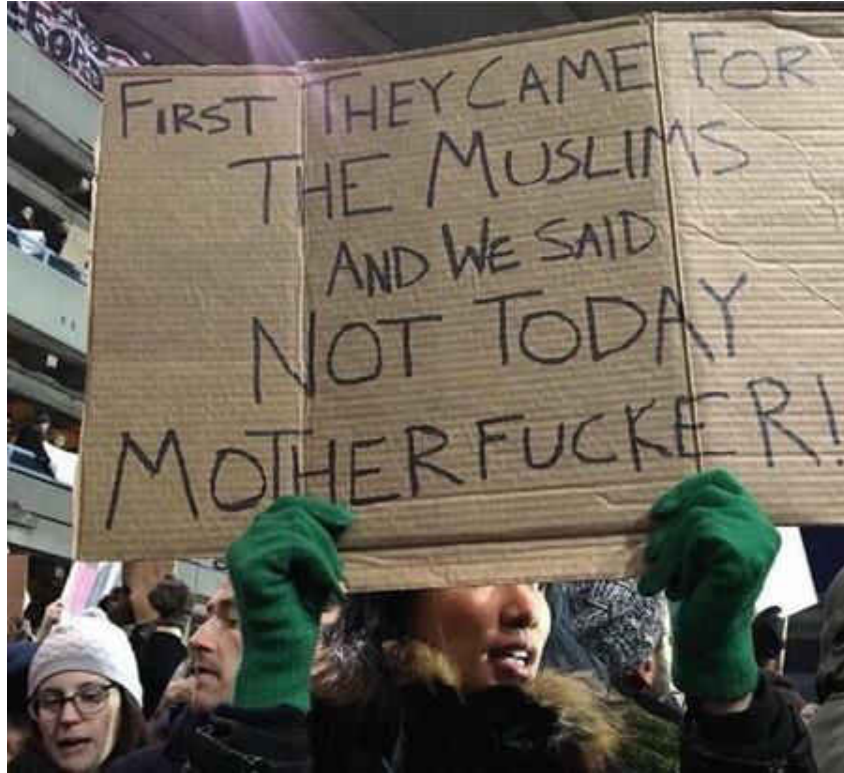
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<sup>437</sup> Gorris; Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>438</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 23.

<sup>439</sup> Jessie Sholl, Instagram post, January 28, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BP03IH7hzhb/?hl=en/>

<sup>440</sup> Martin Niemöller, "First they came for the Socialists...", in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum web site, accessed February 2, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392/>.



**Figure 7.** “First They Came for...” protest sign against Executive Order 13769 photographed by Jessie Sholl. Jessie Sholl, Instagram post, January 28, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BP03IH7hzhb/?hl=en/>

The protest sign, drawing from connections that protestors and other concerned US residents have been making between the policies of the Trump administration and fascist administrations across the world and throughout history (including Nazi Germany), begins with the pattern of “came for” in Pastor Niemöller’s poem. The past of who the Nazis came for is brought into the present of a fascist Trump administrator coming for Muslims through the immigration executive order. However, this reappropriation of the Pastor’s reflection into contemporary times also allows for the possibility that this pattern could be stopped, for example, through engaged action and protest. Hence, the line,



“...And We SAID NOT TODAY MOTHERFUCKER!” is a transformation of the possibilities presented in the original quote through a contemporary space of resistance.

This protest sign, like the transformed slogan in the advertisement of the car, represents Bing’s and Scheibman’s emphasis that humor’s recontextualizations and transformations are a practice of introducing “a new possible world” from existing situations.<sup>441</sup> When analyzing the car advertisement graffiti and Guerilla Girls Homeland Security mentioned above, Bing and Scheibman argue that that humor practice can effect a shift towards a previously unasserted array of possibilities in the form of a “hypothetical world,” even including a “utopia.”<sup>442</sup> Examples such as the “NOT TODAY MOTHERFUCKER” sign are thus able to recontextualize an energetic shift from the morbid past of fascism towards a possible world that does not repeat brutal practices of marginalization and elimination. The car graffiti similarly projects different possibilities through transforming the sexist ad, as the practice of humorwork here recontextualizes a message about objectifying women into a possible situation of women’s agency, including the ability to strike back and “run over” worlds of sexist objectification. While these examples of humorwork do not engage in straightforward argumentative discourse, they nonetheless maintain a clear message in publicly digestible discourse, cooling any semiotic fire enough to remain intelligible while recontextualizing sexist and fascist projections.

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<sup>441</sup> Bing and Scheibman, 28.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 28.

Finally, consider the most chaotic and subversive practice of humor that call forth significant semiotic eruptions. These might range from absurdist jokes that defy neatly-regimented symbolic discourse while nonetheless making their intelligible and effective mark upon the existing order to a practice of humor that revels in extreme disruptions of intelligibility through inappropriateness, bizarreness, and/or nonsense.

A more intelligible yet chaotic (and forcefully semiotic in Kristevan terms) practice of humor includes many (but by no means all) of comedian and performance artist Kristine Wong's scripted shows and interviews. While Wong is interested in feminist and antiracist practices of humor, to the extent that she explicitly describes her humorwork practice as "getting inside the situation like the Trojan horse," Wong also frequently uses frantic speech, gesture, and embodied movement along with props to give her humorwork a disruptive, semiotic edge.<sup>443</sup> It makes sense that Wong would want to incorporate this technique in her political displays of humor, as one of her more frantic and off-kilter performances is an embodied practice of staging mental illness and the ways it gets covered by society. Wong is thus politically taking up gestures often associated with women undergoing a mental health crisis to highlight the extent to which women (and especially Asian American women) are expected to be hypercompetent and not ask for help.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Kristina Wong, "Off Color Comedy: Kristina Wong," Times Video, *The New York Times*, interview and video by Channon Hodge, Tanzina Vega, and Taige Jensen, October 28, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/arts/100000003199534/off-color-kristina-wong.html/>.

<sup>444</sup> Kristina Wong, *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Burbank, CA: Cinema Libre Studio, 2000), Amazon Prime video streaming, <http://a.co/6BLBjqx/>.

More non-political forays into unintelligibility and absurdity is displayed by several practices of Internet humor that recontextualize existing images and disrupt discourse with extreme results. One simple example is the transformation of the otherwise benign Garfield comic by Jim Davis into varying levels of absurdity. The *Garfield without Garfield* trend of comic manipulations, for example, showcases the strange results when the character Garfield is removed from the comic strip while Jon and his speech bubbles remain. What results is a transformation of the comic that lacks a concrete politics and is mostly humorous for its absurd (or even nihilistic) results.

*Garfield without Garfield* itself has resulted in several similar absurd transformations of the comic, including “Realfield” where Garfield is replaced with a non-responsive more realistic cartoon orange cat. Another *Garfield* variant is *Lasagna Cat*, which was started by the sketch comedy group Fatal Farm in 2008 and features awkward live-action performances of *Garfield* strips, including a costumed Garfield and Odie, that are followed by more absurd (and sometimes disturbing) remixes of the strip set to music. In one video, set to the tune of Billy Idol’s “Eyes Without a Face,” Garfield’s face becomes distorted and blown up, with his eyeballs eventually falling out of their sockets as he continues to stare with gaping eyeholes at the viewer, in a strange mix of humor and horror.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> Chris Higgins, “7 Hilarious Garfield Variants,” *Mental Floss*, August 31, 2011, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/28653/7-hilarious-garfield-variants/>.



**Figure 8.** *Garfield* comic strip by Jim Davis edited by Dan Walsh to exclude Garfield in *Garfield Minus Garfield* as absurdist humor. Dan Walsh, *Garfield Minus Garfield*, February 23, 2008, <http://garfieldminusgarfield.net/day/2008/02/23/>.

In addition to these *Garfield* manipulations, other Internet accounts use disruptions of speech and expectation in the form of ongoing Twitter accounts. One example is the account Carrot Facts (@RealCarrotFacts on Twitter), which on its face is a

Twitter account that states facts about carrots, but instead plunges into frequent misspellings, unintelligible juxtapositions between carrots and politics, and frequent lamentations over some other character named Megan. Tweets such as “croat have flavor,”<sup>446</sup> “Merry christmas carrot have vitaman A Megan left me I wish she was still with me I will never met another girl like her I am so deprensed,”<sup>447</sup> and “carrot are Good and taste good donal Trump should not be president”<sup>448</sup> range from confusing to absurd. Here, we may even reach the moment in Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women* in which Kristeva describes the threat of laughter shattering “symbolic armour” unto ecstasy and madness.<sup>449</sup> It is this laughter and practice of humor that a non-Kristevan contemporary humor theory is least equipped to analyze, as it can only gaze at a symbolic play of pure words without any intimate revolts of the subject. More broadly, absurdist and chaotic humor also shares an affinity with the subversive but suspended temporality of the Bakhtinian masculine carnivalesque<sup>450</sup> and the “destruction without reserve” found in the work of Georges Bataille.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Carrot Facts, Twitter post, January 5, 2017, 3:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RealCarrotFacts/status/817158464703066112/>.

<sup>447</sup> Carrot Facts, Twitter post, December 25, 2013, 6:48 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RealCarrotFacts/status/416037683647877120/>.

<sup>448</sup> Carrot Facts, Twitter post, August 16, 2017, 5:11 p. m., <https://twitter.com/RealCarrotFacts/status/897974068296564736/>.

<sup>449</sup> Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 30.

<sup>450</sup> Gray, 31-32.

<sup>451</sup> Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 24.

Each of these examples suggests a range of humor in relation to semiotic and symbolic, and I invoke them to suggest not only that Kristeva's writings on language transform the disembodied domain of contemporary humor studies, but also that engaging Kristeva's writings with specific, concrete practices of humor may alter her picture of laughter as well. The heterogeneity of language that Kristeva seeks to restore is thus an intricate, messy heterogeneity, and admits of a range of intricate and conflicting perspectives on humor. Feminist philosophers such as Wittig help to make this range clearer, and the work of feminist humor scholars such as Chiaro, Bing, and Scheibman help to ground the discussion of humorwork's practice with more specificity.

#### The Enduring Importance of Feminist Philosophy for Humor Studies

There is a risk that the reader could finish this chapter and decide that feminist philosophy is not very useful for much at all. What is the value of framing humor studies through a feminist philosophy of humor when feminists in linguistics and across the many non-philosophy vantage points of humor studies as an interdisciplinary practice are certainly up for the challenge of theorizing humor? Before moving to the next chapter, I find it worthwhile to reiterate why I find it valuable to continue centering Irigaray, Cixous, Willett, Kristeva, Ahmed, Wittig, Bettcher, Manne, and other feminist philosophers as interlocutors in the project of crafting a robust feminist social and political philosophy of humor.

First, I find it important to linger on the importance of Kristeva for feminist philosophy, and especially a feminist understanding of language as it connects with the practice of an embodied speaking subject. There is a risk that this chapter comes across as

consigning Kristeva to the fate of tempered correction, having distributed the dynamics of humor between semiotic and symbolic according to various intensities that leaves more semiotic, revolutionary upsurges of language back on the fringes. This is unsatisfying from a Kristevan perspective, given that it may come across as setting her insights that semiotic drives continue to constitute the seemingly-stable symbolic aside in favor of reasserting precisely the stable symbolic picture that she argues against while trivializing her unique contributions to feminist philosophy.

In this context, it is helpful to return to the passage from *About Chinese Women* contrasting men's and women's laughter. As a refresher, in this passage Kristeva asserts that men's laughter avoids falling into total semiotic chaos through a gendered symbolic armor in contrast to women risking total semiotic madness when engaging in laughter.<sup>452</sup> Because Kristeva writes very little explicitly about laughter, it is tempting to take up this one passage as an insurmountable barrier to women's capabilities for political laughter since Kristeva suggests it always risks falling into a total semiotic break with intelligibility. Overall, by invoking Wittig I have rejected a dichotomy between stable speech and revolutionary speech by focusing on the ruptures possible in even the supposedly stable speech of political life exploitable through humor as a Trojan horse upon language, but this does not mean abandoning the Kristeva's insight that semiotic drives continue to persist and destabilize the symbolic.

Despite this focus on symbolic disruption through humor, I do not intend to dismiss Kristeva as counterproductive to considering humor as a political force. It may be

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<sup>452</sup> Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 30.

hasty to pit the one passage in *About Chinese Women* against the revolutionary potential for laughter and humorous, playful disruptions of language as part of a revolt of the subject found in Kristeva's work such as *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Kristeva's overall framework of language as an unstable process connected to a desiring, embodied, and gendered subject capable of revolt against and through language thus remains a core guiding framework for me as I continue my work in this dissertation. I depend upon precisely this Kristevan insight in the next two chapters as I read the circulation of emotions beyond apolitical language into the practice of humor, although I complicate the passage in *About Chinese Women* to suggest that the instability of humor in relation to the subject also impacts the humor of men and more broadly the field of patriarchal and racist humor (not to simplify and totalize men with patriarchy and women with revolution, as I clarified in Chapter III). This will get taken up again in Chapter VII as I turn towards the unstable, embodied, and gendered practice of humor by a subject who may very well have humor turned against them, a point that Kristeva's work stands out among the work of other feminist scholars in elucidating. By suggesting a range of symbolic and semiotic resistance beyond simply the symbolic in contrast with the semiotic, I am also hoping to continue acknowledging Kristeva's insight that semiotic drives continue to constitute the seemingly stable symbolic, flowing underneath 'established' language like magma flowing under crust and always ready to erupt.

More broadly, the work of feminist philosophers remains key to studying the political meaning of humor and should not be held merely as secondary to the work of feminist scholars of humor outside philosophy. The work of feminist scholars of humor outside of philosophy is compelling because much of it focuses on humor more explicitly



and in more depth than the treatment given to the subject by many feminist scholars outside philosophy. As I have argued since Chapter II, feminist philosophy is a key resource for considering the meaning of feminist practices of humor in more depth. I have brought the work of feminist philosophers and theorists such as Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig, Bettcher, Ahmed, Willett, and Manne further into conversation with the subject of humor because they provide robust frameworks for thinking through the significance of humor in a way that goes beyond the work of current feminist scholars of humor outside philosophy.

One way in which feminist philosophers and theorists continue to stand out when brought to the subject of humor is considering the motivations through which humor is practiced. Feminist philosophers such as Ahmed and Kristeva focus on not only language and politics considered at the surface level, but also the relationship between language, emotions, and the more volatile drives of a speaking subject. I thus find feminist philosophy a key resource for considering the more volatile dynamics of humor in touch with living subjects, which I will continue to focus on through emotions in Chapter VI and both embodied and gendered instability in Chapter VII.

Additionally, feminist philosophers more explicitly recognize the situatedness of language and resistance within the context of power, and especially within systematic dynamics of domination and inequality such as sexism under patriarchy. As I discussed in Chapter III, feminist philosophers such as Manne and Bettcher are crucial for providing a more detailed analysis of how laughter and humor operate in the context of complex systems for enforcing sexism such as misogyny, and Ahmed's emphasis on the circulation of emotions as both personal and cultural provides a more robust

understanding of the ways in which humor circulates emotions such as disgust or fear that tie in with larger systems of subordination such as sexism, transphobia, and racism. The practice of humor within systems of power is also crucial for understanding the use of humor for resistance against the status quo, as I discussed in Chapter IV and this chapter.

Crucially, many feminist philosophers explicitly connect the very constitution of language to power as it relates to hierarchies of gender and domination. This is what continues to draw me to philosophers such as Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig, and Kristeva, despite their differences, and why I have chosen them to discuss them in so much detail during this chapter and the previous chapter. These feminist philosophers remain crucial to the project of bringing together feminist philosophy and humor because humor so frequently involves a disruption in language, images, and other systems of meaning that are part of the sinew upholding sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. These philosophers stand out in bringing significance and meaning to the practice of feminist humor as not merely a trivial practice but also one that is messing with and warping the situation of patriarchy against its own terms. If the construction of ‘proper’ speech and communication is also a gendered construction, then these feminist philosophers stand out in their ability to highlight the significance of feminist humor in practice.

#### Humorwork: Feminist and Antifeminist

In sum, in this chapter I argued that bringing feminist humor scholars into conversation with feminist philosophers is helpful for understanding the concrete, specific practices of humorwork upon the world as practiced by feminists in action. I began by juxtaposing Kristeva’s semiotic-upon-symbolic model of laughter and its

practice with Wittig's focus upon disruptions within existing language. Then I grounded and specified the disruption of situations through humorwork by discussing the work of feminist humor scholars Chiaro, Bing, and Scheibman, including a specification of humorwork's techniques and its varying relationship to politics, banality, and semiotic excess.

One result of decoupling my focus from women's and feminist laughter to concrete humorwork is that these specific manipulations do not seem to be the sole province of feminists and others who seek transformative amelioration. As I already discussed in Chapter III, laughter and humor are also distinctly tied to the practice of hegemony, and focusing on recontextualization, reappropriation, and transformation does not distinctly entail a focus on *feminist* aims. Consequently more work is required to distinguish feminist humorwork, which I will class more broadly as *ameliorative* or *counterhegemonic*, from antifeminist and racist humorwork, which I will class more broadly as *counterameliorative*. The next chapter (Chapter VI) thus studies the humorwork of racist anti-black protestors to lead towards a culminating discussion of humorwork's political dangers and promises in Chapter VII.

CHAPTER VI  
HUMORWORK AS COUNTERAMELIORATIVE PRACTICE:  
RACISM AND AFFECT IN FERGUSON

Humorwork against Liberation

Regrettably, humorwork is not solely aligned with the laughing feminist century and will not be practiced by only feminists in a laughing 21st even as women will certainly continue to deploy humor as part of resistance to the manifold forms of racist heteropatriarchy. I am thus interested in tempering the strong emphasis on humor as feminist political resistance in this chapter by discussing humor used for ends that are distinctly antifeminist, racist, and homophobic. Already in Chapter II I referenced comedians such as Bill Burr who are concerned about the specter of feminism and other “goddamn groups” as a threat to humor through their sensitivity.<sup>453</sup> Many practices of humor go beyond Burr’s staged performance to strike at marginalized groups and ameliorative activism in public space. For this reason, it is crucial to acknowledge humor’s potential for both feminist good and for counterameliorative ill.

To describe regressive deployments of humor I will focus on a particular example of racist humor from Ferguson, Missouri to examine a practice I call “counterameliorative humor,” which reinforces or recalls a situation of domination or subjugation, including (but not limited to) humor that is antifeminist, sexist, racist, or homophobic. Specifically, I will argue that understanding counterameliorative humor in

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<sup>453</sup> Burr.

practice requires an approach that tracks how humorwork navigates complex systems of domination and the histories of their emotional circulations. More broadly, I understand counterameliorative humor as a practice that attempts to shut down or gradually whittle away movements that aim for better social and political conditions for marginalized groups within a society.

First, I will explain Luvell Anderson's overview of theories discussing racist humor, and his emphasis that racist humor includes the harm done to people or groups of people target by it and the intentions and attitudes of the agents who practice racist humor. Next, I will discuss the ameliorative aims of Black Lives Matter and the reclaimed slogan "Hands up, don't shoot," as well as the racist response through counterameliorative humorwork of "Pants up, don't loot." I then return to a more detailed analysis from Sara Ahmed's book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* first mentioned in Chapter III to emphasize the importance of cultural and historical emotional circulations for understanding counterameliorative humorwork. I conclude by suggesting that counterameliorative humorwork, and indeed all forms of humorwork, carry potential failure, risk, and instability, which will be the subject of the next and final chapter.

### Counterameliorative Humor

In the previous chapter, I argued that humor can foster reappropriation and transformation practices that range from trivial to political to manic. Rather than a simplistic vision of humor as an enforcement of superiority or hegemony, or an exciting poetic uptake of humor as a creative force of liberation that can drown out the status quo, I have argued throughout this work that humor is a political but multivalent practice.

These tools and this spectrum of more or less political humor is also relevant for counterameliorative humor as it is practiced in public (and private) space.

More specifically, humor that is decidedly not geared towards liberation is able to effect recontextualization and transformation just like more feminist or banal practices of humor. Just as humor can be used to recontextualize an existing situation into an absurdist or liberatory direction, it can also work in service of more regressive stances. Attempts to change the status quo, including slogans and messages that have been created for the aim of liberation, are not self-sufficient and self-guaranteed radical acts, but instead are vulnerable to manipulation and transformation just like other practices of speech and action. In this context, counterameliorative humor can act to stave off social change and reinforce the status quo or even aim for a more regressive atmosphere.

First, I want to clarify that I use the term “counterameliorative humor” to both relate and distinguish this discussion from other discussions about racist humor and sexist humor that do not take up my specific approach to studying the social and political practice of humor, or namely, my interest in the practice of humorwork as a political practice of recontextualization and transformation. In this context, I will argue that counterameliorative humor is an instance of individual and collective practices of humorwork that aims for the entrenchment of a more oppressive, dominant, and regressive society.

In this context, I find it helpful to look at Luvell Anderson’s analysis of definitions in his essay “Racist Humor.” Anderson organizes theories of racist humor into two groups: harm-centered and agent-centered. Harm-centered definitions of racist humor, which Anderson attributes to Michael Philips and David Benatar, defines humor

as racist when it intends or causes harm against a racial group, causing “hurts, offenses, and beliefs, and other disliked mental states.”<sup>454</sup> In this picture, humor becomes racist when it causes unjustified harm, regardless of intention. Agent-centered definitions of racist humor, which Anderson draws from Merrie Bergmann and Jorge Garcia, instead focuses on “racist beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms” held by the creator of humor, or the ways in which these beliefs, attitudes, and/or norms are “used to add to the fun effect” of the humor in question.<sup>455</sup>

Anderson then moves beyond harm-centered and agent-centered definitions of humor, stressing that categorizing humor as either “racist” or “not racist” forces the discussion into missing key nuances and gradations when people make humor related to race. In this vein, Anderson proposes a distinction between (1) “merely racial humor” that subverts racial stereotypes in ways successfully received by an audience; (2) “racially insensitive humor” which fails to subvert racial stereotypes by either not aiming for their subversion or not getting properly received by an audience; and (3) “racist humor,” defined as either wrongfully harming people based on their membership in a racial group or when the speaker’s attitude is “malevolent or one of disregard.”<sup>456</sup> Anderson thus usefully expands definitions of racist humor to take into account both the harms of humor and the agent’s attitudes informing them, the humor’s uptake by an audience, and the range of race-related humor from “merely racial humor’s” subversions

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<sup>454</sup> Luvell Anderson, “Racist Humor,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (2015): 503.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

to the failures of “racially insensitive humor” to the harmful effects or malevolent agents of racist humor.

When I discuss counterameliorative humor, I am similarly interested in both the effects of humorwork and the aims of the agents who practice it, as well as gradations in its practice. However, my focus is specifically on the social and political implications of humorwork as a practice of reappropriation and transformation, and how this reappropriation and transformation is taken up towards counterameliorative social and political ends. In this context, I do not prioritize the specific harms of humorwork’s practice upon individuals, nor am I solely focused on the individual attitudes and beliefs of those who practice a particular instance of humor, although both of these factors continue to matter and have mutual implications. Rather, my interest in counterameliorative humor synthesizes not only the effects of humor and the attitudes behind it, but also the specific implications of how humor is practiced. I thus turn to the phrase “counterameliorative humor” rather than “harmful humor” or “malevolent humor” to center both the political effects of humorwork and the specific manipulations of words, images, and beliefs that result in these effects.

Abstractly describing my approach is limited without illustrative examples, so I will consider a case of counterameliorative humor, and specifically racist humor, through which a practice-focused approach can be clarified. Providing an example will also show that the humorwork I have been discussing extends beyond the ameliorative examples I considered in the previous chapter, as it is capable of being deployed for regressive and oppressive ends. The specific concrete techniques of humorwork will thus be shown in their more politically ambiguous dimensions, not merely a tool for some agents of



liberation but also part of a larger interplay of disruptive language that may respond by shutting down attempts to end oppression and domination.

### Counterameliorative Anti-Black Racist Humor in Ferguson

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was murdered while unarmed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Protests formed shortly after both in Ferguson and across the United States, responding to the epidemic of unarmed black people getting murdered by white police officers or through Stand Your Ground policies without consequence, including the unpunished murders of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and both Tamir Rice and Eric Garner in 2014. After the shooting, a witness reported that Michael Brown held up his hands in front of Darren Wilson and stated “Hands up, don’t shoot,” before Wilson fatally shot him. While the grand jury later rejected this account based on changing witness testimonies, the words “Hands up, don’t shoot” became an important phrase marking continued injustice and pointing towards a need for change.<sup>457</sup>

In this context, “Hands up, don’t shoot” has often served as an ameliorative phrase. After news of Brown’s murder spread, it appeared in protests, on t-shirts, across social media, and was referenced by five St. Louis Rams players during a football pregame.<sup>458</sup> Activist DeRay Mckesson said of the phrase, “When we say 'hands up,' it's

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<sup>457</sup> Emanuella Grinberg, “Why 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' Resonates Regardless of Evidence,” *CNN*, January 11, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/10/us/ferguson-evidence-hands-up/>.

<sup>458</sup> “No Fines for Rams Players’ Salute,” *ESPN* web site, Dec. 1, 2014, [http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/11963218/the-five-st-louis-rams-players-saluted-slain-teenager-michael-brown-sunday-game-not-fined/](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/11963218/the-five-st-louis-rams-players-saluted-slain-teenager-michael-brown-sunday-game-not-fined/).

about reminding police we are unarmed and reminding them of a pattern of police brutality."<sup>459</sup> The phrase has joined other slogans such as “I can’t breathe,” which was used by activists calling for justice and an end to police brutality against black people after Eric Garner was killed by a chokehold from a police officer.<sup>460</sup> “Hands up, don’t shoot” has also been deployed in the context of broader long-term social movements such as Black Lives Matter, which work against racist police brutality and other aspects of oppression caused by systemic anti-blackness.

The phrase “Hands up, don’t shoot” is thus often reclaimed as an ameliorative slogan. We might consider in more detail, for example, the use of the phrase in the context of Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter was co-founded as a social media hashtag by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin. Garza wrote of the political aspirations of Black Lives Matter,

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.<sup>461</sup>

Garza thus stresses that Black Lives Matter and related protests stand against systematic anti-blackness and for the flourishing of black lives in the US and beyond.

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<sup>459</sup> Quoted in Grinberg.

<sup>460</sup> Oliver Laughland, Jessica Glenza, Steven Thrasher, and Paul Lewis, “‘We Can’t Breathe’: Eric Garner’s Last Words Become Protesters’ Rallying Cry,” *The Guardian*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/04/we-cant-breathe-eric-garner-protesters-chant-last-words/>.

<sup>461</sup> Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, Oct. 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

In this vein, Black Lives Matter fits the description that sociologist Manuel Castells gives to social movements that both employ and extend beyond social media, asserting that digital social movements are rooted in the call for justice against an unjust society.<sup>462</sup> In contrast to the construction of institutions used to perpetuate the values and desires of those in power, Castells emphasizes the amplified ability of social movements that include a digital space to contest the status quo. Castells refers to the power of digital movements as “counterpower,” defined as “the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests.”<sup>463</sup> In this context, Black Lives Matter serves as a counterpower against the status quo, claiming representation through the use of protests and slogans for a more just society that will not excuse killings by police and other forms of racist violence. The phrase “Hands up, don’t shoot” has similarly served as an ameliorative call for representation and action in its reclaimed form. Other calls for amelioration in the context of Black Lives Matter would include reclaiming “I Can’t Breathe” for protests, as well as NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s decision to “take a knee” during the national anthem, which was taken up by other players and met with direct scorn by President Trump’s tweets in November 2017.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>464</sup> Tom Schad, “Donald Trump Calls NFL 'Weak and Out of Control' in Latest Tweet About Protests,” *USA Today* web site, Nov. 28, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2017/11/28/donald-trump-calls-nfl-weak-and-out-control-latest-tweet-protests-anthem/900535001/>

Despite a link between the use of the phrase “Hands up, don’t shoot” and ameliorative protest, the phrase is open to attack in the form of reappropriation and transformation using humorwork for the purpose of thwarting attempts at social justice. For this reason, I refer to this form of humorwork as counterameliorative, since it serves to disarm, disrupt, and take away social justice words, images, and actions against themselves by reasserting the status quo. One practice of counterameliorative humor has been taking elements from the ameliorative reclamation of the phrase “Hands up, don’t shoot” to shift it into the racist phrase “Pants up, don’t loot.” The phrase was popularized by Ryan Lovelace in a *National Review* article from August 2014 that attributed “Pants up, don’t loot” to “one voice” shouting in response to protestors chanting “Hands up, don’t shoot.”<sup>465</sup> Later, the slogan was held up by a group of white counter-protestors over a bridge in Ferguson, Missouri amidst ongoing protests. In November, as protestors awaited the eventual court decision that would not indict officer Darren Wilson, a GoFundMe page was started by Tennessee resident Don Alexander to pay for a billboard in Ferguson displaying the giant hashtag “#PantsUPDontLOOT.” While Alexander’s campaign appears to have not been able to find a billboard company willing to display the sign, it was still able to receive well over the \$3000 asking price on their website the first day that donations opened.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Ryan Lovelace, “‘Pants Up, Don’t Loot,’” *National Review*, Aug. 18, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/385681/pants-dont-loot-ryan-lovelace/>.

<sup>466</sup> James Nye, “‘Pants-up, Don’t Loot’: Supporters of Officer Darren Wilson Raise \$3,000 to Erect Billboard Taunting Would-Be Ferguson Protesters with Controversial Slogan,” *The Daily Mail*, November 18, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2840255/Pants-Don-t-loot-Supporters-Officer-Darren-Wilson-raise-3-000-erect-billboard-taunting-Ferguson-protesters-controversial-slogan.html/>.

In this vein, the slogan “Pants up, don’t loot” has both ideologically and materially contested the aims of reclaiming “Hands up, don’t shoot.” The shift from Brown’s reported utterance of “Hands up, don’t shoot” to the use of “Hands up, don’t shoot” by protestors is clearly not a practice of humorwork as reappropriation and transformation in the sense discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than being transformed against its own aims, Brown’s reported words were instead seriously taken up by protestors to continue striving against the conditions that resulted in Brown’s death. The protestors thus may be using Brown’s reported words in a different context, but they are not playing with these words or twisting them back upon themselves.

The phrase “Pants up, don’t loot,” however, does participate in the techniques of reappropriation and transformation discussed in the previous chapter as humorwork. So far, I have described humorwork as a concrete practice of taking elements embedded within existing words, images, ideas, and discourses in order to transform them against their original intentions, meanings, and aims. For example, I drew from Monique Wittig’s discussion of politically and strategically using language as a “Trojan horse” against itself to emphasize that social and political humorwork such as graffiti or reclaimed slogans like “Pussy Grabs Back” are able to rework or even prey upon their origins in oppressive (i.e. sexist, racist, etc.) frameworks. Though this practice frequently takes up ameliorative aims, “Pants up, don’t loot” is an example of humorwork that takes up these techniques for counterameliorative purposes.

First, “Pants up, don’t loot” would not exist as a phrase without its origin in transforming “Hands up, don’t shoot.” It was specifically created as a transformation of this phrase by people who do not agree with it being reclaimed for protests, and who

likely disagree with the aim of the protests to end police brutality and its particular relationship with anti-black racism. However, it is important to note that the specific techniques of reappropriating the phrase are part of its categorization as humorwork. For example, we might consider the ways in which #BlackLivesMatter has been responded to by counterprotestors through similar phrases with different intentions such as #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter. These shifts are not humorwork (and indeed almost nobody finds these phrases themselves humorous) precisely because of the directness of their responses. In contrast to Black Lives Matter, the “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” responses directly contest the focus on anti-black racism, erroneously pitting black lives against “all lives” and the lives of police officers.

“Pants up, don’t loot,” in contrast, is more indirect in its response to “Hands up, don’t shoot.” First, it relies not on a direct contestation (which is not to say that it is not a real attempt at contestation), but rather a similarity in the sounds of words and underlying racist stereotypes. It is not coincidental that “hands up” sounds similar to “pants up,” and “don’t shoot” to “don’t loot.” These sounds are part of the “Trojan horse” embedded within language that enables the transformation of the ameliorative phrase towards a racist phrase. Likewise, “pants up” and “don’t loot” are not carelessly chosen words, but rather specifically geared towards racist stereotypes and discourses around Ferguson and ameliorative justice. The *National Review* essay from which “Pants up, don’t loot” was popularized, for example, is entirely focused on the conduct of protesters and the specter of protesters looting or not following police instructions<sup>467</sup> rather than centering the

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<sup>467</sup> Lovelace.

attempt of protestors to fight against the reality that racist police brutality is systematically excused and rendered invisible. Additionally, the focus on “pants up” shifts the image of “hands up” to a racist stereotype that generalizes and ridicules the ways black men dress as inappropriate and unruly. The “Pants up, don’t loot” phrase thus evokes the controlling image of the “thug,” through which black men are depicted as an unruly threat needing containment rather than voices to be heard.<sup>468</sup>

### Counterameliorative Humor and Affect

Noting the phonetics lurking in the words and the racist images they invoke is still not enough, as understanding this instance of counterameliorative racist humorwork requires a more systematic, affective, and collective sense of what precisely this humor is attempting to accomplish for the subjects who are bringing it into practice. For this reason, I find it helpful to turn to Sara Ahmed’s work on the political life of emotions in circulation in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. This will add an affective and collective practice dimension to the discussion of humorwork thus far and provide a more detailed account of the process through which “Pants up, don’t loot” preys upon already-circulating emotions tied to ideologies such as racism to warp reclaimed words.

The relationship between humor and emotions has sometimes been disputed by notable theories of humor. Philosopher of humor John Morreall, for example, asserts that

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<sup>468</sup> See Marie Dawn Dow, “The Deadly Challenges of Raising African American Boys: Navigating the Controlling Image of the ‘Thug,’” *Gender and Society* 30, no. 2 (2016): 171; John McWhorter, “The Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word ‘Thug,’” *NPR Opinion*, interview by Melissa Block, April 30, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/04/30/403362626/the-racially-charged-meaning-behind-the-word-thug/>.

humor is primarily a practice of the intellect through “cognitive shifts” that disengage people from “conceptual and practical concerns,” and thus are fundamentally removed from emotions through rational disengagement.<sup>469</sup> However, in addition to the critiques I offered of the disengagement approach in Chapter III, contemporary philosophical accounts of humor have also contested the removal of humor from emotion. The “epistemic emotion” approach offered in *Inside Jokes* by Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, for example, foregoes foreclosing cognition from emotion in favor of emphasizing how they work together. While I will not take on an “epistemic emotion” approach due to my focus on social and political humor, as discussed in Chapter III, I will similarly emphasize that emotions play a critical role in the practice of humor.

Already, this analysis has an emotional undercurrent that is worth making explicit. Earlier I mentioned Castells’ description of digital activism as a form of counterpower, and linked this to Black Lives Matter as an ameliorative movement that has an important digital element. Castells also emphasizes the affective dimension of protest, stressing that “affective intelligence” is a key element in responding to oppression.<sup>470</sup> Affects such as enthusiasm, hope, anger, outrage, and empathy are thus key parts of activist movements in an arc from “emotion-driven action to deliberation and project construction.”<sup>471</sup> Sociologist Deborah Gould has also written on the continuous

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<sup>469</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50, 66-67.

<sup>470</sup> Castells, 12.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-16.



rich affective life of social movements in the context of ACT-UP and responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, stressing that “emotion is fundamental to political life and always a factor in the realm of activism, something that stirs, inhibits, intensifies, modulates, impedes, incites...”<sup>472</sup> Thus, when Garza emphasizes the importance of affirmation in the context of Black Lives Matter, she is also emphasizing an affective protest against anti-blackness.<sup>473</sup>

The anti-blackness enacted against Brown by Wilson, the US police system, and the courts also has an affective dimension. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed is interested in describing what emotions and affects do in the context of complex interactions between history, culture, bodies, and politics.<sup>474</sup> Refusing to offer a definition of emotions as clear and stable entities, but interested in the structure of how different cultural emotions such as fear, disgust, hate, and love orient subjects differently, Ahmed focuses on both the ways that emotions/affects impress themselves upon subjects and the ways they are directed towards an object.<sup>475</sup> In this context, Ahmed stresses that emotions neither primarily dwell within a subject or solely emanated by an object of concern considered separately from each other, but rather are generated through a circulation in relation to its objects. Emotions are not merely properties of individuals, but also an affective social and political history of contact through which objects and others are

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<sup>472</sup> Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 439.

<sup>473</sup> Garza.

<sup>474</sup> Ahmed, 4.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

transformed into “objects of feeling.”<sup>476</sup> Ahmed writes, “...I suggest that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such...Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social Tension.”<sup>477</sup> Emotions are thus ways in which objects are not only understood in reference to their social relationships with others, but also histories of these social and political relationships.

Ahmed refers to the manner through which objects are shaped by emotions as “stickiness,” noting that certain emotions are latched onto some objects and not onto others.<sup>478</sup> Though Ahmed references “objects” here, she also considers the effects of emotions in contact with other (and “othered”) bodies. Discussing a passage by Audre Lorde on her experience of racism while riding a train, Ahmed writes,

...the word ‘hate’ works by working on the surfaces of bodies. This bodily encounter, while ending with ‘The hate’, also ends with the reconstitution of bodily space. The bodies that come together, that almost touch and comingle, slide away from each other, becoming relived in their apartness. The particular bodies that move apart allow the redefinition of social as well as bodily integrity.<sup>479</sup>

In this context, emotions such as hate both attach to particular bodies, and influence their social relationship in bodily space. This attachment of emotions to bodies is influenced by ongoing histories such as racism, resulting in negative emotions such as hate attaching to black people and circulating around their bodies in particular, rather than to white bodies. Ahmed continues,

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 53.

The emotion of ‘hate’ aligns the particular white body with the bodily form of the community – the emotion functions to substantiate the threat of invasion and contamination in the body of a particular other, who comes to stand for and stand in for, a group of others. In other words, the hate encounter aligns, not only the ‘I’ with the ‘we’ (the white body, the white nation), but the ‘you’ with the ‘them’ (the black body, black people).<sup>480</sup>

In this context, the resonance that hate takes up groups together white people as a favored and centered group while “sticking” a negative affect to black people, resulting in both a dynamic of “us vs. them” and an alignment of black people with “invasion and contamination.” Hatred and other negative emotions directed towards black people thus cannot be merely traced to the agent who holds these feelings or the people towards which they are directed and who experience resulting harm, but rather a larger field of meanings that are circulated unevenly across bodies in social space.

In this context, if we follow Garza’s point that Black Lives Matter can be considered a movement of affirmation, affirmation is not only the motivation for individual Black Lives Matter activists, but also a way of contesting the racist affective life through which black people are socially encountered by white people with sedimented, circulating negative emotions. Activism and movements such Black Lives Matter are not only contesting the construction of institutions, but also the ideologies and affects that circulate, feed their power, and are appealed to when justifying violence.

For example, while attempting to defend his actions in court, Darren Wilson attempted to justify killing Brown by deploying a heavily emotional description of Michael Brown and his body. Despite Wilson and Brown being around the same height, and both over 200 pounds at the time, and the fact that Wilson carried a gun while Brown

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

was unarmed, Wilson likened himself to an innocent child trying to grapple with a professional wrestler during his initial struggle with Brown. Wilson, who was ten years older than Brown, reports, “When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.” Wilson continues with this portrayal of Brown as aggressive and impervious, stating that after getting shot and while the police car was full of his blood, Brown heightened his unrelenting, threatening stance to a supernatural degree. Wilson narrates, “He looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.” This framing of Brown as impervious and unrelenting continued past not only the first time he was shot but also the second, with Wilson stating, “He was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting him...And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn’t even there, I wasn’t even anything in his way.” It is only when Wilson took the killing shot that he felt the otherworldly, insurmountable threat that he read into Brown’s body was contained. Wilson concludes, “I remember his feet coming up...and then they rested...When it [the bullet] went into him, the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was gone, it was gone, I mean I knew he stopped, the threat was stopped.”<sup>481</sup>

In this example, Wilson is not a neutral reporter of his encounter with Brown, but rather is describing an intense array of emotions that have been “stuck” to Brown’s body, enabled by wider, racist negative emotions that circulate about black men and their

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<sup>481</sup> Terrence McCoy, “Darren Wilson Explains Why He Killed Michael Brown,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/25/why-darren-wilson-said-he-killed-michael-brown/?utm\\_term=.57470ab8ada5/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/25/why-darren-wilson-said-he-killed-michael-brown/?utm_term=.57470ab8ada5/).

bodies in the US and beyond. Specifically, Wilson is expressing an encounter with Brown through an affect of fear which sticks to Brown as a sign of threat. Ahmed emphasizes that fear sticks objects together to signal threat through particular histories, including histories of racism. Ahmed writes (in conversation with Frantz Fanon) about the fear white people have of black people,

The production of the black man as the object of fear depends on past histories of association: Negro, animal, bad, mean, ugly. The movement of fear between signs is what allows the object of fear to be generated in the present (the Negro is an animal, bad, mean, ugly). The movement between signs allows others to be attributed with emotional value, as “being fearsome.”<sup>482</sup>

Through the history of fear and the bodies stuck to threat through fear, Brown’s body is described by Wilson as unrelentingly and even inhumanly threatening, a characterization that can appeal to both Wilson and the larger court through the affective life of racism. Ahmed emphasizes that fear not only links bodies to threat, but also envelops and contains them within fear, resulting in a misreading of black bodies as fearsome in comparison to white bodies.<sup>483</sup> This misreading of black bodies as fearsome also links to the danger and threat that black bodies are stuck with through fear, to the extent that a white person may prioritize at all costs the threat to their life that has been misread and stuck onto a black person over a black person’s actual, continuing life. Ahmed writes,

Such fantasies [of fear] construct the other as a danger not only to one’s self as self, but to one’s very life, to one’s very existence as a separate being with a life of its own. Such fantasies of the other hence work to justify violence against others, whose very existence comes to be felt as a threat to the life of the white body...<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Ahmed, 66-67.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 64.

For Wilson, Brown's life ceases to matter in comparison to the threat that Brown poses to his white body, stuck with demonic, inhuman, and monstrous power in comparison to Wilson's suddenly vulnerable and fragile body. Wilson even frames his gun, the weapon of murder, as fragile in comparison to Brown's unarmed body, emphasizing the gun's constant failure as it "clicked" instead of firing and constantly missed, in comparison to Brown's "bulking up to run through the shots." It is only in death that Wilson's fear and the threat stuck to Brown ceases, with Wilson declaring not that a life was lost, but instead that "the threat was stopped."<sup>485</sup>

Returning again to Garza's emphasis on affirmation, Black Lives Matter stands against (among many other injustices) the continuing circulation of emotions such as fear and hate that link black people to threats needing containment in contrast to fragile and protectable white bodies. Instead, Black Lives Matters affirms that black people should have a larger social relationality that invokes vulnerability, care, and love rather than an unreflective perpetuation of racist negative emotions in circulation. "Hands up, don't shoot" is part of this affirmation, linking Brown with vulnerability rather than Wilson's appeal to threatening demonic near-invincibility. "Hands up, don't shoot" presents Brown as a living, unarmed, fragile person who was encountering a police officer holding a lethal weapon and part of a racist U. S. police and incarceration system. It presents Brown with a life deserving of sympathy and value rather than death.

In this context, the response by the subjects who practice counterameliorative humor such as "Pants up, don't loot," brings a heavily affective dimension to humorwork.

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<sup>485</sup> McCoy.

While the reader may not find the phrase “Pants up, don’t loot” funny or humorous at all, and I find it repugnant rather than funny, the phrase nonetheless makes frequent appearances under the category “Funny” when posted and shared online. It is thus worth considering what the practice of this particular instance of counterameliorative humor might look like to the subjects who circulate and even enjoy its practice.

The subjects who create and enjoy “Pants up, don’t loot” are not only shifting the phrase “Hands up, don’t shoot” by exploiting ambiguities in phonetics and language to invoke harmful stereotypes, but are also exploiting the “sticky” aspect of emotions from Ahmed’s account of emotional “stickiness.” Specifically, “Pants up, don’t loot” attempts to thwart the efforts of Black Lives Matter to resonate black male bodies with more positive affects such as affirmation, care, and love, as well as the more specific effect of “Hands up, don’t shoot” to emphasize vulnerability, by recirculating racist stereotypes and controlling images that have the weight of historical sedimentation behind them. “Pants up, don’t loot” thus takes glee in denying attempts to place more weight on affective associations between black people and mattering (in the sense of having an actual, intrinsically valuable life) back into the easier, sedimented world within which white people encounter black people primarily as threats to be hated, feared, dismissed, contained, and eliminated. Specifically, “Pants up, don’t loot” is able to evoke images of disorder (“pants up”) and the combination of disorder and threat (“don’t loot”) that is stuck to black people through a racist history, not only trying to counter the efforts of Black Lives Matter and Ferguson protestors, but also trivializing and deflating it by letting the weight of racist history do much of the work of “sticking.” In this way,

humorwork that is counterameliorative is also often counteraffective, as well as rooted in systematic injustices with large, complicated histories of interaction.

“Pants up, don’t loot” also shifts the focus on Michael Brown’s death and the many killings of unarmed black people by police into a concern about disorderly conduct (in the form of fashion) as well as the threat of theft and property destruction. Ahmed describes a different instance in which the rhetoric that “the law is ‘more interested in the right of criminals than the rights of people who are burgled” was used to affectively stick a 16-year old teenager who was murdered while stealing to the emotional resonance of “criminal,” prioritizing the person who was almost stolen from over the person who was shot and killed. Ahmed writes,

The undeclared history sticks, and it positions [the burglar] as the victim rather than the criminal, as a person who was burgled, rather than a person who killed. The victim of the murder is now the criminal; the crime that did not happen because of the murder (the burglary) takes the place of the murder as the true crime, and as the real injustice.<sup>486</sup>

“Pants up, don’t loot” is similarly undeclaring the history of Brown’s murder to instead position Brown and Ferguson protestors chanting “Hands up, don’t shoot” as criminals and a threat to society. However, rather than directly making a statement that Wilson, the police, and private property are the true vulnerable subjects in contrast to Brown and the protestors as “criminals,” the use of “Pants up, don’t loot” attempts to disrupt the context and aims of the protests by indirectly reappropriating and transforming their slogan, delighting in the attempt to take appeals for affirmation and vulnerability away from Brown and protestors without any engagement on Brown’s or the protestors’ own terms.

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<sup>486</sup> Ahmed, 47.



It is also important to emphasize the role of racism in this particular attempt to stick Brown and protestors to “criminal,” since Ahmed’s example was about a white man killing another white man. In addition to the racist history within which black people have been characterized as general threats, there is also a racist history within which black protests and protestors have been stuck as a threat to order, property, and the rule of law. In 2018, for example, (mostly white) football fans destroyed property throughout the city after the Philadelphia Eagles won the Super Bowl. The following morning police reported that three people were arrested as a beaming, amused news reporter for NBC10 told his audience that the aim of police “was all about striking that perfect balance, allowing fans to celebrate after decades of waiting for this Superbowl Title, and still keeping the city and those revelers safe.”<sup>487</sup> Hawk Newsome, the President of Black Lives Matter of Greater New York, pointed out the stark difference between the police and media response to the Eagles win and the framing of black protestors against continued police violence as “thugs” and looters and criminals. Newsome asserted, “Somehow, it seems there's a line drawn in the sand where destruction of property because of a sports victory is OK and acceptable in America. However, if you have people who are fighting for their most basic human right, the right to live, they will be condemned.”<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Dan Stamm, “Broken Glass, Downed Traffic Lights: Some Eagles Celebrations Go Too Far in Center City,” *NBC10 Philadelphia*, Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Center-City-Eagles-Celebration-Vandalism-472714003.html/>.

<sup>488</sup> Hank Newsome, “Black Lives Matter: Philadelphia Super Bowl Riots Reaction ‘Glaring Example of White Privilege,’” quoted by Chantal Da Silva, *Newsweek*, Feb. 5, 2018. <http://www.newsweek.com/philadelphia-chaos-reveals-racial-double-standard-over-riots-critics-say-799421/>.

In this context, the specter of inappropriate protest and unlawful riot linked with the more specific figures of the “thug,” the looter, and the criminal are more firmly stuck to black people and groups of black people in protest. This means that people creating and enjoying “Pants up, don’t loot” are not only attempting to shift away from affects of affirmation and vulnerability, but also centering sedimented racist emotions around black protest while trying to disrupt the legitimacy of black social movements. “Pants up, don’t loot” also shifts away from acknowledgments of black protesters’ First Amendment rights, protection from police overstepping the law, and the importance of challenging unjust laws to instead center concerns about (white) public order and property. And it does so without a single unpacked or clear statement of opposition or argument, instead relishing humorwork’s indirect recontextualization of sounds, language, meaning, and affective circulation. It binds its practitioners and fans, through enjoyment and mirth and play, to a horizon in which threatened abstract property and racist sentiment are valued over actual black lives.

In addition to drawing from a sedimented racist affective past that continues into the racist present, counterameliorative humor also potentially impacts cultural and political senses of possibility. Gould links the emotions of activism to a sense of political possibilities for change, ranging from ameliorative to change for the worse. She writes,

“...*emotion*, in the word’s fullest sense - sensations, feelings, passions, whether conscious or not - conditions the possibilities for oppositional activism. It does so by facilitating, and blocking, our political imaginations, our political horizons, our ideas about the politically (im)possible, (un)desirable, (un)necessary in a given moment. Our affective states can constrict our political imaginaries...as well as extend them in new, unexpected directions.”<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Gould, 443.

In addition to a relationship with the past and the present, the role of affect in activism is also linked to a sense of possible futures.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Bing and Scheibman emphasize that humor plays with projected possible worlds. In addition to their discussion of humor as a potential projection of utopias such as through the work of the Guerilla Girls and feminist graffiti, Bing and Scheibman also associate sexist humor with the ability to project “a hypothetical world” that can objectify women for the sake of men. In this context, Bing and Scheibman conceptualize humor with a potential for projecting possible “utopias and dystopias.”<sup>490</sup> Similarly, Limor Shifman emphasizes that “...regardless of emotional keying, political memes are about making a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there.”<sup>491</sup> The reappropriation of the Black Lives Matter protest slogan into racist humor is thus also a redirection of normative possibilities in public life. If Gould is correct that emotions can be linked to a sense of political possibilities, then political humor is relevant in its ability to play with their projection, opening and closing various hypothetical worlds.

Returning to the slogan “Hands up, don’t shoot,” it too projects a possible world, not through humorwork but through its call for social amelioration. In a conversation between George Yancy and Judith Butler for the New York Times’ *The Stone* forum for contemporary philosophers, Yancy and Butler discussed the vital role of slogans such as “Hands up, don’t shoot” in projecting and striving for an ameliorative future. Yancy

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<sup>490</sup> Bing and Schiebman, 28.

<sup>491</sup> Shifman, 120.

writes, “Posters reading ‘Black Lives Matter,’ Hands Up. Don’t Shoot,’ ‘I Can’t Breathe’ communicate the reality of a specific kind of racial vulnerability that black people experience on a daily basis.”<sup>492</sup> A crucial part of the slogans is that they refuse to stay silent about features of anti-black racism when concerns have systematically remained unaddressed or met with hostility. Butler adds,

One reason the chant ‘Black Lives Matter’ is so important is that it states the obvious [that black lives do matter] but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, but also a chant that links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives, but also a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat.<sup>493</sup>

Black Lives Matter thus also includes an emotional projection of a more just future rooted in an understanding of the past, with slogans such as “Hands up, don’t shoot” calling attention to the continued deferral of a just future in the present.

“Pants up, don’t loot,” however, latches onto the sounds and the association with blackness in “Hands up, don’t shoot,” as well as its various affective weights, to take away the projection of a just future and reassert the power of a racist present and past through which sedimented emotions stick and recirculate. The voices and struggles of black people calling for an end to societal anti-blackness are drowned out in favor of

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<sup>492</sup> George Yancy, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’” conversation between George Yancy and Judith Butler, *The Stone* from *The New York Times Opinionator*, Jan. 12, 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/>.

<sup>493</sup> Judith Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’” conversation between George Yancy and Judith Butler, *The Stone* from *The New York Times Opinionator*, Jan. 12, 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/>.

flattened, racist controlling images and stereotypes to the delight of racist practitioners and their sticky emotional investments. The horizon of possible worlds projected by protestors, including a possible world where Michael Brown's life and vulnerability was valued, is met with an attempt at constriction that brings pleasure to the saboteurs.

### Racist Humor, Affect, and Practice

Returning to my goal of clarifying the role of looking at counterameliorative humorwork in the context of other philosophical discussions about racist humor, my humorwork approach centers the practice involved in the creation of racist humor while situating it within affective systems of power. Like Anderson, I am concerned about the harms caused by racist humor and the racist beliefs/attitudes of the agents who practice it. But centering the practices through which racist humor works, including the indirect ways of latching onto anti-racist slogans and attempting to shift them back towards racist ends, requires a consideration of cultural and political circulations of history, bodies, affect, and power. I have thus emphasized that humorwork and counterameliorative humorwork specifically happens beyond individual subject, target, and practice. More precisely, political humorwork navigates and shifts through complex systems of domination and the histories of their emotional circulations.

It is important, however, that we do not act as if counterameliorative humor, or even "Pants up, don't loot," is inevitably or clearly successful. While humor's capability for indirect reappropriation and transformation provides counterameliorative humorwork with powerful tools to disrupt ameliorative struggle against its own terms, this indirectness also serves as a site of instability. In the next (and final) chapter, I look at

this instability in depth to conclude that humorwork constitutes an unstable political practice.

## CHAPTER VII

### HUMORWORK AS UNSTABLE POLITICS

#### With Laughter on My Side: Revisited

In the previous chapters, I have argued that political humorwork involves a transformation of speech, discourse, slogans, situations, and images from their original intentions and arrangements into a new form through an indirect reappropriation of their linguistic, conceptual, visual, and affective elements. This practice of reappropriation and transformation has the potential for feminist (or generally ameliorative) aims, or for counterameliorative purposes that work against social movements in favor of entrenched norms and the institutional status quo. Humorwork thus emerges as a creative and multivalent social and political practice that circulates across multiple levels of human interaction on a large scale to the extent that it is not a trivial, but rather a highly complex mode of social and political engagement.

However, the analysis so far may risk imbuing humorwork with too much certainty and efficacy in its intentions and results. That is, by focusing on the concrete practice of humor, and looking at the effects of its practice, we may risk missing the ways humor is uniquely suited to failure, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and unanticipated effects. As an indirect form of engagement that in Delia Chiaro's words "plays unfair"<sup>494</sup> and refuses many restrictions and cooperative terms of engagement, humor is also subject to the precarities and instabilities of its own mode of practice.

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<sup>494</sup> Chiaro, 45.

Additionally, so far the move from the subject of laughter to the practice of humorwork risks losing sight of the subject who not only practices but also takes up humor as a mantle. As I discussed in Chapter IV, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous associate laughter with the embodied, speaking subject. In contrast, my analysis of humorwork turned away from a focus on laughter, which has been taken up by Anca Parvulescu as her primary focus,<sup>495</sup> to instead consider humor as a more specific, concrete practice. Though I do not center laughter as my primary concern, ejecting the subject of humor's practice risks reducing its practice to what Kristeva calls the dead, ejected products of language, presented without the living subject.<sup>496</sup> By focusing on humor's instabilities in this chapter, I return to the potential instability and excess of the speaking, embodied subject who might take up humorwork as practice and potentially experience the excess and instability of taking up language, images, and actions beyond straightforward norms of engagement.

Finally, understanding the practice of social and political humorwork does not achieve an explanation of the overall effects political humorwork has on wider discourse, imagery, norms, and institutions. Without recognizing the instabilities contained within the work of humor, and the subjects who practice it, humorwork risks being presented as a straightforward technique of disruption, as if humorists could calculate and deploy humor according to some blueprint with a clear result. Instead of presenting a skewed overall description of the field of political humorwork, I will argue that the widespread

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<sup>495</sup> Parvulescu.

<sup>496</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 21.



deployment of humorwork marks an unstable, constantly shifting and transforming mode of engagement in political life.

In this final chapter, I will focus on the many ways in which engaging in humorwork falls into the ambiguities of, as discussed by Kierkegaard's A, having humor on your side.<sup>497</sup> In this context, humorwork is practiced across several levels of potential instability, impacting not only its practice but also its effects on social and political life. Specifically, I discuss instabilities that connect the subject of humorwork with the continued life of their humor beyond their intentions and expectations, humorwork that draws upon the instabilities of gendered embodiment, and humorwork that posits itself as stable but fails due to the emotions of the subject who practices humor and the possibilities that humor can be practiced against anyone or anything given the right conditions for reappropriation and transformation. To explain these dynamics, I will consider specific examples of humor, humorists, and humorous situations, including Pepe the Frog, Miss Piggy, Ricky Gervais, Roseanne, and the 2018 White House Correspondents Dinner. I conclude with the pronouncement that while the innumerable day-to-day practices of political humorwork have unclear effects, the reappropriation and transformation effected by humor in practice is a relevant and potentially powerful object of feminist social and political concern.

The Joke's on You: Pepe the Frog and the Subject of Unstable Humorwork

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<sup>497</sup> Kierkegaard, 42-43.

In chapters IV and V, before discussing counterameliorative humorwork in Chapter VI, I discussed feminist approaches to humor and laughter that emphasize the importance of the subject who produces it. Feminist theorists and philosophers such as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva argue that language and laughter are not merely free-standing, lifeless products of a language that exists outside of people, but instead linked with their subjectivity and situated position in relation to power, including sex. Emphasizing the subject invested in humorwork continues to be useful to avoid tethering humor to lifeless words with no connection to people, as well as for continuing to recognize the importance of subject position for making humor.

Moreover, this relationship between subjectivity, subject position, and laughter and humor is productive of instability, misunderstandings, and dangerous situations. Both Irigaray and Cixous attribute to laughter a position in which the feminine stands out in distinction to the reductive gaze of men.<sup>498</sup> Cixous points out specifically that laughter from women while under the command of men can result in danger or even death.<sup>499</sup> As discussed at length in Chapter V, Kristeva also points to the subject's danger of falling into madness when disturbing ordinarily regulated speech and composure, the subject getting swallowed in her more unstable drives that always persist along with her more stable, ordered surface.<sup>500</sup> Beyond its most banal practices (as discussed in Chapter V) laughter and humorwork are thus not mere tools that a subject can pick up, strategically

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<sup>498</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 162-163; Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 878).

<sup>499</sup> Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," 42.

<sup>500</sup> Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 29-30.

or haphazardly deploy, and then carry on unaffected. Rather, due to the practice of humorwork by a subject situated within a social and political world, its effects are often unstable and difficult to calculate ahead of time.

In addition to considering the sexed position of the humorist, it is also important to pay attention to the connection between the humorist, the exertion of creation that goes into humorwork, and their creation. In this context, it is interesting to consider the “work” of humorwork. I have already introduced Kierkegaard into the fold, and I will evoke another 19th century spirit in the form of Karl Marx to consider the connection between the production and the subject of humorwork. Marx did not discuss humor beyond his famous insight into Hegel that “all facts and personages in history” occur twice, “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”<sup>501</sup> However, if we consider humor as not only a practice of language but also one that involves the subject, it is useful to consider the relationship between a humorist and the unstable results of their efforts. Humor’s potential for transformation, while often related to a sociality of cooperation and positive affect, can also take a turn for the worse or the strange as a humorist’s work is taken up and reappropriated through the efforts of others.

One of Marx’s interventions in his critique of capitalism was to emphasize that the worker’s labor-power and the product of their work cannot be so cleanly separated from the worker when sold to the capitalist. The worker’s labor not only represents their life, capable of extraction from the worker through exertion for the exclusive owners of

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<sup>501</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 15.

the means of production under exploitative working conditions,<sup>502</sup> but also a scission between the worker and the result of their labors through alienation.<sup>503</sup> Exertion under a capitalist system, and working as an act of creation, thus cannot be simplistically considered apart from the subject doing this work, even as exploitative conditions can take the worker's products away to confront their creator in an adversarial relationship.

Emphasizing the connection between the subject and the results of their humorwork is useful for considering the social and political implications of the ways in which a humorist may have an unstable relationship to the results of their humor practice. Humor is tied to the person who made it and their social world not only due to the fabric of shared understanding and affects through which a humorist creates socially embedded work, but also because humor comes about through an exertion that continues to link the humorist to the results of their creation. Feminist theorists have emphasized that this connection between the subject and their creation is sexed and frequently volatile, but it is also useful to consider through Marx that the creation of humor is a significant investment on the part of its creator. Thus, the ways that humor might be taken up or even transformed by others is also a continued concern for the subject who produces it, indicating the instability of humor not only as a political act but also in general. This relationship too is not easily paired away in purified form from a relationship with

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<sup>502</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 1: 274-275.

<sup>503</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 72-73.

capitalist production, especially as humorists may write, act, and stand up to be compensated with their daily bread.

To illustrate the unstable relationship between humorist and humorwork creations, it is useful to consider a specific example of a humorist becoming alienated from their creation, which is helpfully demonstrated through the example of Pepe the Frog. To understand the particular instabilities in this example, I will first establish that the sociality of humorwork as a practice results in potentially collaborative, alienating, and generally transformative practices that may iterate upon the humorist's work over time. Humorwork, like other practices, is susceptible to reappropriation and transformation through continuing humorwork. In the previous two chapters, I discussed practices of humorwork as reappropriation and transformation for both ameliorative and counterameliorative purposes. It is perhaps no surprise that the products of humorwork themselves do not have a distinct immunity to transformation, and there is reason to believe that humorwork may be more susceptible to continuing humorous (and non-humorous) transformations because of its unstable mode of practice.

Consider, for example, H. P. Grice's distinction between *bona-fide* and *non-bona-fide* speech discussed in Chapter III. Entering into a humorous mode of engagement signals to attentive interlocutors that discourse is no longer functioning according to its usual norms, instead taking another course.<sup>504</sup> Delia Chiaro emphasizes that the lines between serious discourse and jest are not so clearly defined as one mode of discourse can easily transform into another through the latent capacities of wordplay. However,

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<sup>504</sup> Raskin, 103.

Chiaro also emphasizes that humor can often result in a cascade of jest in the form of “joke capping” wherein interlocutors continue to build off the themes embedded within each other’s jokes.<sup>505</sup> The production of a joke is thus also often related to the production of more, as each joke takes upon and reworks elements of each other among a social group.

One of Chiaro’s main examples of wordplay that builds upon other instances of wordplay is graffiti. Chiaro writes, “...[D]ozens of joke types, particularly written graffiti, are structured in terms of a single sentence of utterance. This normally acts as a matrix and serves as a blueprint from which other jokes are generated.”<sup>506</sup> For example, one series of graffiti wordplay that Chiaro discusses originated from a mid-1970s advertising campaign by Smirnoff featuring “escapist photographs accompanied by slogans such as *I thought the Kama Sutra was an Indian restaurant until I discovered Smirnoff.*” Shortly after graffiti showed up that played with elements of this phrase, for example:

*“I thought innuendo was an Italian suppository until I discovered Smirnoff.*

*I thought cirrhosis was a type of cloud until I discovered Smirnoff.”*<sup>507</sup>

This process represents a by-now-familiar process of humorwork: the slogan in the advertisement has been reworked into a new “discovery” that plays upon the phonetics of “innuendo” (sounding like “in your end-o” and linking with suppositories, for the reader lacking pun imagination).

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<sup>505</sup> Chiaro, 105.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 62.

However, the graffiti joke based on the ad is also part of a larger field reworking the jokes beyond Smirnoff while still retaining links to the form:

*“I thought Nausea was a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre until I discovered Scrumpy.”*<sup>508</sup>

Interestingly, eventually the graffiti left a humorous mode and returned to a more straightforward assertion of an idea or a “semi-idiom” in Chiaro’s description:

*“I used to think I was an atheist until I discovered I was God.  
I used to talk in clichés but now I avoid them like the plague.”*<sup>509</sup>

In these examples of humorwork, the phrase is brought from an ad into a humorous reworking through graffiti, including further developments upon existing humorous graffiti playing with the phrase. Eventually, these reworkings find themselves back into a more serious mode of directly conveying information, the entrance into a humorous mode itself capable of being corralled back into more straightforward (albeit cloudy) ideas.

Chiaro’s discussion of jokes in graffiti is also relevant to the constantly remixed and transformed field of Internet memes. While the word meme is traceable to Richard Dawkins and refers more broadly to “non-genetic behaviour and cultural ideas that are passed on from person to person,” the word “meme” is more commonly associated with influential, viral Internet jokes, as (academically) defined by Patrick Davison in 2009.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Linda K. Börzsei, "Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes," *New Media Studies Magazine* 7 (2013), 3, [http://works.bepress.com/linda\\_borzsei/2/](http://works.bepress.com/linda_borzsei/2/).

Since memes are constantly spread and remixed into new forms, they can also be understood as humorwork and likely share a kinship with the older practice of graffiti, as images and discourse are remixed by various agents in public space.

A highly politicized recent example of a joke that was subject to transformation by continuing humorwork is the comics character Pepe the Frog. Pepe the Frog was originally created by artist Matt Furie in the 2000s for his comic book *Boy's Club*. Furie writes of the character,

...he's just kind of an everyman frog, he lives with his three roommates, a dog, a bear and a wolf. It just kind of expresses early 20-something hedonistic lifestyle, of just hanging out, playing pranks on each other, eating pizza, partying, that kind of thing. A lot of bodily humor.<sup>511</sup>

Pepe the Frog was originally intended as a humorous character representing a messy and weird early-20s roommate living situation. But in the 2000s a specific page from Furie's comic went viral through Furie's intended bodily humor (here, focused on peeing). Furie recounts,

There was a six-panel comic page of Pepe taking a leak with his pants all the way down, and one of his roommates walks in on him. Later on they're playing video games, and his buddy Landwolf says "I heard you pull your pants all the way down to go pee," and Pepe responds by saying "feels good man," he looks happy. So that was kind of cut out from there, and used in a viral way, people would say things like "I just finished my final exam" and they'd post the happy frog saying "feels good man." So it was like kind of a positive reinforcement thing.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Matt Furie, "It's Not Easy Being Meme," *The Atlantic*, interview by Adam Serwer, September 13, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/its-not-easy-being-green/499892/>.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 9.** Commonly shared page of Pepe the Frog from the comic *Boy's Club* by Matt Furie featuring “feels good man.” Matt Furie, *Boy's Club* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2016), 42.

As memes that show up on humor-focused online message boards tend to operate, the Pepe character's face and statement of “feels good man” was removed from its context and continuously remixed. Pepe himself was reworked into various forms with various moods, including a “sad Pepe” and a more smug variation, transforming the original body humor into an ongoing humorous engagement with the character. Worth noting here is

that the Pepe character maintained the weird, grotesque, qualities built into him through Furie's more light-hearted humorwork, including his stylization as a specifically male gross roommate with a questionable sense of consequences and boundaries, letting his pee fly in the wind and recounting his delight to his gamer roommate. Pepe is thus not quite the "everyman" that Furie envisioned, but a specific kind of slimy man-frog, dipping farther into his origins in the swamp than a more composed and less freewheeling character like Jim Henson's anxiety-ridden Kermit the Frog for whom it is less easy being green.

While the character was originally intended for body humor, which in Chapter IV I would have placed on a spectrum between banal and absurd humor, Pepe's gradual transformation online brought the character into a more intensely political register where he remains today. During the 2016 elections Trump supporters on politically right-spectrum humorous message boards such as 4chan remixed the smug recreation of Pepe into a hybridization between Donald Trump and Pepe the Frog. Following the fusion between Pepe and Trump, Trump supporters online started adopting Pepe as a meme associated with Trump and revitalized nationalist and fascist movements such as the "alt-right." Eventually this transformed version of Pepe reached Trump himself, as he and his son shared remixed images of Pepe online, while Hillary Clinton's campaign responded that it was "horrifying" that Trump would share images of Pepe after his transformation in the public eye into a white supremacist meme.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> Rachael Revesz, "Hillary Clinton attacks Donald Trump for posting Pepe the Frog Meme," *The Independent*, September 13, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-pepe-frog-instagram-breitbart-white-supremacist-alex-jones-milo-a7240581.html/>.

Pepe was not only transformed from his more banal or absurd humorous origins into a source of humorous political memes, but also specifically into various multiplying counterameliorative political memes. In September 2016 The Anti-Defamation League, which hosts a database of hate speech and hate symbols, officially added Pepe the Frog alongside other hate symbols such as the swastika and the iron cross.<sup>514</sup>

Initially, Furie was concerned with the transformation of Pepe into a reactionary character but assumed that this possibility was par for the course of Internet meme culture and expressed hope that the proliferating white supremacist reappropriations of Pepe were a passing phase. He also associated Pepe's transformation again with his status as an "everyman" or "blank slate" character, distancing his role in creating the character and the character as originally created from its racist, sexist, and homophobic Internet iterations. Furie explained in a September 2016 interview,

...I just think that people reinvent him in all these different ways, it's kind of a blank slate. It's just out of my control, what people are doing with it, and my thoughts on it, are more of amusement...I think that's it's just a phase, and come November, it's just gonna go on to the next phase, obviously that political agenda is exactly the opposite of my own personal feelings, but in terms of meme culture, it's people reappropriating things for their own agenda. That's just a product of the internet. And I think people in whatever dark corners of the internet are just trying to one up each other on how shocking they can make Pepe appear.<sup>515</sup>

Pepe continued to be featured online in his reappropriated white supremacist form despite Furie's hopes. When white supremacist media personality Richard Spencer was punched

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<sup>514</sup> Anti-Defamation League, "ADL Adds 'Pepe the Frog' Meme, Used by Anti-Semites and Racists, to Online Hate Symbols Database," The Anti-Defamation League web site, September 27, 2016, <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-adds-pepe-the-frog-meme-used-by-anti-semites-and-racists-to-online-hate/>.

<sup>515</sup> Furie, "It's Not Easy Being Meme."

on video in January 2017 on Trump's Inauguration Day, he was in the middle of explaining to the reporter why he was wearing a pin of Pepe on his jacket. The video of Richard Spencer was then remixed with music and other effects through video editing for the sake of humorous ridicule against his alt-right, white supremacist ideology.<sup>516</sup>



**Figure 10.** Alt-right personality Richard Spencer getting punched in the face while describing his Pepe pin to Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Washington bureau chief Zoe Daniel. “Far-Right Activist Richard Spencer Punched During Interview,” *ABC News*, last updated October 23, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-21/far-right-activist-punched-on-camera/8200316/>.

Eventually, Furie gave up hope that constant Internet reappropriation would run its course, and officially killed Pepe the Frog in a comic strip posted in May 2017.<sup>517</sup> This

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<sup>516</sup> Jake Swearingen, “Twitter Can’t Stop Remixing Richard Spencer Getting Punched in the Face.” *New York Mag*, January 23, 2017, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/01/lets-just-watch-some-richard-spencer-punch-video-remixes.html/>.

<sup>517</sup> Daniella Silva, “Pepe the Frog Is Dead: Creator Kills Off Meme Absorbed by Far-

did nothing to stop Pepe's continued use by others, and in August 2017 Furie started a fundraising campaign on Kickstarter that reached \$34,757 of its planned \$10,000 goal to "Save Pepe" from reappropriation by white supremacists, neo-Nazis, the alt-right, and other fascists. Furie's goal was to reclaim the character through resurrection by reintroducing Pepe in his original humorous comic strip form. The fundraiser details,

We understand there's no way to fully control the internet or how people decide to use Pepe the Frog. Trying to control that would be a completely unreasonable goal. That said, the aim of this project is to positively resurrect Pepe through the creation of a brand new comic in the spirit of the original BOY'S CLUB.<sup>518</sup>

Furie recognized that he cannot control reappropriations of Pepe but hoped that his original take on the character could be reintroduced among the main uses of the character.

Furie's attempt to revitalize Pepe coincided with a new campaign against reappropriations of his character through copyright law including Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) demands for takedown of his copyrighted content and lawsuits. In August, for example, Furie won a suit against a man who wrote an Islamophobic book called *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede*, donating the money from the settlement to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and has since then brought a lawsuit against Alex Jones and his popular reactionary conspiracy theory website *InfoWars*.<sup>519</sup>

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Right," *NBC News*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/pepe-frog-dead-creator-kills-meme-absorbed-far-right-n756281/>.

<sup>518</sup> Matt Furie and Jason Furie, "Save Pepe," *Kickstarter*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/615106574/save-pepe/>.

<sup>519</sup> Jessica Roy, "Creator of Pepe the Frog is Suing Infowars," *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-pepe-the-frog-infowars-lawsuit-20180306-story.html/>.

As of now it is uncertain whether Furie's combined resurrection attempts and copyright claims will have an effect on separating Pepe from his current association with hate groups. Despite the serious political impact of the symbol in its reappropriated form, Pepe's link with his humorous origin also persists in many of the spaces where he is deployed. Pressed about posing with a Pepe banner and other white supremacist symbols in a January 2018 interview, psychologist and conservative social media personality Jordan Peterson played up this continued link between Pepe and humor, explaining,

Most of the people who are using this sort of symbol are using it in a deeply satirical way. Now the fact that the far right has decided that it's a radical indicator of the validity of their particular view doesn't mean that that's what it is, so it's something that we haven't seen before. There's a lot of game-playing going on online, a lot.<sup>520</sup>

Reflecting on the subjectivity of people who participate in the subcultures that transformed and celebrate the new Pepe, Peterson adds, "I'm trying to call them forth as individuals out of the chaos that they're ensconced in."<sup>521</sup>

The transformation of Pepe the frog from his origins as a source of absurd, banal humor to his various humorous reappropriations in the 2000s and to his now potentially stabilized reappropriation into a symbol of white supremacy and fascism illustrates the instability of humorwork as it works upon humorwork across several levels. Just as Furie placed Pepe into the absurd position of being discovered standing while peeing with his pants pulled down by his roommate, the character's likeness was removed from the panel

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<sup>520</sup> Jordan Peterson, "Jordan Peterson on Political Polarization & Pepe the Frog," *CBC News*, interview by Wendy Mesley, January 28, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/the-weekly/jordan-peterson-on-political-polarization-pepe-the-frog-1.4507915/>.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

and changed over time to stand for hatred and a counterameliorative backlash against social justice in the 2010s. In an essay on the death of memes, English professor Lauren Michele Jackson reflects on the specific transformation of Pepe's humor, writing,

In Pepe's case, the otherwise chill and harmless character created by artist Matt Furie in the early 2000s was on the decline [in use] until he got a new context when the alt-right reappropriated him leading into the election. Pepe was resurrected from obscurity when internet culture found a new need for the cartoon's special brand of male millennial grotesquerie.<sup>522</sup>

Here Jackson emphasizes that Pepe's original association with grotesque, bodily humor among men is part of its enduring resonance as a character of the alt-right, passed on from banal absurdity to national politics in a way that often moves between and beyond its humor. Practices and results of humorwork are open to continuing practices of humorwork in ways that may vastly exceed the intentions of its practice.

Jackson does not go further into this interesting point about Pepe's original grotesque characterization, but considering it in more detail implicates Furie more in Pepe's conversion into an alt-right symbol of hatred than he acknowledges. Specifically, emphasizing the continuing connection between the subject of humorwork and their humor rather than allowing Pepe to float free of his origins highlights a dynamic of alienation between a humorist and their transformed creation. I do not mean to blame Furie for the uptake of Pepe by the alt-right, but instead point to a continuing confrontation between Furie and the now alienated alt-right Pepe. Building upon my

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<sup>522</sup> Lauren Michele Jackson, "A Unified Theory of Meme Death," *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/a-unified-theory-of-meme-death/546866/>.

earlier discussion of humorwork and Marx, it is useful to emphasize how Furie's transformed creation also continues to confront him in the form of alienation.

For Marx, alienation turns the tables on the relationship between the worker and the product of their labor. Instead of seeing themselves in the object they have produced through activity, and connecting with others through this recognition, the alienated object instead stands against the worker who produced it. What the worker now sees in this object is instead alien and external to the productive activity they exerted upon the world to create it, confronting rather than confirming their life and power in relation to the other people who take away the worker's product to serve their pleasure and fulfill their "*satisfaction* and pleasure."<sup>523</sup> Though I do not want to suggest that Furie has experienced the same alienation that Marx described in the relationship between wage-labor, the worker, and the capitalist, he nonetheless has become alienated from Pepe through a process of reappropriation that not only takes the production of Pepe memes beyond Furie's control but also leads to a confrontation between Furie and the continuing meaning of his creation.

If we consider humorwork to be a process through which the humorist continues to be tied to the meaning of their work, then the instability of reappropriation latent within continuing activities of wordplay also admit to unstable possibilities of humorwork alienation. Furie put effort into realizing his character of Pepe and achieving the comic effect of weird, gross roommate that was not intended to reach a national political stage, let alone be used to bolster a conservative figure like Trump and the host

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<sup>523</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 66-74.



of alt-right humorists who continue to pin Pepe to their causes of hatred. Though Furie did not predict this outcome, his humorwork always contained the instability that his work could be transformed in ways he may not have expected, and his continuing relationship with Pepe is likely to be combative and fraught. Rather than transforming into a monster totally outside Furie's orbit Pepe thus continues to confront him through the instability of his reappropriation possibilities, leading to Furie's continuing efforts to reclaim, kill, and ultimately legislate the character he created who confronts him and thwarts him through unstable humorous reappropriation and a crowd of humorists that Furie must continue to contend with.

One potential difficulty with evoking Marx is that his lack of a sexed analysis of the subject in relation to work fails to account for embodied and gendered<sup>524</sup> relationships between a subject undertaking humorwork and their creation, failing to adequately include insights from feminist theorists and philosophers about humor. However, the production of Pepe, the instability of humorwork, and the resulting alienation is heavily gendered. Though Furie portrays Pepe as an "everyman," Pepe's character and actions, as I mentioned earlier, paint him specifically as a gross, care-free, male roommate who pisses in the wind and likes to talk about it. It is thus not surprising that Pepe was taken up by Internet message boards consisting predominantly of gross anti-social men who lack proper hygiene and like to play video games while associating with other gross anti-social men (even if only from an ironized distance). As I have emphasized in this dissertation, and as emphasized in much of the literature on humor studies, the

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<sup>524</sup> I use "sexed" and "gendered" mostly interchangeably in this dissertation and consider both to be tied to embodiment and material social relationships.

reappropriations and transformations effected by humor frequently are catalyzed by a latent element of the phrase, image, or situation that results in humor. It is thus not surprising that Pepe might specifically be hybridized with Trump, a man who takes Pepe's carefree, reckless, and slimy masculine enthusiasm to new heights of politicization and profit. It is notable in this regard that though one of Trump's frequent campaign slogans during the election was "Drain the swamp," the alt-right would choose to associate him with a grotesque frog-man as he proceeded to enter office and elect a host of unqualified profiteers and surround himself with shady characters who participated in questionable election tactics.

In addition to the confrontation with others and the alienated meaning of his work, the instability of humorwork also brings Furie into a gendered confrontation with himself. The transformation of Pepe into Trump is also the transformation of a humorous masculinity that Furie considers harmless and reflective of the "everyman" into a style of masculinity that Furie considers grotesque and hateful, proceeding through a process of collective online reappropriation that Furie did not anticipate but nonetheless brought out latent elements of his character and humorous imagery to lead Pepe into the political spotlight. The instability of humorwork thus reveals that Pepe may have been closer to his transformation into hate symbol than comfortable for Furie to consider, indicating the need for reevaluating not only the continued use of Pepe post-reappropriation but also the style of gross masculinity that was manipulable into his current form. Though the instability of humorwork and its gendered connection with the humorist subject can have disastrous results, it can also potentially lead to reevaluation and a critical sense of unseen political possibilities latent within even the most seemingly neutral and banal

humor. Returning to the parable of Kierkegaard's gods from the Introduction, if the meaning of having laughter on your side is unclear and unstable, then the revelation of laughter's effects can result in a reinterrogation of the conditions upon which this laughter was formed.

#### It Ain't over 'Til the Unruly Woman Sings: Humorwork, Instability, and Gender

Though gender and an unreflective gendered style informs Furie's encounter with the transformed Pepe the Frog, it is useful to consider not only the relationships between gender and the unstable political transformations of humorwork but also specific unstable gendered practices of humor that are embodied. Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva importantly point out that language cannot be totally separated from gendered embodiment, but it is also important to look beyond language and consider stylized performances of the gendered body undertaking humorwork and resulting instabilities.

One example of unstable, embodied humorwork is the figure of the unruly woman as discussed by Kathleen Rowe. Following the film *A Question of Silence*, feminist theorists of laughter such as Cixous, and carnivalesque, Rowe is interested in the ways that women transform their position as spectacle of the masculine gaze into a disruption of control through humorous, embodied, and unstable performances of exaggeration, hyperbole, and excess against the positions of rationality that are associated with men at the expense of women.<sup>525</sup> In this context, Rowe looks at the history of humorous women in film to introduce the figure of "the unruly woman." Citing Medusa as one of the

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<sup>525</sup> Rowe, 4-5.

earliest examples of the unruly woman, Rowe describes the unruly woman as “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival,” associated with excess, offense, and the grotesque through an oscillation between beauty and monstrosity.<sup>526</sup> The unruly woman takes up the excess, visibility, and spectacle placed upon them by men as a source of power, redirecting it back against a social and political order that would rather women be seen than heard.<sup>527</sup> But in doing this, women are brought into an unstable position through taking up visibility as a form of power that still harbors possibilities for negative exposure and vulnerability.<sup>528</sup> Taking up humorous unruliness thus simultaneously serves as a reappropriated source of power that was intended to put women in their place but also an instability that this power can be reasserted.

In the previous section I discussed a particularly grotesque man-frog, and in this section it is useful to consider one of Rowe’s paradigm examples of an unruly woman, Miss Piggy from *The Muppets*. In contrast to the anxious and controlling Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy is often portrayed as a large, loud, obnoxious, and abrasive diva voiced by a man, simultaneously more human and more animal than any of the other Muppets, and constantly disrupting Kermit and his plans by calling attention to herself and expressing jealousy when not receiving her due. She also is one of the Muppets that kicks the most ass. Though she is often portrayed as narcissistic, inappropriately flirtatious, and

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<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

generally too much for the other Muppets to handle, when they enter a moment of trouble she is the character who proclaims “Hi-ya!,” beats up the opposition, and saves the day, although she is equally likely to use her karate chops against anyone she perceives as standing in her way. The effect of the character and her performance as part of the Muppets is one of laughter and comedy formed from her various excesses and her gendered pushing of boundaries against the other (almost always) masculine Muppets in the cast.<sup>529</sup>

It is important to note that Miss Piggy’s unstable source of humor as feminine excess bordering on grotesque is distinct from Pepe the Frog’s masculine grotesqueness as care-free, slimy roommate that eventually helped him plunge into the swamp of entitled, hateful Trumpian hybridity. The Miss Piggy character either achieves or is bordering on a hurtful stereotype of women, especially women who do not fit beauty norms based on weight, women who have been accused of being narcissistic when trying to meet their needs, and women who do not meet the strictures of “behaving like a lady.” At the same time, however, this characterization of Miss Piggy is also one that makes her visible as acting against precisely these norms and the (mostly male) cast of the Muppets, not giving in to their expectations of her behavior (as if they could reign her in if they tried), and also evading punishment for acting out of line. Miss Piggy’s excess is thus one of expanding outside of boundaries that are set up to keep her controlled, shattering expectation, and generally living large in a society where regimented norms work together to shrink women down and confine their movements.

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 26-30.

Pepe, on the other hand, is enacting a humorous grotesqueness that plays into a style of masculinity as free-wheeling, uncontained, and unpleasantly out-there without any expectations that he reign his behavior in. Attempting to direct the fiat of “act like a man” towards Pepe would not achieve the same effect as demanding Miss Piggy “act like a lady,” since society endorses acting like a man in the form of self-direction, expansion, and taking up space, peeing in the wind all he pleases with his pants down as far as possible. Due to power structures, Pepe’s most popular slogan “Feels good, man” is untranslatable in “the feminine,” thus denying any analogue like “Feels good, woman.” Whereas Pepe is transformable into Trump, Miss Piggy does not get reappropriated in a similar manner, and if reshaped in the hands of the alt-right she may be more likely to be evoked as a woman who has misstepped her place and needs to be pressed back into it rather than a man who brings delight to his followers as he pisses upon the entire United States. Miss Piggy would also most certainly beat up Pepe the Frog in any fight.

Through Miss Piggy, Rowe creates a blueprint of characteristics that the figure of the unruly woman may have, linking her to the figure of the “woman on top” who disrupts the social hierarchy of men over women:

- 1) The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or attempting to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
- 2) Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetite.
- 3) Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
- 4) She makes jokes, or laughs herself.
- 5) She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.

6) She may be old or a masculinized crone. For old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.

7) Her behavior is associated with looseness, and occasionally whorishness. But her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.

8) She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence.<sup>530</sup>

“The unruly woman” is thus capable of taking the form of many unruly women, especially as they humorously take up the subject position of being subjected to visibility when exceeding the constraints of sexist norms, and then taking advantage of this spectacle by using it to magnify her transgression of norms.

The instability of this humorous, embodied, gendered position is also dangerous. After all, on account of being a puppet voiced by a man, Miss Piggy is insulated from any real backlash that may result from her unstable position. Living women are not. To highlight the dangerous side of taking up the mantle of the unruly woman, Rowe refers to Roseanne’s practice of humor during *Roseanne*’s initial run from 1988 to 1997. Rowe attributes to Roseanne an unruly woman persona amplified by her unapologetic weight that did not fit the norms of feminine thinness typically enshrined on television, her position as a non-idealized working woman, and her ease in her authority, her body, and her constant ability to break and laugh at expectations.<sup>531</sup> However, in 1990, when she brought her persona into a San Diego Padres game while singing the National Anthem, Roseanne’s humor as an unruly woman backfired with dangerous results for her career

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 65.

and public life. She purposefully began to sing the National Anthem too high to mock advice given to her by Johnny Carson, began singing loudly and brashly and off-key when hitting this higher register and the word “Freeeeee,” then grabbed her crotch and spat on the ground in front of a thunderously booing crowd.<sup>532</sup>

Rowe argues that the backlash that Roseanne received, including from the mouth of President George H. W. Bush, was tied to her humorous performance as unruly woman. Roseanne took her transgression too far against the convergence of masculinity and nationalism represented in the ideology of baseball, and her backlash reinvoked unruliness as a source for swift, harsh, and overwhelming societal correction.<sup>533</sup> Bergson, as discussed in Chapter III, considered laughter to be the societal correction of the overly mechanical and rigid,<sup>534</sup> but in this instance Roseanne was punished by mass media for precisely the opposite. This punishment also coincided with cruel tabloid coverage of Roseanne’s personal life, with Rowe concluding that the backlash against Roseanne was an attempt to pry away her humorous position and turn the humor back against her, making her a laughingstock for her unruly behavior.<sup>535</sup> Rowe traces this to a gradual shift of Roseanne’s unruly humorous persona to a more serious mode and explanation for her

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<sup>532</sup> Geoff Edgers, “Roseanne on the Day She Shrieked ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ Grabbed Her Crotch and Earned a Rebuke from President Bush,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/07/23/roseanne-on-the-day-she-shrieked-the-star-spangled-banner-grabbed-her-crotch-and-earned-a-rebuke-from-president-bush/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.4892e40114f4/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/07/23/roseanne-on-the-day-she-shrieked-the-star-spangled-banner-grabbed-her-crotch-and-earned-a-rebuke-from-president-bush/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4892e40114f4/).

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>534</sup> Bergson, 197.

<sup>535</sup> Rowe, 59.



behavior, including cosmetic surgery to reduce her weight, which was shifted from a source of humor to the narrative of a tragic health problem resulting in a new, harder to place humorous persona.<sup>536</sup> This “new” Roseanne briefly reemerged in the 2018 reboot of *Roseanne* as a Trump supporter, before Roseanne herself was fired for a racist tweet comparing the former senior advisor of President Barack Obama to an ape,<sup>537</sup> proving that even an unruly woman can sometimes practice humorwork that is counterameliorative.

Beyond the unstable gendered confrontation between the humorist and the creation of their humorwork is also a potential gendered instability between the humorist and their own embodied performance, granting the subject both power through humorous transgression and the possibility of this humorous position getting twisted back as a form of punishment. Returning to Kierkegaard’s parables of the clown in the theater and the laughter of the gods I began with in the Introduction, taking up humorwork both destabilizes its potential uptake by others, and having laughter on one’s side may be the very cause of having laughter taken away or redirected as a form of punishment. The gendered, embodied, social, and affective dimensions of humor in practice thus indicate a need for thoughtful care and social and political awareness, lest their effects go horribly awry. And even then, humorists aware of humorwork’s instabilities must accept that despite any intentions and predictions their creations and practices of humorwork could

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<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>537</sup> John Koblin, “After Racist Tweet, Roseanne Barr’s Show Is Canceled by ABC,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/business/media/roseanne-barr-offensive-tweets.html/>.

work against their intentions, requiring a sense of practice as powerful but also not amenable to full control.

However, pointing out humor's instabilities in these contexts does not quite go far enough. As I discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation, several common views of humor hold that it is distinctly separable from politics and its potential instabilities, instead fundamentally grounded in technique and a free expression of ideas that should not be primarily tethered to social and political considerations. It thus falls upon me, the humorless feminist millennial, to return to the subject of political humor that attempts to establish itself beyond politics.

#### The Last Laugh: The "Threat" to Humor Revisited

I began my discussion of humor and politics in Chapter II by reflecting on popular discussions, including quotes from comedians Bill Burr and Jerry Seinfeld, President Donald Trump, and articles by journalists covering humorless college students that call for the depoliticization of humor in contrast to a tide of "political correctness" that threatens to throw the free expression of humor into peril. Now that I have explained social and political humorwork as an affective, embodied practice that brings its subject in contact with instabilities, it is worth considering if this approach is truly applicable to social and political humor that claims a home in stable, depoliticized space.

Earlier, I pointed out that comedians made a distinction between focusing on the operations and ideas of humor in contrast to needless politicization. Bill Burr focuses on the technical skill of a domestic violence joke, emphasizing that it has no sway over convincing someone to actually commit domestic violence, and instead unpacking it as "a

great fuckin' joke."<sup>538</sup> Jerry Seinfeld focuses on his craft and topics "he can make funny,"<sup>539</sup> while journalism about college students insists that jokes are primarily intended to be funny rather than a lesson about politics.<sup>540</sup> The practice of humor is thus viewed primarily as a craft, with any political critique tangential or even irrelevant to fully understanding and appreciating a joke.

I have instead stressed that humorwork is socially and politically situated, and connected with the embodied subject who practices it. As I argued in Chapter VI, humor such as the racist "Pants up, don't loot" is tied to a political practice of humorwork that transforms a centering of black lives into an affective reassertion of racist controlling images. While humorwork can be placed on a continuum between banal, absurd, and political, as I stressed in Chapter V, this does not free most political jokes by comedians from social and political critique. Bill Burr, for example, attempts to liberate a restaurant sign reading "We like our beer the way we like our violence: domestic" from criticism because he claims it is a technically skilled joke that will not directly impact anyone's decisions about committing domestic violence.<sup>541</sup> In my account, however, the expectation that a specific instance of a joke will have a direct cause on another individual person's decisions to commit harm is too narrow a scope for restricting the political field of a joke. Regardless of any potential direct causal link the joke is still

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<sup>538</sup> Burr.

<sup>539</sup> Falcone.

<sup>540</sup> Flanagan.

<sup>541</sup> Burr.

reappropriating the “I like my women like I like my [object]” formula, itself suggesting the possession of women by the speaker, into a link with domestic violence, which is systematically targeted against women. If the politics of humor is understood to encompass the link between subjects and their social and political world, and how they choose to engage with that world through reappropriation and transformation, Burr’s overly limited understanding of the political arbitrarily brackets out its larger scope.

However, it is not only a focus on craft that influences the understanding that humor should not count as political, but also an emphasis on the effect or potential effect that humor might have on others. Specifically, the problem for many humorists is not only the attempted politicization of their work but also the inability of others to “take” the joke, instead losing the free thread of comedy due to their over-sensitivity and feelings. It’s in this context that certain subterranean corners of the Internet, such as those that delight in the transformed Pepe, have turned to the mantra “Fuck your feelings.” President Trump himself represents this political callousness against feelings and receptivity, decrying political correctness and sensitivity in favor of pursuing policies that will be less fit for “losers.”<sup>542</sup> Any sensitivity to people and politics thus amounts to an over-sensitivity, unable to keep on rolling along in delight and potential victory.

One of the more nuanced followers of the “Fuck your feelings” mentality is not someone who particularly likes Trump at all, but rather British comedian Ricky Gervais, indicating that this stance is held by political “conservatives” and “liberals” alike. After

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<sup>542</sup> Taibbi.

attending a performance of Ricky Gervais's 2017 Humanity world tour, television news personality Piers Morgan reported,

It IS truly shocking: a 90-minute fusillade of savagely uncompromising comedy, with no taboo subject off limits – from Aids, cancer and rape to paedophilia, terrorism, transgenderism. ('I'm identifying as a chimp,' he declared. 'Much easier than having everything cut off to be a woman.')...But at its heart, Humanity's theme is one of my own bêtes noires: the modern malaise of absurdly over-sensitive snowflakes that wallow in permanent offence and victimhood, fuelled by PC-crazed social media. Gervais tests his audiences with gags so near the knuckle that everyone around me repeatedly gasped in genuine horror before exploding with laughter; though, with delicious irony, two women in front of me sat grim-faced throughout the whole show.<sup>543</sup>

Through this analysis of the performance Piers Morgan lauds Gervais's constant, unapologetic edginess and transgression of conversational norms through humor, representing a transcendence against limits, in contrast to a rising threat of sensitivity, feelings, receptivity, and offense that threaten speech with constraint. The audience is beset with a "test," a ride full of "genuine horror" rewarded with an explosion of laughter if tolerated and understood in contrast to the "delicious irony" of two "grim-faced" women. Why this is an irony is unclear, but nonetheless related to the grim, heavy affectedness of the two women who are unable to laugh and thus fail to follow along with the free play of humor, doomed to an association with Morgan's hated "snowflakes" who too easily melt at the first sign of heat. The proper reception for Morgan, exemplified through Gervais, is thus an emphasis on the boundlessness of humor in contrast to people who are too weighted down to "take" the joke and the delight of freedom that it offers.

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<sup>543</sup> Piers Morgan, "You're an Evil Genius,' I Told Ricky Gervais," *The Daily Mail*, October 19, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-4970844/You-evil-genius-told-Ricky-Gervais.html/>.

Looking at Gervais's own understanding of his humor leads to more nuance than Morgan reports. In his 2018 Netflix comedy special *Humanity* Ricky Gervais asserts with frustration, "A joke about a bad thing isn't as bad as the bad thing, or necessarily condoning the bad thing. It could be anti the bad thing. It depends on the actual joke." Gervais goes beyond Burr to assert that jokes can be bad, reassuring that he does not approve of rape jokes that directly mock survivors, instead emphasizing a more situational understanding of jokes on a case-by-case basis.<sup>544</sup> In a 2018 interview responding directly to Morgan's assessment of Gervais's comedy routine as anti-political correctness, Gervais instead countered,

"That is a part of it, and I've always been a champion of free speech. But I don't want to be lumped in with those people that say it's PC gone mad. Political correctness, per se, is a good thing. I would say I am a lefty, liberal, snowflake, politically correct person. I don't like the fact that the right [wing] have been the champions of free speech for the last couple of years."<sup>545</sup>

It is thus important to qualify Gervais's understanding of his humorwork and how he navigates the tension between "champion of free speech" and his self-description as "lefty, liberal, snowflake, politically correct person."

At times, Gervais accurately describes a way in which someone misinterpreted his humorwork, and expresses views on humor that are socially conscious or even altruistic. Clarifying his intent during *Humanity*'s final encore, Gervais says to his crowd, "I hope

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<sup>544</sup> Ricky Gervais, *Humanity* (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix Studios, 2018), Netflix video streaming, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80189653/>.

<sup>545</sup> Ricky Gervais, "We Had a Long Chat with Ricky Gervais About Controversy, 'Humanity' and What He Would Have Said at the Golden Globes," *New Musical Express (NME)*, interview by Dan Stubbs, March 18, 2018, <http://www.nme.com/blogs/tv-blogs/ricky-gervais-interview-2018-david-brent-humanity-2263210/>.

you enjoyed the show. I hope no-one was offended. [crowd cheering and laughing]. No, I really do, because that's never the point! I've always wanted people to know they can laugh at bad things without being bad people." Gervais thus seems to double-down on his focus on the context of humor rather than just a blanket focus on offense. He goes on to reflect on what he learned about growing up in poverty from his brother: "That's what comedy's for, that's what humor's for. It gets us over bad stuff."<sup>546</sup> Gervais' focus on humor's better nature is consistent with older interviews, such as a 2014 interview about his 2013-2014 show *Derek* about a "childlike" man with a big heart who says funny things because he has "no filter" and has not been crushed by society. Gervais says of his use of comedy on the show, "I think that's fundamental in comedy. We try jokes, and certainly jokes, we try to undermine societal norms. There's something odd about the joke. We flip it, and we look at life from a slightly different angle."<sup>547</sup> It is thus important to note that Gervais's views on humor are often complex, situational, and even altruistic in comparison to the caricature of edgy, uncaring humorwork painted by even fans like Morgan. While the show was controversial because Gervais wrote and starred as a neurodivergent character, and he did play opposite to a character that has a more cynical and edgy perspective, for the sake of this argument I will consider Gervais's self-understanding of his humorwork on his own terms.

Despite Gervais's nuances, his navigation of the free play of comedy in contrast to offense still lands the humorwork of *Humanity* firmly in the ballpark of a "Fuck your

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<sup>546</sup> Gervais, *Humanity*.

<sup>547</sup> Ricky Gervais, *Ricky Gervais on Derek with Joy Behar: Live at the Paley Center*, interview by Joy Behar, Paley Center for Media (New York: PaleyLive, 2014), DVD.

feelings” mindset about humor. Alongside his appeals to a more caring and healing approach to humor, Gervais also often invokes a contradictory framework of free humor in contrast to offensiveness that brackets out most complaints about the political aspects of his jokes. That is, often his complaints about erroneous uptakes of his humor are legitimate, but he uses this to paint a broad brush against many compelling critiques against some of his more edgy jokes and bits for entrenching oppressive social norms rather than undermining them. Rather than remain consistent with his contextual analysis of humor and specific people who criticize his humor, Gervais uses this to create a large claim about human nature, and specifically the human nature of his detractors:

But that’s what the world’s like. People see something they don’t like, they expect it to stop, as opposed to deal with their emotions. They want us to care about their thing as much as they do. It’s why the world is getting worse, and the world is getting worse.<sup>548</sup>

Instead of considering that some claims against his humor may be justified, Gervais instead attributes the failure of everyone to take his jokes properly to their personal issues with emotions, echoing Burr’s complaints about “all these goddamn groups” that are ruining humor, although Gervais tends to trace the issue back to social media making people take humor and ideas in an overly personal way. Despite Gervais’s professed contextualism, he subjects all potential humor detractors to the court of feelings and oversensitivity.

Gervais’s focus on the proper understanding of a joke, combined with his dislike of people who take them up through feelings as opposed to understanding or tolerance, causes him to miss (intentionally or not) the entrenchment of social norms by many of his

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<sup>548</sup> Gervais, *Humanity*.



jokes. His emphasis that rape jokes are not necessarily bad leads to him telling a joke he claims is solely a play of words and punnery: “A woman goes running into a police station. She says, ‘Help, I’ve been graped!’ The policeman says, ‘Do you mean raped?’ She says, ‘No, there was a bunch of them.’”<sup>549</sup> Gervais presumably cites this as an example of an acceptable rape joke because it relies on a pun: “graped” is tied to rape by more than one person because “raped” is phonetically reappropriable into “graped” and grapes are tied to bunches when plural (a bunch of grapes). Through the pun, it also becomes unclear if the woman in the joke was graped (in the sense of, say, having a bunch of grapes thrown at her) or sexually assaulted by several people.

Even taking Gervais on his own terms, his position that potential critics (or random passersby on social media) are incorrect when sensing a potential political reentrenchment of norms in this joke dips too far into the false assumption that wordplay jokes are trivial in contrast to bad, direct anti-victim humor or Rousseau’s “laughter of mockers” discussed in Chapter III. Given the feminist understanding of rape culture as a trivialization and normalization of rape within a society through social norms,<sup>550</sup> playing with the phonetics of “rape” and “grape” that also juxtaposes gang rape with the name for a plurality of grapes (the “bunch”) serves as yet another instance where rape becomes totally trivialized and thrown about as if it was as apolitical as a pun about ghosts (The ghost enjoyed ice cream) or other fruit jokes that do not evoke rape (Orange you glad I didn’t say banana?). The joke may involve wordplay and puns, but it also brings in a

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<sup>549</sup> Gervais, *Humanity*.

<sup>550</sup> See Katz, 149.

transformation related to rape that fails to shift a serious but often trivialized topic fully into the realm of banal humor (as discussed in Chapter V). Gervais's failure to see any negative potential behind the "graped" rape joke is thus another part of the problem.

Gervais's continuing tension in the contradiction between his attempts at positive norm-challenging humor and his emphasis on free humor in contrast to emotions is indicated by a motto that serves as one of his main approaches to humor, following in the footsteps of his funny brother: "...[I]f you think of something funny you've got to say it. Win, lose, or draw. It might go well, it might go badly, but you've got to say it." Gervais juxtaposes this with the upshot of saying every bit of humor that comes to mind: "We're all gonna die, so we should have a laugh because if you can laugh in the face of adversity, you're bullet-proof."<sup>551</sup> Gervais's insistence on humor as a way of healing from "bad stuff" combined with his insistence on invulnerability through laughter and saying every funny thing he thinks of whittles away his own emphasis on contextualizing a joke for the sake of healing humor. While he thinks Morgan goes too far in his analysis of Gervais's stand-up comedy set as a total send-up of political correctness and sensitive snowflakes, Morgan is correct when he reports that Gervais's stand-up bit frequently haphazardly deploys humor about subjects "from Aids, cancer and rape to paedophilia, terrorism, transgenderism."<sup>552</sup> The joke in *Humanity* comparing trans people to Gervais transitioning into a chimpanzee named "Bobo" is clearly a way of ridiculing trans people, which does not go against long-standing anti-trans social and political norms. Gervais's focus on "the bad" in contrast to laughter thus begins to unravel when he aims far beyond

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<sup>551</sup> Gervais, *Humanity*.

<sup>552</sup> Morgan.

matters that affect him directly to laugh about diseases such as AIDS that are trivialized and affect other people, or other groups of people he considers bad or incoherent such as trans people, to the extent that the upheaval of social norms for the sake of flipping them flies totally out the window. Here we are met with the frustrated Ricky Gervais, attempting to freely joke about anything funny that comes to mind but then tormented when his humor is brought back to him through unrecognizable interpretations by over-sensitive others full of feelings who will never satisfy his self-assured broad bush of contextual humor and its non-harmful practice. This is the Ricky Gervais who, despite his attempts at nuance, nonetheless lapses into the humorwork position of “Fuck your feelings.”

Already, there is a destabilization in Gervais’s continued emphasis on edgy humor in contrast to feelings. As noted with *Furie*, despite Gervais expressing (and even enacting) more positive and even caring views of humor, the effects of his humor and its uptake by others against his intentions and understanding constantly haunts his work and turns it against him. A large part of his bit in *Humanity* is his continued frustration that his work impacts people beyond his intentions. He spends a lengthy period haranguing about the evils of people on social media encountering his humor in ways that clearly bother him despite the boosted voice he enjoys from fame and the lavish lifestyle he braggingly mocks throughout the entirety of the special. Despite the contrast between Gervais as free humorworker and the people who can’t take his jokes through over-sensitivity, Gervais suffers a similar indigestion of humor through his constant sensitivity to his jokes when they are taken back to him. The association of freedom with humorwork and sensitivity with the receivers of the joke is thus liable to be inverted, the

instability of humorwork's continued relationship with the subject constantly thwarting any potential for total control of humor's public and private life.

Looking at his current projects, Gervais's sensitivity and feelings appear to be an important influence on his appeal to the sensitivity of others in contrast to the freedom of humor. *Derek* represents Gervais when he is closest to seeing humor as a force for good against social norms that constrain people who are different and vulnerable. In comparison to Gervais's other massively popular series *The Office*, which was met with universal acclaim and was rebooted with great success in the United States with another reboot forthcoming in India, *Derek* was met with mixed reviews and lower ratings without the promise of becoming another massive hit. It is thus not surprising that *Humanity* finds Gervais holding onto some of his sense that humor can be healing but also sliding into the cynicism that the irritating uptake of his jokes is unrelenting and his attempts at positivity are not met with success. Although I will withhold full judgment until it is released, it thus seems unsurprising that Gervais's next project, commissioned by Netflix, completes his attempt to be Derek with his constant affective slide into edgy "fuck your feelings" humor. Titled *After Life*, the show's pitch reads,

Tony had a perfect life. But after his wife Lisa suddenly dies, Tony changes. After contemplating taking his own life, he decides instead to live long enough to punish the world by saying and doing whatever he likes from now on. He thinks it's like a Super Power - not caring about himself or anyone else - but it turns out to be tricky when everyone is trying to save the nice guy they used to know.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Netflix, "After Life, A New Comedy Series Coming to Netflix Starring Ricky Gervais," Netflix Media Center press release, May 9, 2018, <https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/after-life-a-new-comedy-series-coming-to-netflix-starring-ricky-gervais/>.

It remains to be seen if this show will involve Gervais fully doubling down on his mission against offense, if it will serve as a self-critique, or (more likely) a confusing mix of both. Regardless, as a subject who practices humorwork, Gervais is also heavily invested in and emotionally impacted by his work and the instabilities of its potential uptake over time.

Beyond more (surprisingly) nuanced cases like Gervais, humor's capacity to be taken up by anyone against anyone else, given the right conditions for reappropriation, thwarts even the crudest detractors of political correctness and feelings. At the 2018 White House Correspondents dinner, traditionally conducted as a roast attended by the President and his administration, comedian Michelle Wolf shifted the frequent rhetorical alignment between the Trump administration, unwavering callousness in the face of over-sensitive "political correctness," and nonreceptivity. Whereas earlier Trump had declared "I have no time for political correctness," casting a focus on correct speech and action as only fit for "losers," now an obsession with correct speech and decorum suddenly pushed members of the Trump administration and supportive sites of mass media into a defensive mode claiming that humor was a source of unjust harm and calling for protection from a comedian conducting the roast they were hired to perform.

Trump himself decided to break tradition and not attend the roast with the press, who he constantly rails against for mistreatment and the unfairness of "fake news," but White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders still attended, and became the focus of a lot of claims that Wolf's humor went too far. At the podium, Wolf remarked,

And of course, we have Sarah Huckabee Sanders. We are graced with Sarah's presence tonight. I have to say I'm a little star-struck. I love you as Aunt Lydia in 'The Handmaid's Tale.' Mike Pence, if you haven't seen it, you would love it..."I actually really like Sarah. I think she's very resourceful. Like she burns facts, and

then she uses that ash to create a perfect smoky eye. Like maybe she's born with it, maybe it's lies. It's probably lies. And I'm never really sure what to call Sarah Huckabee Sanders, you know? Is it Sarah Sanders, is it Sarah Huckabee Sanders, is it Cousin Huckabee, is it Auntie Huckabee Sanders? Like, what's Uncle Tom but for white women who disappoint other white women? Oh, I know. Ann Coulter.<sup>554</sup>

These jokes focus on Sanders's appearance and role in the Trump administration in three ways. First, they focus on her role as a Press Secretary known for stretching the truth by shifting her image into the stern figure of indoctrination in the 2017 Hulu show based on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Second, they depict Sanders as a weaver of lies that are so abundant and useful that she uses them to adorn her face. Finally, they reflect on her role as a betrayer and disappointment to other white women through a twist of the knife shifting from wondering about her three-part name to wondering about what such a traitor should be called. Through this roast Wolf thus reveals the contemporary lie to the old feminist adage, "Well-behaved women seldom make history." Sanders is not only well-behaved in the sense of serving the Trump administration and attempting to smooth over its PR goals at any cost to truth, but also in the sense of "making history" through the act of cobbling together convenient truths to serve as the story about the continued success of the Trump administration, facts and reflective thought and ethical considerations be damned. If I am forgiven for making a pun that even Mary Daly may have rolled her eyes at, in the service of Trump well-behaved women frequently make his story.

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<sup>554</sup> Michelle Wolf, "Exactly What Michelle Wolf Said About Sarah Huckabee Sanders at White House Correspondents' Dinner," *ABC News*, quoted by Michael Rothman, April 30, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/michelle-wolf-sarah-huckabee-sanders-white-house-correspondents/story?id=54838650/>.

The response to Wolf's performance indicated a shift by the Trump administration and supportive mass media to a concern about the effects of words and the importance of feelings and respect. MSNBC *Morning Joe* co-host Mika Brzezinski flipped the word deplorable, previously used by Hilary Clinton in reference to Trump supporters, onto Wolf, writing, "Watching a wife and mother be humiliated on national television for her looks is deplorable...I have experienced insults about my appearance from the president. All women have a duty to unite when these attacks happen and the WHCA owes Sarah an apology." Wolf responded with a defense of her joke as not predominantly about mocking Sanders's appearance, responding, "Why are you guys making this about Sarah's looks? I said she burns facts and uses the ash to create a \*perfect\* smoky eye. I complimented her eye makeup and her ingenuity of materials."<sup>555</sup>

This shift is perhaps best noted by the change in rhetoric by former Governor of Arkansas and Fox News talk show host Mike Huckabee. Prior to his show on April 28th, Huckabee advertised on Twitter,

If you lack sense of humor, get 'offended' by slights you create, or just can't bring yourself to tolerate those you disagree with the [sic] DO NOT watch my show 2nite! You will be triggered and will need a pony, popsicle, and Playdough to cope!<sup>556</sup>

This advertisement is framing the freedom of humor against people who won't tolerate it by taking offense, to the extent that their affectedness by humor is simultaneously

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<sup>555</sup> Patrick Shanley, "Michelle Wolf Slammed for "Vile" Sarah Huckabee Sanders Jokes at White House Correspondents' Dinner," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 29, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/michelle-wolf-slammed-vile-sarah-huckabee-sanders-jokes-at-white-house-correspondents-dinner-1106776/>.

<sup>556</sup> Mike Huckabee, Twitter post, April 28, 2018, 3:43 a.m., <https://twitter.com/GovMikeHuckabee/status/990179696863309829/>.

feminized and infantilized through the language of “pony, popsicle, and Playdough,” also with a tinge of ableism by pointing to a lack of intellectual development past childhood and the inability to “cope” with the adult, established civil world.

In a contrast that is real but so perfect for illustrating the shift I am describing that it is almost hard to believe, Huckabee totally shifted his analysis of humor, freedom, and affectedness that very night after the Dinner when time had rolled past midnight to April 29th:

The WHCD was supposed to celebrate the 1st Amendment. Instead they celebrated bullying, vulgarity, and hate. They got all dressed up so they would look nicer when they had a hired gun savagely attack their guests. Do they really wonder why America has no respect for them? Sad!<sup>557</sup>

Offensive humor is no longer civil here, it is no longer adult, and it is no longer to be tolerated in spite of its consequences for others. Through a turn of inconvenience and target humor becomes framed as “savage,” the hired humorworker performing the job she was paid for no longer a figure of free and tolerant discourse but instead an entirely weaponized “hired gun.” The ability to take a slight becomes no longer one of the most prized virtues, but instead is totally discounted next to the respect due to people in fancy dress. Here the contrast between free humor and the over-sensitive target of humor (or politically correct loser), in comparison to uncivil (and therefore unfree) harmful humor and an undeserving subject of civil decorum, unravels the entire framework of “free speech” upon which discussions about humor lie. Claiming humor on the side of free speech and deploying the faulty contrast between humor and affectivity is not about the

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<sup>557</sup> Mike Huckabee, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 4:44 a.m., <https://twitter.com/GovMikeHuckabee/status/990557547210989568/>.



substance and epistemology of humor, but rather a masked matter of social and political relationships. This framework should thus be met with suspicion, as it is often more politically rhetorical rather than a true statement about the world and people in it.

Wolf's humorwork in the style of a roast and its potential harm also resulted in a challenge to the continued existence of the White House Correspondents' Dinner, a tradition started in 1921, opened to women in addition to men in 1962, and featuring a comedian in roast style since 1983 during Ronald Reagan's presidency. On Twitter the White House Correspondents' Association released an official statement by outgoing president Margaret Talev that refused to back up Wolf or their decision to hire her for the roast, instead apologizing for the incivility of her humor and in this context explicitly contrasting the roast Wolf was hired to conduct with the goals of a proper free press:

Last night's message was supposed to offer a unifying message about our common commitment to a vigorous and free press while honoring civility, great reporting and scholarship winners, not to divide people. Unfortunately, the entertainer's monologue was not in the spirit of that mission.<sup>558</sup>

President Trump, of course, also used Twitter to denounce the roast that he refused to attend. Initially, he laid out a rocky future for the event, writing,

The White House Correspondents' Dinner was a failure last year, but this year was an embarrassment to everyone associated with it. The filthy "comedian" totally bombed (couldn't even deliver her lines-much like the Seth Meyers weak performance). Put Dinner to rest, or start over!<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> White House Correspondents Association, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 7:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/whca/status/990773612226412545/>.

<sup>559</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 7:38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/990782291667488768/>.

Of note is not only his critique of Wolf's comedic skill but also declaration of her as "filthy," in close proximity to calling Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" during the presidential race in 2016. He continued the next day, now with more of an emphasis on the death of the event, writing,

The White House Correspondents' Dinner is DEAD as we know it. This was a total disaster and an embarrassment to our great Country and all that it stands for. FAKE NEWS is alive and well and beautifully represented on Saturday night!<sup>560</sup>

With the Trump administration having thrown the critique of politically correct losers out the window, the White House Correspondents' Dinner as a venue for the expression of comedy remains under threat in the effort to ease hurt feelings about a roast being performed as a roast. During an interview in late April 2018 after the event, incoming White House Correspondents' Association president Olivier Knox weighed several suggestions he is considering for the future: "No entertainer. No comic. A serious speaker. Maybe a musician. Maybe don't televise it."<sup>561</sup> Perhaps, however, it is Michelle Wolf who has the last laugh, having mirthfully exclaimed during her Dinner comedy set, "Yeah, shoulda done more research before you got me to do this."<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter post, April 30, 2018, 5:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/99092648032985907/>.

<sup>561</sup> Michael M. Grynbaum, "Did Michelle Wolf Kill the White House Correspondents' Dinner?" *The New York Times*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/business/media/michelle-wolf-white-house-correspondents-dinner.html/>.

<sup>562</sup> Colin, Drury, "Trump Calls for 'Embarrassing' White House Correspondents' Dinner to be 'Put to Rest'," *The Independent*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-white-house-correspondents-dinner-2018-michelle-wolf-end-us-president-a8328936.html/>.

In this context the rebooted Roseanne, now a Trump supporter along with the reappropriated Pepe, returned not to a baseball diamond with an unruly song and a spit and a crotch-grab in the face of patriotism but instead a set of rules for comedy as love in the form of facile non-conflict, especially towards people who are more powerful. Roseanne tweeted on April 29th, “first rule of comedy: NEVER target someone more famous than U who is in the audience. U will lose the entire crowd.”<sup>563</sup> She followed this discouragement against speaking against power with: “second rule of comedy: comedy comes from LOVE, not from HATE! If u feel hate, you won't get laughs.”<sup>564</sup> Then her third rule of comedy, “...the comic has to be the ‘asshole,’ not the audience!”<sup>565</sup> leaves the entire possibility of a comedian conducting a roast in doubt. Finally, Roseanne revisited her rules for comedy a few days later on May 1st: “4th rule of comedy: get big laughs close together.”<sup>566</sup> Through a spineless inversion of Cynthia Willett’s theory of comedy as Eros,<sup>567</sup> Roseanne posed the opposite set of rules to Rowe’s emphasis on Roseanne as a figure of unruliness, casting comedy as a critique of power aside in favor of comedy as a method for pleasing and currying favor.

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<sup>563</sup> Roseanne Barr, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 11:17 a.m., <https://twitter.com/therealroseanne/status/990656230191493120/>.

<sup>564</sup> --Roseanne Barr, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 1:45 p.m., <https://twitter.com/therealroseanne/status/990689951791673344/>.

<sup>565</sup> Roseanne Barr, Twitter post, April 29, 2018, 1:52 p.m., <https://twitter.com/therealroseanne/status/990695457134448640/>.

<sup>566</sup> Roseanne Barr, Twitter post, May 1, 2018, 1:33 a.m., <https://twitter.com/therealroseanne/status/991234154334388224/>.

<sup>567</sup> Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire*.

The onslaught of the humorless, over-sensitive, and politically correct against the humor of free-speaking envelope-pushers is thus revealed to be a puppet show of power. Not only humor, but also discourse around humor, is political and should not be removed from its social world. Contrary to Morreall,<sup>568</sup> the joke-teller does not retreat into their intellect at the expense of the potentially harmed emotional other, but rather remains emotionally invested and engaged with the affect of the joke and its continued relationship to jesting subject. This connection is revealed most explicitly when humor becomes unstable, working differently or even against the humorist's best calculations, humor's social and political life constantly overshadowing the attempt to contain it within the isolated head or the realm of abstract, disconnected, free expression.

#### Feminist Philosophy and Unstable Politics

In this chapter, I began by fulfilling my promise to honor more deeply the contributions of feminist philosophers who connect laughter to embodiment, subjectivity, and potential instability. I first traced the instability of humorwork to the continuing connection between the subject of humorwork and their reappropriated or misunderstood humor, referring to Matt Furie and the transformation of Pepe the Frog to argue that the humorworking subject and the life of the humor-product often cannot be easily separated. I then argued this instability takes upon a gendered and embodied register by discussing the example of the unruly woman, who practices humorwork at the excess of gender, embodiment, and visibility. Finally, I showed that the popular framework of humor as free practice in contrast to overly politicized and overly sensitive reactions to humor is a

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<sup>568</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50, 66-67.

political rhetoric easily defeated by examining the instabilities that emotionally connect even the freest and most edgy humorists with the continued uptake of their work. All humorists are subject to the possibility that their humor can be reappropriated and deployed against anyone or anything given the right conditions. I have thus argued that humor involves an unstable politics, and the practice of humor cannot be totally captured by rigid control or rules. The practice of humorwork by gendered, embodied, emotional subjects with complex relationships to others in a social and political power-laden world entails that the ongoing social and political life of humor is often messy.

I began Chapter II and ended this chapter with a discussion of humor that disavows its connection with affect, bodies, subjects, and a social and political world. Over the course of my dissertation I have argued that it is important to foreground the role of power in humor, and to do so it is important to foreground the social location of the people who make humor, the affects they bring into play during humor's work of reappropriation and transformation, and the continued instability of practicing humor that thwarts rigid calculation. In the context of feminist politics, I take this distinction between politicized humor and falsely depoliticized humor to not only be descriptive but also practical and normative.

These two different frameworks of humor also carry very different views on the politics of humor, the role of humorwork for resistance and social change, and the responsibilities humorists have in relation to others. The depoliticized view, considered in its political dimensions, separates the practice of humor from its potential effects, and from the nuance and self-humility of considering one's social location and how this might inform the practice of humor. It separates humor from affect, from both oneself

and others, and brackets it outside the sphere of the body, let alone a body that is gendered. It also fails to account for the instability of humor, losing a sense that potential misinterpretations and reappropriations of humor may continue to implicate a subject, to the extent they remain in connection and may even be responsible for the range of ways humor can be taken up. This view of humor is one that disconnects the humorist from their world, perhaps offering a cocoon of safety with which to defensively push away ethics and politics or rip the skeleton of humor from its more complex holistic body for study, but losing the rich connection between humorists and the world and discounting humor's potential role in social change. Due to the instabilities of humor, this approach to humorwork also inevitably fails in practice even if it lacks self-responsibility or tries to mask this failure.

Feminist humorwork can be envisioned in a different voice. In contrast to a practice of humor that is closed-off and insular while trying (and failing) to distance itself from the world and feelings and others and bodies, feminist humorwork can do better and serve as a political, engaged, and embodied practice embracing instability and the connection between practice, sociality, and affect. In refusing to distance itself from others and the world, feminist humorwork can also be potentially transformative, both attentive to ways in which existing and entrenched discourse, images, ideas, and situations can be changed against their intentions and expectations, while attempting to project a world through unstable practice that could be better. Feminist humorwork can also be a potential site for humility, as the instability of humor informs the possibility that our words and deeds, ideas and actions, and artistic endeavors can often be taken up against our intentions and recast anew. The feminist humorworker can use this

understanding of potential misunderstanding not only to bend what is too rigid, but also to take care and responsibility with the potential unanticipated effects when practicing humor with others.

An investigation into the relationship between feminist philosophy and unstable humorwork is also a helpful consideration of the relationship between feminist philosophy and unstable politics more broadly. While it is often helpful to engage in action and direct speech, I hope I have made the case for a feminist politics of indirection and misdirection, a feminist trickery that may very well serve as an eternal irony of the social and political community. Such a consideration is also a matter of community and connection, as no one feminist philosopher will be able to master a topic such as humor that involves so many complex interactions between politics, language, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and subjectivity, and feminist philosophers as a group will be lost without considering the insights of broader interdisciplinary scholarship and practitioners of feminist activism, art, and comedy, inclusive of everyday words and deeds. I also hope this points towards a feminist scholarship beyond the lack of complexity often given to work in applied philosophy as a one-directional arc from ideas to action that instead simultaneously brings action to bear on thought, and thought to bear in action, in a continued dialectic that clarifies the importance of both thought and action when thinking about a specific practice, and especially a practice so complex as humor.

If understanding humorwork, and unstable politics, is also a matter between subject, practice, and world, then I also want to suggest it is important to take up this position and tinker with it yourself, as I have done with humor in public for the past few years. Taking up this instability myself has given me a renewed appreciation for the ways

in which humor can lead to misinterpretations I never would have expected and a life beyond me that I may have not even been aware of as it is taken out of my hands and remolded across time. I have learned first-hand how humor can be shared as part of the thought process and dialogue of an open community, and how I can try to be more effective and responsible with the effects of my humor on others. I have made jokes I was unsure about that resonated with a lot of people, and I have made jokes that hurt people through uptakes against my expectations that I did not anticipate and still do not understand. I have also encountered moments where my attempt at reappropriating and transforming language and images has been used against me. By taking up the indirect practice of humor, my attempts to make a humorous political point sometimes shifted back into a regressive form I no longer controlled even as I retained a connection with this humor through bad feelings. Finally, writing on the politics of humor has caused me to reflect more on rhetoric about humor as a free, unburdened expression that would be fundamentally threatened by relating humor to politics, emotions, affectivity, and bodies. This depoliticization of humor, along with broader rhetoric that depoliticizes “free speech” in opposition to over-sensitive affectivity, is often unreflected upon in an effort to silence people with less power.

Despite the difficulties of writing about and practicing humor that has accompanied many of its triumphs, I am grateful to have chosen this strange subject of humor, to have practiced what I preach, and to have sharpened both my ideas and my practice of humor in conversation with each other. I am a funnier and wiser person than when I started, and ready to accept a more refined subject position as feminist philosopher-comedian, should the gods laughingly place humor on my side.



## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

#### BUILDING HUMORWORK

##### Politics, Revolution, and Instability in Humorwork

Throughout this dissertation I have worked through the complexities of claiming to have humor on one's side. I have focused on the practice of humorwork and its instabilities, emphasizing that humorwork involves a complex field of indirect politics occurring across the everyday landscapes of social and political life. This unstable field of humor politics is enabled by the subject and their relationship with language, especially as it is connected with an emotional and social world conducive of political speech linked with power and oppression. In this conclusion I will explain the role that each chapter of this dissertation had in drawing out the relationship between humor, politics, resistance, and instability. I will then explain the specific features of my feminist account of humorwork for future approaches to humor in social and political philosophy.

I began this dissertation by discussing the claim of comedians, mostly men of the baby boomer generation, that the fate of humor is threatened by the rise of over-sensitive and over-emotional social justice-minded people, usually of the millennial generation, who overly politicize jokes. From the outset this dissertation has thus focused on the compatibility between centering the politics of humor and understanding how humor works. To that end, in Chapter II argued that scholarship in humor studies often brackets out the role of the subject and power in the practice of humor, instead focusing on humor

as primarily a study of depoliticized language. In Chapter III, I took this argument further by pointing out that the popular scholarly approach of dividing humor theories into essentialist categories decenters the relationship between humor, power, and oppression. When the history of philosophical work centering the social and political role of humor is dismissed for failing to account for all the essential features of humor, this leads to the relationship between power and humor getting hastily cast aside in mainstream humor theory, resulting in individualist frameworks of humor ethics that decenter larger social and political relationships between humor, power, and oppression.

I also began this dissertation by considering the relationship between women and humor, discussing both the claim by Christopher Hitchens that women naturally have less of an affinity for humor than men and Naomi Weisstein's argument that women should develop a new way of practicing humor beyond its systematic use against women under patriarchy. Juxtaposed with popular claims mentioned in the previous paragraph that the free, proper practice of humor is threatened by people who center aims of social justice, I move from the topic of women and humor to considering the potential use of humor as a practice of social amelioration against oppression. In Chapter IV, I reviewed feminist film, theory, and philosophy about women's laughter as a revolutionary act of opening space for laughter's possibilities. I argued that while it is important to focus on connections between women, laughter, and revolution, this does not shed light on many specific political practices of humor by women and the ways they may or may not resist oppression. In Chapter V I thus discussed the specific practices of feminist humorists, drawing from humor studies and especially the work of Delia Chiaro to argue feminist humorists are able to experience the world and its patriarchal structures as fundamentally

manipulable at both subtle and overt levels of humor practice. In describing this practice, I introduced the concept of *humorwork*, through which people practice humor to indirectly reappropriate and transform words, phrases, images, and situations against their own terms for political ends. Humorwork thus serves as a concrete practice through which humor can be used to generate possible situations of liberation through indirect manipulation rather than direct engagement on the terms of an oppressive status quo.

The third insight that jump-started my dissertation was the realization that I am often unable to predict or control the outcome of my political humorwork experiments on the Internet, even in the rare event that my jokes are met with enthusiasm by thousands and achieve “viral” status. Despite my interest and hopes for a connection between humor and practices of feminist resistance, my dissertation has also focused on ways in which humor can be used against liberation in the form of counterameliorative humor, as well as the instability of humor as a practice more broadly, to capture the more limited and unpredictable contours of humorwork. In Chapter VI, I referred to racist movements against Black Lives Matter to discuss what I call counterameliorative humorwork, which reentrenches an oppressive status quo through humor that is antifeminist, sexist, racist, or homophobic (among many other counterameliorative possibilities and combinations). I conclude that humorwork should not be considered only as a practice that aims for liberation and amelioration, but also as a practice that often invokes racist circulations of emotion to undermine activism and slogans against oppression. In addition to the use of humor for resistance, counterameliorative humorwork must be considered as a similar practice that aims to shut down or wear out movements for social liberation.

Continuing from the more complex field of humorwork's potential use for politics, Chapter VII concludes the dissertation by highlighting a larger instability that undergirds all potential political practices of humorwork. Refocusing on the embodied subject who produces humor, I emphasize that products of humorwork often take on a continued life of creative reappropriation beyond the intentions of their creator, capable of transformations that the humorist may not have expected. The field of indirect reappropriation and transformation available through the practice of humorwork thus frequently denies attempts to calculate ahead of time the social and political effects that humor will have in broader circulation. This field of instability also relates to embodied gendered performance, as taking up a subject position of comic gendered unruliness can grant the power of exploiting visibility but also result in distinct punishments as this visibility is turned against the subject who wields it. I drew upon these insights about the instability of humorwork to focus on comedians who claim access to the true practice of humor as free, unemotional, and edgy in contrast to tropes of humorless feminists and over-emotional people (usually feminist millennials) oriented towards social justice. Specifically, I focused on Ricky Gervais' emotional attachment to his critics and the immediate shift by the Trump administration and Trump-allied media from framing liberals and other politically left-leaning people as overly sensitive to chastising political humor as unacceptable and abusive following the 2018 White House Correspondents Dinner.

The instability of humorwork indicates that the indirect manipulations available through the practice of political humor cannot be fully calculated ahead of time, as it is possible to have the products of humor transformed against original intentions, it is

possible to be chastised as unruly and punished for using humor, and people who think they are immune to humor's politics are often undermined by their own emotional responses to its uptake. I conclude from this that engaging in humorwork provides a distinctly powerful practice of indirectly reappropriating and transforming existing speech, images, and situations without accepting their direct and straightforward terms. While this practice of humorwork can open political possibilities and visions that may have been impossible within the terms of oppressive systems, the indirect mode of engagement also opens the practice of humor up to continued reappropriation and transformation against original intentions, as well as distinct possibilities of punishment for taking up an unruly practice and subject position. Humorwork is thus an unstable practice of politics that can be taken up for both feminist and counterameliorative aims as part of a larger field of political discourse moving beyond direct, propositional political engagement.

### Implications of Humorwork as Unstable Politics

Now that I have brought feminist philosophy to bear on humor studies and emphasized the importance of considering humorwork as unstable politics, I will point to several implications of this view. First, I have argued that social and political theories of humor should be welcomed as part of the rich pluralism of humor studies as a field. Though I have pointed out limitations of humor studies, the philosophy of humor, the ethics of humor, and feminist theories of laughter for adequately describing humor as a social and political practice, I have endeavored throughout not to entirely dismiss any of these wide approaches to studying humor. For example, I have critiqued the decentering

of social and political analysis in humor studies and the limitations of feminist theories of laughter for considering humor in practice, and then brought insights from humor studies together with feminist philosophy to make these approaches stronger. By approaching humor through the lens of feminist philosophy I am thus hoping to maintain a rich, wide pluralism in humor scholarship, while also endeavoring to have feminist philosophy, feminist theory, and social and political theory more broadly taken seriously in the interdisciplinary pluralism of humor studies.

Second, as part of this pluralism, and especially in Chapter III, I have embraced humor as a term historically carrying different meanings for different scholars over a long period of time. Following contemporary approaches in humor studies and philosophy of humor, I take “humor” to signify an umbrella term for various practices, mental states, operations of language, performances, and cultural productions that are in some sense funny or amusing in intention or result<sup>569</sup> while taking care to not distort non-general or historically specific uses of “humor.” I thus embrace a broad use of the term “humor” in conversation with other approaches to humor that I have given more precision in my analysis by focusing on *humorwork* specifically. Because approaching humor through the lens of continental feminist philosophy involves connecting the speaking subject, their gendered embodiment, their language, their emotions, and their social and political world, I take the pluralism of humor to invoke relationships between social and political philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of language, as well as politics, language, and embodiment.

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<sup>569</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 61, 63-64.

Third, I have argued for a practice-focused approach to studying humor. I am not suggesting that a social and political philosophy of humor must always center specific examples of humor in practice. However, I do take considering the practice of humor to be key for gathering specific evidence for a political analysis of how humor operates and what it can potentially accomplish. I thus recommend that a social and political philosophy of humor should at least consider the practice of humor, even if focusing instead on related phenomena such as laughter, to keep the conversation grounded.

Fourth, and related to the subject of grounding conversations about the politics of humor in practice, I have built skepticism and limitations about the political effects of humorwork into my approach. In contrast to feminist theories of laughter that consider its abstract revolutionary potential or promise for women, I have decided instead to focus on practice to consider what specifically humorwork is able to accomplish when indirectly engaging with specific language, images, and situations. I have also considered the instability of humor to further limit the extent to which humor can accomplish its best intentions. While I do not intend to totally rob humor of any revolutionary potential, I also want to avoid exaggerating the potential of humorwork for changing the world in ways that can be calculated ahead of its practice. I also intend this limitation as an insight into planning actions of political humor, since it is important to not only focus on the execution of humorwork but also potential ways any practice of humor can misfire. Beyond specific practitioners, a social and political philosophy of humor must also be careful to avoid erroneously associating humorwork solely with the aims of liberation or the aims of oppression.

Fifth, by considering popular discussions about the allegiance of humor, such as the historical assertion that women have less of an affinity for humor and the contemporary assertion that humor is threatened by humorless people who are overemotional and concerned with the cause of social justice, I take the study of humorwork to also involve a critical study of how frameworks such as humorfulness and humorlessness often operate for political ends. For example, at the end of Chapter VII, I concluded that comedians such as Ricky Gervais often consider their comedy to involve an authentic, free practice of humor that is primarily depoliticized, removed from emotion, and separate from potential social effects, even while ignoring their intense emotional investment in its political uptake. This assumption is often used to assert an ideal response to humor from others, specifically that the hearer should be able to “take a joke” and not be too sensitive regardless of the joke’s context or content. Focusing on the practice of humorwork by a subject in a social and political world can also assist with considering the ways their humor or perceived lack of humor is framed politically, functioning as a resource to critique assumptions about humor that excuse or diminish its potential negative effects on people in the world.

Moving forward, I hope to continue filling in some of the features that I have indicated serve an important role in humorwork as a political practice. While I have spent much time in this dissertation emphasizing that discussions and theories about humor have left it depoliticized, I would also like to focus on other elements of humor that can get left behind by accounts of the necessary and sufficient operations of humor, such as emotions and play. While I have indicated that the circulation of emotions plays an important role in the political life of humorwork, I hope that more work will be done to



examine the decentering of emotions and affectivity from humor by theories focusing on its linguistic operations and by popular discussions about the ability or inability to “take” a joke. If humor has a rich political life, then it also has a rich emotional life that must not be left out of a fully developed social and political philosophy of humorwork.

Relatedly, I hope to see more work on the subject of play in relation to humorwork, especially as it connects the rich and social emotional life of humor to complicated operations of reappropriation and transformation. Though I have endeavored throughout this dissertation to include amusing and playful examples of feminist and ameliorative humorwork in action, one risk of focusing on the political weight of humor is that fun, silliness, and playfulness can end up decentered in relation to humor as a series of political operations. I thus hope future work will focus on the fun, playfulness, and surprise of humor, and how this can be centered without dismissing the role of humorwork as a political practice. Accomplishing this would better assist the study of humorwork in fulfilling its pluralist goals.

Going beyond this, though I returned to the gendered body as promised in Chapter VI, more can be said about the humorwork of embodied performance than I could manage in this dissertation without stretching the account of humorwork too much beyond its origin in linguistic manipulations. I am interested in not only the use of humorwork in language and graffiti, but also its embodied performance by feminist comedians, performance artists, dancers, mimes, and clowns. Focusing on instances of humorwork that depend more on embodied movement would go farther towards providing a fully fleshed out philosophy of humor as practiced by an embodied subject in a social and political world.

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