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Telling Laughter:
Hilarity and Democracy in the Nineteenth-Century United States

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M.A., University of Virginia, 2003
B.A., Cornell University, 2001

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University
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Abstract

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By Jennifer A. Hughes

Laughter is often viewed as a form of self-evident body language, its significance being universal across time and culture. This study examines, however, instances of merriment that carry different meanings within different cultural moments. Exploring the ways in which laughter in post-Jacksonian America was bound intimately with cultural conceptions of happiness, morality, and both mental and physical health, I argue that its depiction – whether in the marketplace, in the discourse of reform, or, indeed, in aesthetics – comprises a rich but largely unexamined shifting political discourse about social identity and democratic rights. *Telling Laughter* contends that humor of this era was the site of complicated debate between striving for an expanded democracy and maintaining the *status quo*. This investigation of the strained logic of differentiation between the laughter of full citizens and that of marginalized or non-citizens sheds light upon the ways the laughing bodies were interpreted during a time in which the more "constant" state of a body – its sex and race – determined its civil rights. Depictions of hysterical women and "happy darkeys" evince the willful misreading of sexed and raced bodies in the throes of hilarity. *Telling Laughter* foregrounds context by gathering and comparing visual and textual rhetorical maneuvers on the topic of hilarity in order to show the confluence of commercial markets, reform movements, and the desires of their publics. With examinations of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Henry Clay Lewis's "The Curious Widow," Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, and more brief treatments of authors including Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Stowe, I evince that culturally-historicized readings of laughing bodies bring into relief the interactivity of these authors and the popular press in engaging with the political issue of the extension of democratic rights. Finally, *Telling Laughter* highlights literary and popular instances in which marginalized subjects utilize laughter to shatter stereotypes and be heard.

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Telling Laughter:
Hilarity and Democracy in the Nineteenth-Century United States

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Introduction: Stories of Laughter

In 1850 William Lloyd Garrison reprinted, with indignation, this apocryphal story about Frederick Douglass on the front page of his abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*:

> MADDENED JUSTICE. Fred. Douglass, the impudent negro who has of late taken upon himself the privilege of abusing our country, its Patriots and Constitution, without having that chastisement which he so richly merited at the hands of our republicans who could condescend to notice his blasphemy and negroism, had the audacity yesterday to walk down Broadway, the principal promenade in our city, with two white females resting on his arms. Several citizens who had noticed this disgraceful scene, followed the impudent scamp to the Battery. On observing that he was watched, the negro kept laughing and sneering at the gentlemen who were behind him. One of them could not withstand the provoked and justifiable temptation to award to the negro that punishment which his daring rascality had subjected him to. The gentleman stepped up to him, and politely requested the females to leave their ebony companion, and place themselves under the protection of a gentleman who was standing near by. The women very quietly did as they were desired to do, and then the indignant and insulted gentleman administered to the back of the negro a ‘dressing’ that he will have occasion to remember hence. Maddened justice forgets the dictates of law in a case of this kind; and personally we can see no reason why it should not.[1]

The article, originally printed in the *New York Globe*, captures an instance of white outrage at a black man's apparent enjoyment while walking in the company of white women. Although Douglass's integrated company attracts attention on the streets of New York, it is his “laughing and sneering” at that attention that drives one white onlooker to “maddened justice.” To this man, Douglass's merriment – loud and public – crosses the color line of propriety and deserves punishment. “The dictates of law” allow Douglass to walk down Broadway in whatever company he chooses in 1850s New York, but his public laughter becomes the justification for the “insulted gentleman” to act upon private

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[1] “Maddened Justice,” as reprinted from the *New York Globe* in the *Liberator*, May 31, 1850, Volume 20, Issue 22. This is a different *New York Globe* from the African American paper of the 1880s.

racist views. This white response to black laughter is presumed visceral, natural, and transcendent of the law. Laughter serves as the narrative climax of the racist anecdote, marking the point at which the reader's presumed offense at the scene matches that of the white onlooker who erupts into violence.

How did laughter come to be the implicit tipping point of the story? What Douglass says with his laughter – or is imagined to say – technically contains no formal linguistic content. However, the twenty-first century reader realizes that Douglass's laughter and the reaction it provokes are dependent upon history. That is, when a white onlooker confronts Douglass's laughter, he does not wonder what caused that mirth, but rather seeks to find meanings in it that substantiate a racist world-view, to discover offensiveness within Douglass's utterance and behaviors. The article's initial intended readership, the patrons of the *New York Globe,* is called upon to share the offense and condone the punishment. Carefully considered, the story of Douglass's laughter testifies to the complex mechanics of antebellum racism that linked hegemonic conventions of patriotism, of racial and sexual relationships, and of practices within the public sphere. Laughter can function as an indictment of Douglass because it is an utterance that lingers in the gray areas of language, gesture, and reflex. Hilarity comes with a grimace and a showing of the teeth; that an onlooker could see a “sneer” in a laugh is no surprise. It comes with a bodily earthquake as one rapidly, and *loudly,* inhales and exhales; again, no surprise that an onlooker might interpret laughter on the street as willfully exhibitionist. Add a racial confrontation to these interpretations, and we have the scenario of “Maddened Justice.” The narrator justifies the indignant reactionary behavior of the white onlooker within the blurb by reading Douglass's laughter simultaneously as a

conscious (“impudent”) taunting gesture and as an unconscious utterance that calls attention to his uncontrollable black body. His laughter is not just incidental to “a case of this kind.” It paradoxically becomes, in this racist narrator's motivated interpretation, damning evidence of both intentional insult and inherent animality.

The meaning of laughter, however, depends as much upon who is listening as who is laughing. “Maddened Justice” became a different story entirely for the readers of *The Liberator*, where it was reprinted. Garrison offers the following commentary at the end of “Maddened Justice”: “This statement *in regard to the assault* upon Mr. Douglass is, we trust, a vile fabrication” (emphasis mine). To the editor and patrons of *The Liberator*, Douglass's laughter does not warrant comment. The assault is where the import rests. Pointedly questioning the veracity of the attacks, Garrison does not attempt to deny or explain away the scene of Douglass's laughter. The intrusion of the racist violence is the crux of the issue for Garrison's readership. They are called upon to react to the article dubbing the famed abolitionist an “impudent scamp” and to condemn the hatred that motivates the fantasy of attack. The fact that Douglass's hilarity could be so scandalous to one sort of readership and so unremarkable to another proves that laughter does not inherently and universally signify “daring rascality.”

Indeed, any understanding of antebellum laughter was so dependent upon the interactive, interpretative collision between who was laughing and who was listening that it could mean nearly anything. In 1836, an almanac contains stories of Davy Crockett, the rough-and-tumble, uneducated hero of post-Jacksonian democracy. His unrefined voice is transcribed in thick orthographic dialect as a way of celebrating his common origins and his natural good humor. When he laughs, it is a spectacle of energy and

power. He laughs the shirt off of his back; he grins the bark off a tree; he “screams” an alligator into submission.[2] Advertisements for Crockett almanacs claim that readers should buy these funny books to cure their ailments – physical and mental – through laughter, and become happy, healthy citizens like Davy. In 1840, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* runs an article that playfully describes the “type” of the “hearty woman.” All those who would fit in this category must be married and a mother, in addition to being plump, ruddy, and unflappably able to laugh off troubles and discontent.[3] In reading the article, one discovers that the “hearty woman” is a rare ideal and a delicate balance. Furthermore, the absence of any one aspect of her embodied womanhood would transform the perception of her character instantly. Other representations of women in the era reveal that a woman's laugh is not always viewed in the positive light of heartiness. Were she single, she would be seen as a flirt – too free with her laughter. Were she thin, ill, or a widow, her laughter would seem unhealthy, and be viewed as a symptom of hysteria or of sexual voraciousness

In *Telling Laughter*, I am concerned with the numerous and often contradictory judgments – moral, social, medical – made upon bodies in hilarity in the nineteenth-century United States across the spectrum of commercial, didactic, and literary materials. By looking into the ways that laughter told stories to nineteenth-century audiences, *Telling Laughter* attends to a rich but largely unexamined political discourse about social identity and democratic rights. Because laughter is so rarely viewed by scholars as anything but self-evident body language – as something for which one need only find one overarching theory to clarify its meaning – the dynamic, unstable nature of its

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[2] *Crockett's Yaller Flower Almanac for '36: Snagsville, Salt-river, published by Boon Crockett, and Squire Downing, Skunk's Misery, Down East* (New York: Sold by R. H. Elton, 1835).

[3] “Sketches of Character: The Hearty Lady,” *Godey's Lady's Book*, February 1840, 93-94.

significance (as exemplified by the Douglass anecdote) tends to go unheeded. However, to revisit laughter in the nineteenth century is to understand more deeply the import of literary instances of hilarity ranging from Henry David Thoreau's good-humored neighbor in *Walden* to Herman Melville’s insanely-giddy Pip, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's tragically-cachinnating Ethan Brand to Henry Clay Lewis’s inexplicably guffawing widow. Furthermore, to revise and complicate our understanding of laughter is to illuminate critical cultural figures like Davy Crockett, influential popular entertainments like laughing gas exhibitions and minstrel shows, and careful political gestures like the exaggerated solemnity of reformers. *Telling Laughter* looks at laughter within its contexts, in this case those of nineteenth-century America, rather than seeking a universal understanding of the utterance. It examines a range of nineteenth-century commentaries on laughter in order to trace the ways that political and social personhood were inscribed onto laughing bodies, and to delineate how laughter became meaningful due to intricate cultural expectations and anxieties about how it is situated, embodied, and interpreted.

Studies of laughter have long been hampered by theories that treat the utterance as timeless and peculiarly disembodied.[4] Within the last fifty years, scholarship across the disciplines has been eschewing the search for universal human conditions, opting to accept and explore the messiness of particularity – but laughter scholarship has proved largely tenacious in its pursuit of universals. Historian Daniel Wickberg laments, “[b]y reducing understandings of laughter to a static and abstract system of types, twentieth-

[4] Somatic elements of laughter are mentioned, but for the most part an *ideal, unmarked, unsexed, unaged* body shakes, weeps, urinates, etc.

century philosophers, psychologists, and critics have removed laughter from history.”[5] Theories of laughter generally pursue answers to *how* the utterance erupts from an individual, focusing on origin and intention. Thomas Hobbes avers that an individual laughs as an expression of feelings of superiority.[6] Immanuel Kant locates its origin in the mental recognition of an incongruity.[7] Henri Bergson posits laughter to be an innate means of chastising others for improper behavior, therein implicitly arguing for objectively defined “good” and “improper” human behaviors.[8] Indeed, the most recognized and respected names in humor theory remain those who offer overarching theories of why *we* human beings laugh. Although the effort to imagine the human race unified through laughter across centuries and continents is humane and admirable, history

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5 Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 47.

6 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin edition of 1668* [1651], ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 32, definition 42. Hobbes posits that laughter is an expression of “sudden glory” by someone who is either pleased by something they themselves have done, or “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (ibid.). In either case, laughter is an utterance of self-congratulation according to Hobbes. The philosopher remarks, also, that those who laugh most at others are “conscious of the fewest abilities” in themselves – that is, laughing too much at other people's faults is “a sign of pusillanimity” (ibid.).

7 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790], ed. and trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209. It is called the incongruity theory because Kant defines laughter as “an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing” (ibid.). Kant gives several examples of anecdotes that cause laughter, and explains that the difference between expectations cannot be distressing or important, or else it would not be funny or pleasurable. Hence his use of the term “nothing” to describe the bathetic nature of a risible object (210). Kant explains further that laughter is the product of “agreeable” (rather than “beautiful”) art – because the art affects the body. His philosophy is in line with the long tradition of laughter as salubrious, for he writes that the body's motion in laughter (and in other pleasures) “promotes the restoration of their balance and has a beneficial influence on health” (209).

8 Henri Bergson, “Laughter” in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1956). Bergson writes that laughter is only corrective of minor societal problems – such as things that suggest “*inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body” (73, emphasis original). He argues that “inelasticity” is the common comic thread in what makes both an awkward tumble and a person with strange habits risible: “this rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (74). Bergson expands upon what causes laughter in his essay, but he maintains this definition of laughter as social censure.

– and the complex nature of laughter within history – is obscured in the process while historical prejudices are laid bare.[9]

Take, for example, Charles Baudelaire's eloquent "On the Essence of Laughter," which he himself calls "purely an artist's and a philosopher's article."[10] His goal is to discover the nature of the genre of caricature and "the essence of laughter." The theory that emerges in his mid nineteenth-century essay is that laughter is – always – the product of knowledge. He traces the birth of laughter to the Biblical Fall, asserting that laughter naturally erupts in the face of the contradictory revelation that human beings are fallen (have sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge), but that they are saved (*felix culpa*). All subsequent laughter serves as a reminder of this contradictory knowledge. Baudelaire then posits, with the logic of colonialism at his service, that *we* Christians appreciate the comic "as a condition of our general intellectual power" and superiority over less civilized groups.[11] With a glib flourish, he concludes that "Indian or Chinese idols are not aware that they are ridiculous; it is in us, Christians, that their comicality resides."[12] Baudelaire's theory may be compelling to a Western, Christian readership, but it implies the impossibility of a non-Christian sense of humor. All others are somberly ridiculous savages, incapable of laughter.

Consider, then, Sigmund Freud's theory of laughter in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Editor Peter Gay points out that Freud "offered *Jokes* as a contribution

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9 These formulaic categorizations of brands of humor, branded according to what sorts of laughter they produce, can become interesting when examined as products of particular cultures and histories, as the scholarship of Wickberg and others (such as Barry Sanders and Gregg Camfield) attest. These scholars contextualize ideas about "the sense of humor" by noting contemporaneous political anxieties and cultural valuations.

10 Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter" in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies* [1855], trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (Double Day Press: NY, 1956), 133.

11 Ibid., 142.

12 Ibid., 143.

to psychoanalytic theorizing” that supplemented the analysis of dreams and neuroses.[13] Freud begins his explication of the nature of laughter by proposing a theory of laughter's purpose within the functioning and orderly model of the individual consciousness. This model is intended to be representative of all human brains, and therefore laughter always serves the same purpose within every individual. To that end, Freud theorized that laughter was a physical release of mental energy conserved through one or a combination of several mental processes ranging from efficient linguistic play to a transformation of aggression through tendentious joking.[14] However, one must recognize a problem in Freud's universal theory in that he uses a male brain (white and “civilized,” or European) for his model as he theorizes. Freud's theory of laughter-as-release ultimately ignores laughter as it actually exists, erupting between and among all kinds of people under an infinite number of conditions. His methodology not surprisingly, then, allows him to conclude that women are not capable of some aggressive forms of laughter, and reduces them to powerless, silent objects of masculine joking. It is also unsurprising that in following Freud's theory of laughter, women's hilarity is heard as a symptom of psychological disorder: hysteria.

Freud also wrote of laughter that, from the standpoint of psychoanalytic consciousness, “strictly speaking, we do not know what we are laughing at.”[15] In making this statement, Freud seeks to justify how a civilized person might be driven to emit a “peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut.” His answer is that one laughs *first* at the refined and clever form of a joke – be that from a manipulation of a homophone, or from

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13 Peter Gay, “Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life” in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* [1905], trans. and ed. by James Strachey (W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London, 1960), xxiii.

14 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation*, 114-121.

15 Ibid., 121.

syntactical playfulness – until the grosser content dawns more slowly upon consciousness. From this approach, one can see that Freud is concerned centrally with what happens within the mind of one who laughs, but I assert in this dissertation that a more interesting revelation about laughter comes from the outside. The hearer is as important as the laugher. Strictly speaking, we do not know what any other person is laughing at – though we will make instantaneous and often captious judgments about that person based upon their merriment.

As a first step toward gaining insight into the role that audiences or individual witnesses play in attributing meaning to laugher, I look first towards the historically-conscious scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin quotes Alexander Herzen: “It would be extremely interesting to write the history of laughter.”[16] Bakhtin then carefully situates the comic writings of François Rabelais in the context of the French Renaissance carnival. I adopt Bakhtin’s contextual methodology in *Telling Laughter* to show how budding commercialism, reform movements, slavery, and – most of all – the experiment of democracy contribute to the creation of a compelling history of laughter in the nineteenth-century United States. My call for a historical, situated, archivally-driven study of nineteenth-century laughter echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's call for "historicity" in reading Rabelais. Bakhtin responds to several scholars who seem "to think that laughter is the same in every time and age" and therefore "leave laughter aside, as nonhistorical and unchanging."[17] The shortcomings of this nonhistorical approach to laughter are especially urgent to Bakhtin, as he argues that Rabelais is underappreciated specifically because history shows a degeneration of the meaning of laughter over time.

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[16] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59.

[17] Ibid., 134.

From Rabelais's sixteenth century to Bakhtin's nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the scholar tells a story of loss. Laughter had once aptly responded to the Rabelaisian grotesque, an extreme performance of bodies cycling through eating and defecating, copulating and dying, in celebration of human perpetuity.[18] Bakhtin argues that in Rabelais's time, laughter had not “fully transformed as yet into mockery; it still has a relatively whole character and is related to the entire living process.”[19] He proposes that laughter has come to be nearly meaningless in contemporary times. Sweepingly, Bakhtin describes how laughter was to Renaissance folk culture an utterance of "deep philosophical meaning" to which Bakhtin's fellows have “lost the key.”[20] By dialectically re-entering Rabelais's world, Bakhtin both gains new understanding of that world and a technique for criticizing his fellow scholars, who are the product of centuries of tragic philosophic degeneration. Their view of laughter, in the twentieth century, is that it expresses disdain and ridicule. Bakhtin admonishes his contemporaries' understanding, and celebrates Rabelais as an artist who expressed a crudely eloquent acceptance of the human life-cycle through the carnival spirit and through laughter. He argues that because his contemporaries see laughter as expressing nothing more than ridicule, they are guilty of a dismissive brand of anachronism that reflects a larger problem of an eroded culture – one that lost its ability to laugh meaningfully. In this way, Bakhtin's celebration is, however, at once historicized and romanticized. Although I agree with Bakhtin that anachronism and universalism are ways of “losing the key” to the profundity of another culture, I disagree with his notion that difference between cultures

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[18] Katrina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 302.

[19] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 64.

[20] Ibid., 66 and 108.

denotes either degeneration or progress. In my approach to studying the variable meanings of laughter within the nineteenth-century, I presume that change is merely change. In fact, I seek to discover where culture and literature meet to engender and promote change.

Within relatively recent scientific studies of laughter, the dynamic role that laughter plays in human expression is receiving attention. The research conducted in the last decade of the twentieth century by neuroscientist Robert R. Provine calls attention to how laughter functions within everyday conversation. Provine, having researched established theories of laughter, writes, “After 2,000 years of pontificating by philosophers, it was high time that we actually observed laughing people and described what they were doing, when they did it, and what it meant.”[21] His study is long overdue. Provine's innovative method of investigation was to venture outside of the laboratory – and therefore into a variable-ridden, uncontrolled environment in which laughter thrives – in order to examine the utterance within the context of its everyday usage. “Eavesdropping” on over 1,200 “laughing episodes” revealed to Provine that laughter occurred most frequently amidst inarguably witless and banal chit-chat.[22] Risibility, or the inclination to laugh, appeared only marginally related to material typically considered humorous. Statistically, between eighty to ninety percent of the laughter followed sparkling statements like “It was nice meeting you too” and clever questions like “Are you sure?”[23] Provine remarks, also, that patterns in his data suggest that women laugh

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21 Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 5.

22 Ibid., 25-27. With a small clan of undergraduate research assistants, Provine performed what he calls “sidewalk neurobiology,” listening in on conversations and recording the contexts in which people laughed. A “laughing episode,” according to Provine’s definition, “consists of the comment immediately preceding laughter, and all laughter within one second after the onset of the first laughter.”

23 Ibid., 40.

more than men, that men elicit more laughter from their statements (funny or not), and that gender-based power imbalances appear to influence who laughs and who gets the laughs. In the process of gathering his data, he only recorded the gender of his subjects – not race, age, class, or any other social groupings – but one can extrapolate how laughter might be used differently in all sorts of social interactions. “Laughter,” as Provine pithily proposes, “is about relationships.”[24] Indeed, with these beginnings, Provine’s statistics ask us to reconsider conventional wisdom (both scholarly and not) regarding humor, as both tend to dismiss laughter without a *humorous* risible referent as artificial, and also downplay (or simply miss) the important and extensive presence of audiences or witnesses to laughter. Looking back to “Maddened Justice,” we are reminded that audiences often judge laughter based upon who they are in relation to the hilarious subject, rather than upon the cause of the laughter itself. To ignore the relational, conversational facet of laughter is to miss how, within a conventional system, laughter allows people to view and express such positions as amicability, dominance, subservience, and comfort.

The introduction of relationality into the reasoning of why a person laughs leads to an infinite regression of the significance of laughter; every laugh is inflected by the many roles that any one person may assume in relation to any other in a particular time and place. When a medical scientist such as Frederic Stearns curtly admits, in the process of outlining the genetics and physiology of laughter, that culture is a “relevant variable,” his understatement is glaringly apparent.[25] Relationality, any individual’s embeddedness

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[24] Ibid., 44.

[25] Frederic Rudolf Stearns, *Laughing: A Physiology, Pathophysiology, Psychology, Pathopsychology, and Development* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1972), 35. In a delightfully elitist passage, Stearns goes on to explain that “An individual belonging to a primitive culture cannot laugh at an erroneous literary

within social contexts, stymies the theoretical positioning that leads so many philosophers to ask "what do *we* laugh at," forcing a rejection of the use of that all-inclusive, universal, homogenous pronoun "we." Rather than laughter reflecting some part of a universal human nature, the relational dynamics of a certain cultural moment would dictate the significance of laughter exchanged between woman and man, child and adult, patient and doctor, etc. The instability of the significances of such relationships through time and place disturbs the possibility of any simple analysis of what laughter means.

Parallel to older, universalist theories of laughter, discussions of nineteenth-century humor have tended toward encouraging an understanding of "native comic lore," or what nineteenth-century Americans as individuals found funny and why that was so. This dissertation refutes a tradition of laughter study (tucked within a field dubbed "humor studies") that has been interested in understanding laughter by revealing the underlying, "core" causes of risibility. Humor studies in the United States had been invested in celebrating a national, somewhat homogenous American (democratic) sense of humor, defined particularly against an English (aristocratic) sense of humor. The work of Walter Blair, Hamlin Hill, and Constance Rourke in the first half of the twentieth century is in this vein; these critics offer analyses of what American citizens were laughing *at* when they responded to comic material.[26] Less important to both early and

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quotation or at a situation founded on prejudice contrary to the cultural tradition in which he was raised, just as *an intellectually sophisticated person, bred in a Western cultural sphere*, could not respond with laughing to gestures of a 'primitive' wag to which his audience would burst out in a guffaw. And in a less drastic manner, this disparity holds true for all cultures which have evolved historically on a dissimilar ethnic, environmental, intellectual, and spiritual basis…" (italics mine, 35).

[26] A large percentage of the actual comic material at this time was lifted purely, or in an altered form, out of British publications. For example, comic engravings from British almanac reappear in American almanacs with frequency (such as "Cure for Scolding Wives," see page 47 of this dissertation). Therefore, trying to delineate an "American" sense of humor out of this material is a problematic endeavor. The consumption of humor among Americans was transnational. Also, American humor studies have still not thoroughly accounted for the heterogeneous population of the nineteenth century,

even later scholars of humor is what people believed laughter said about themselves and others. This earlier approach produced valuable scholarship with regard to American writers' use of humor to imagine a new nation. It does, however, in its attention to the nationalist goals of American humorists, obscure fascinating questions of what it meant for consumers to purposefully seek out comic material for the sake of laughing.

For this reason, *Telling Laughter* does not ask why things are funny, or what makes people laugh. The example of “Maddened Justice,” and many other stories like it, reveals an imperative to understand laughter's meanings to have social origins – and therefore changing, motivated origins. In my research, I have found that across commercially, didactically, politically, or aesthetically motivated representations of laughter in the nineteenth century, the cause of laughter is frequently absent. This project shifts the focus to what laughter might mean once it has erupted, and the subject becomes a history of hilarity as it has been talked about, ruminated upon, evaluated, and reevaluated. I employ a bottom-up methodology of cultural studies, looking for meaning of laughter in texts that were a part of nineteenth-century everyday life. The archives have yielded hundreds of overtly-invested and somewhat anti-theoretical definitions of laughter, often from what were considered cheap, low, and discardable publications. These popular discussions of laughter are both historically and formally fascinating; they furthermore provide context and comparative value in the study of laughter within conventional literature. I hope that my close analysis of their language shows the value of joining the study of artistic and commercial/popular production. My research into such materials as the advertising language of comic almanacs and the defamation of reformers as laughter-loathing provides further support to David Reynolds's argument

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with its multitude of investments in the potential of humor.

that the study of American literature must recognize that “American literature was generated by a highly complex environment in which competing language and value systems, openly at war on the level of popular culture, provided rich material which certain responsive authors adopted and transformed in dense literary texts.”[27] We misunderstand nineteenth-century authors if we do not attempt to understand those texts to which they were responding. Scenes of hilarity from canonical as well as lesser-read literary authors serve to illuminate connections between language, human bodies, and politics when we reconsider them in a more richly-imagined cultural context. Additionally, we begin to see authors not only as commentators, but as participants and even consumers within an expanded social scene.

I begin my project with the printing boom of the 1830s, examining the advertisements, almanacs, diaries, pamphlets and lectures that flooded the American marketplace with axioms such as “Laugh and grow fat,” and “Laughter is the best medicine.” Chapter 1, “Selling Laughter in the Antebellum Marketplace,” contains my analysis of the language and imagery of advertisers of comic products. In the midst of political experimentation and upheaval, advertisers promoted their risible products through politically diverse attempts at persuasion, including conservative appeals, radical subversions, and utopian visions. Many utilized medical language in a fascinating attempt to disassociate laughter from questions of morality. They borrowed the lexicon of the outrageous patent-medicine ads of the era, collapsing differences between laughter and medication, audience and patients, and performer and physician. An 1846 broadside, for example, claims that the performances of “Doctor” William Valentine would cure his

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[27] David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3.

audiences of melancholy and other ailments by making them laugh at his cross-dressing impersonations of widows. In these advertisements, laughter was championed as a “remedy prescribed by nature,” administered by a benevolent comic industry that wanted to help Americans become healthier, happier citizens – but it also called attention to the body, and therefore had to engage with questions of which American bodies had the right to strive for healthy, happy citizenship.

Chapter 2, “Resuscitating Reformers,” analyzes how moral reformers involved in various causes responded to comic commercialism. The enthusiastic knee-slapping of comic consumerism often partook in narratives of sub-humanity and sub-citizenry that reformers were adamantly working to revise. Reformers recognized that the figure of the “happy darkey” was a justification for the benevolent effects of slavery; similarly, the figure of the hysterical woman was an argument for women’s mental inferiority and therefore their disenfranchisement. In the antebellum years, typical laughter was conceived as something pursued and purchased by ideal citizens: white men. Reformers took issue with this standard – and also with the language of panacea – because these ads implicitly told those white male consumers that it did not matter *what* they laughed at; their responsibility was to themselves, their own bodies and minds. This message of self-centeredness was contrary to the message of reform. Reform publications and lectures often asked the public to be wary of solipsistic humor and its potential path to moral degeneration. However, “Resuscitating Reformers” also strives to reconsider activists’ positive relationships to humor and laughter. Evidence of many reformers’ respect for laughter exists in the form of jokes and transcriptions of giggle-inducing lectures. Still, reformers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass (as we have seen) had to

assess the degree to which it was permissible for women and African Americans – critical members of the reformist demographic – to laugh in public arenas. If reformers ventured to shriek or chuckle, they had to do so with courage.

My following chapters reconsider the work of two antebellum authors who use culturally-perplexing laughing bodies in their writing to make radical political statements. Chapter 3, “Melville’s Laughing Evangel,” analyzes Herman Melville’s humorous opposition to the primitivizing, animalizing, and infantilizing of non-whites through his unusual treatment of Pip’s laughter in *Moby-Dick*. This chapter resituates the African American cabin boy as a central, hopeful figure in the novel. I contend that Melville developed an argument against despair by making Pip perform the role not of trickster or fool, but of a hilarious child evangel. His laughter references his unique personal experience. The crew members of the Pequod react strongly to Pip’s laughter after he goes mad. I argue, for example, that a dejected Queequeg reads a message of endurance through and transcendence of culturally-specific oppression – slavery – in Pip’s hilarity. In this way, the boy’s hauntingly hysterical utterances redeem Queequeg’s life. Melville thrusts the capacity for redemption on Pip by making him the vehicle for “deep thought whose language is laughter.”

Chapter 4, “Henry Clay Lewis’s Curious Widow,” examines a short story by Southwestern humorist Henry Clay Lewis, revealing that he uses the genre of the framed narrative joke story to question the era’s medically-dismissive and misogynist attitudes toward women. In “The Curious Widow,” a young medical student plays a prank on his landlady, planting a ghastly package containing the dissected face of a dead albino for her to find as she snoops in his room. Her response upon discovering the face is loud, long,

gasping laughter. Readers see her boisterous laughter through the eyes of the medical student who, according to his training, pathologizes her utterance as hysteria. When this “reading” of the widow’s response is exposed to be dramatically incorrect, Lewis shows these interpretations of women’s laughter for what they were: rationalizations that wrongly imagined women’s minds to be fragile or broken. The meaning of laughter in the nineteenth century was up for debate, and Melville and Lewis wrote what could be read as radical reassessments of the laughter of marginalized Americans. As this dissertation shows, their work falls on an extreme end of the spectrum of political discourses about laughter and human rights.

Telling Laughter’s conclusion situates the project’s contributions with respect to issues important to recent scholarship on nineteenth-century literature and culture, ranging from the interest in reader/audience-centered methodologies to critical questions about interpreting of the body. Additionally, looking back upon the contradictory roles that laughter played in both progressive and conservative practices before the war, *Telling Laughter*’s conclusion looks forward to see the meanings of laughter in the later half of the nineteenth century by examining the case of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar’s position as a famous black intellectual and humorist at the turn-of-the-century, facing a mixed-audiences’ demands for what he ought to write, offers insight into the ways that interrelated ideologies about laughter and the humanity of marginalized citizens had evolved (or not evolved) since the antebellum era. That Dunbar’s literary reputation was hotly contested at the turn of the century, and remains so even today, hints at a legacy of ideologies passed down to U. S. residents in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Telling Laughter reveals how nineteenth-century debates about personhood, citizenship, and democratic society were recorded within discussions of hilarious bodies.[28] In a century remarkable for both democratic advances and horrific inhumanities – a time in which the sex, race, and even age of one's body determined one's status as human and one's rights as a citizen – body language becomes unusually meaningful. What is truly exciting about the analysis of specific instances of debating about who may laugh – such as antebellum advertisements that encourage the inclusion of a black readership of national humor publications as often as they ridicule black literacy – is that one begins to sense the political uncertainty in which nineteenth-century populations lived. Hindsight can lend a sense of false inevitability to understandings of the past, but one looks back upon the numerous representations of merriment from the era and sees their dramatically different political goals. At times one sees what one expects to see: oppression, brutality, inhumanity. But one sees possibilities and hope alongside fears and dejection. In imagining the past through these documents, "History" at times drops its capital "h," and one feels the possibility that suddenly slavery might be abolished by the 1830s, women might get the vote by the 1840s, or the Civil War might never have happened. My research into stories about laughter – densely threaded as they were through the era's commercial publications, moralist texts, medical pamphlets, and literary works – reveals how something as seemingly meaningless as a giggle was seen as an expression of social identity and democratic status throughout the nineteenth century.

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[28] *Telling Laughter* insists that these interpretations are as critical to understanding a nineteenth century culture as deeply invested in representing happiness as it was in suffering. Scholars of nineteenth-century America, such as Saidiya V. Hartman (*Scenes of Subjection*, 1997), have emphasized the expressive potency of suffering bodies within the era, but the significance of hilarious bodies is too often presumed simple, transparent, and legible. I argue, on the contrary, that cries of pain plead for, while laughter defies, understanding from others.

Because laughter in post-Jacksonian America is bound intimately with cultural conceptions of happiness, morality, and both mental and physical health, it invites us to examine it as a site of complicated debate between striving for expanded democracy and maintaining the *status quo*. *Telling Laughter* pairs cultural history with literary study in order to eke out the many ways that laughter was tellingly meaningful to Americans during the tumultuous nineteenth century.

Chapter 1: Selling Laughter in the Antebellum Marketplace

[1]

The price of seventy-two pages of laughter? Ten cents. In the antebellum marketplace, laughter was for sale in the form of risible pamphlets, almanacs, joke books, newspapers, minstrel shows, theatrical comedies and farces, laughing gas exhibitions, and even "laughing pills." Advertisements for comic materials and performances promoted the potential for those entertainments to make one laugh, but they also emphatically promoted laughter itself. Some ads claimed the morality of hilarity, others vividly imagined its advantages to the human body; some celebrated laughter's power to unite people, others carefully offered laughter as the luxury of the empowered. To examine the language of antebellum comic advertising is to discover understandings of laughter profoundly reliant upon numerous facets of the turbulent antebellum culture.

Laughter's treatment as a marketable commodity by what I call "the comic industry" – the publishers and performers who sold hilarity to the antebellum public – contributed to making the body in hilarity a rich site for debates about embodiment, morality, and political rights. I trace the commercial representation of laughter within the texts and images that are found in ads for popular comic materials of the Jacksonian era as they work to lure in potential customers. Those who sold laughter sought to situate their products within a variety of contemporary conversations, and these conversations in

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[1] J. S. Ogilvie (publisher), *Ha! Ha! Ha!!* (No. 25 Rose Street, New York, 1882), front cover. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. Although this book (a compilation of humorous writing) is post-war, the cover perfectly captures the literal sale of laughter in the tradition of cheap printing.

turn created new understandings of laughter. Was the pursuit of pleasure, of enjoying comic material, opposed to the plight to become more virtuous? Was laughter natural and healthy, or corrupt and degenerative? Or was it merely a bodily experience divorced from morality? These abstract questions were transformed into political debates when applied to specific antebellum laughing bodies: Could black laughter be virtuous? Was hilarity natural to women, or did it in fact signal mental illness? I contend that attending to the commercial arguments of the "comic industry," rather than the actual jokes and humor which they hocked, gives us new insight into the ideas that the antebellum marketplace contributed to debates about citizenship and human rights of the young democratic nation.

Public Discourse and Comic Commercialism

> Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Listen! Hey! In doing so, they by no means render us passive. Quite the contrary.
>
> – Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*

Commercial advertising, through its mere existence, actively engages a public. As Michael Warner emphasizes in the quote above, public discourse encourages the activity of choice in any person who may look at, listen to, or ignore whatever it is that the clamoring child of public discourse proposes. Advertising – positioned so as to engage the people who, "by coming into its range," form its public – does not merely *address* the eyes and ears of those who encounter it, but asks them one by one to evaluate a proposal of exchange: money for product.[2] Each individual may accept, reject, or even ignore solicitation, but some sense of choice arises out of the mechanics of

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[2] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 88.

commercialism, whether real choice exists or not. Warner is writing about public discourse in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century United States, in which digital technologies blur the lines between public and private arenas of discourse. However, as economic historian Charles Sellers writes, there was in the first decades of the nineteenth century an earlier "market revolution" in which new processes of exchange greatly altered American public life.[3] Quickly, technologies enabling cheaper paper and speedier transport left American public spaces plastered with broadsides, littered with pamphlets, and gorged with potential purchases. American citizens of the 1830s, having just experienced the thrill of an extension of democracy to all white male citizens regardless of their financial means or social status, recognized a resonance between these commercial mechanics and post-Jacksonian politics. Larger numbers of people could engage with their government and be involved with its decision making; likewise, innovations in printing and product transportation enabled a broader national marketplace in which more people were asked if they would like to consume. In the antebellum nation, the "right" to consume therein became associated, in a bathetic manner, with the empowerment of political enfranchisement.

In this environment, the comic industry addressed its publics with a savvy awareness that the empowerment of individual choices (to buy) and individual voices (to vote) could be collapsed. The comic industry asked people to claim, through purchase of risible materials, their right to pursue happiness, to enable personal gain, and to have their voices *literally* heard through the act of laughing. Although jokes, cartoons, and stories were the physical product, the comic industry promoted their ability to induce laughter, a

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[3] Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (New York; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

vocalization most frequently associated with good health and contentment. Was it not the perfect form of expression for a nation reaching new heights in democratic empowerment? But to what heights might democracy reach, and who would ultimately be included? In the mass-produced materials which document the existence of the comic industry, one may see advertisers both appealing to pre-existing public beliefs and tastes, and seeking to mold and reinvent them, even as they steadily worked toward the goal of turning higher profits. With flashy fonts, risible woodcuts stamped upon cut-rate paper, and transcriptions of laughable lectures, the comic industry pitched laughter not only as a form of amusement, but as a forum for playful consideration of interrelated antebellum anxieties about mental and physical health, citizenship and human rights, and the pursuits of both pleasure and morality. This clamor of comic promotion serves as a rich example of how popular publications entered into debate with the shifting ideologies of publics and communities.[4]

As we will see, axioms like "laugh and grow fat" maintained a steady crescendo after the 1830s, in a manner that distanced laughter from morality, while simultaneously offering politically-loaded representations of a spectrum of American bodies. The giddy crescendo of the comic industry's depictions of laughter entered the public imagination, creating shifting cultural interpretations of its meanings. In later chapters, we will see how authors Herman Melville and Henry Clay Lewis stripped hilarity of its many popular meanings in order to dramatically reveal the histories behind individual utterances of laughter. But for now, we will look at how laughter, through its commodification, took

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[4] Although specifically talking about the modern medium of television, Stuart Hall theorizes more generally in "Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse" (1977) that production and consumption are parts of what he calls a "discourse circuit." In Hall's circuit, there is potential power to create, accept, or reject a particular ideology, or a "map of social reality" at any point.

on significances which enabled it to function in the political world as both a joyous celebration of progress, with hope for more to come, but also a mechanism of oppressive ideologies.

Almanacs, Utility, and Laughter

> Few materials are more important for a view of American humor than those provided by the comic almanacs during the period from 1830, when they began to appear, to 1860, when they had grown less local and flavorsome. These fascinating small handbooks yield many brief stories and bits of character drawing not to be found elsewhere; more than any single source they prove the wide diffusion of a native comic lore.
>
> – Constance Rourke, *American Humor*

After the advent of the printing boom in the early 1830s, American publics were increasingly offered relatively inexpensive comic materials, including joke books, magazines, gift books, and newspapers, as well as tickets to laughing gas exhibitions, minstrel shows, and comic lectures. Almanacs, however, were the foundation of the early comic industry and were, as Rourke states, a storehouse of "native comic lore" by the 1830s.[5] Popular and profitable since colonization, they proffered meteorological charts, sunrise and sunset schedules, prognostication, wit, and wisdom to their readers. Almanacs were as likely to be found in American households as an edition of Shakespeare, *Paradise Lost*, or even the Bible.[6] In 1831, Charles Ellms of Boston published the first edition of the *American Comic Almanac* (*ACA*), which was the earliest

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5 Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), 237.

6 Milton Drake writes in the preface to his *Almanacs of the United States* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962): "As towns grew along the coasts and rivers and highways of young America, each sizable settlement had its printer. The publication he unfailingly produced in the fall of the year was a local almanac" (unpaginated).

almanac promoting funny material as the *primary* reason for purchase. It paired the expected meteorology of the genre with nothing but jokes, anecdotes, and cartoons.[7]

The *ACA* marks the beginning of a popular comic industry in the United States which would emphasize more and more its sale of hilarity over utility or morality. Its success immediately inspired imitators and competitors, such as *Elton's*, *Turner's*, and *Crockett's*. Historian Daniel Wickberg argues that while nineteenth century Americans valued the sense of humor, "they also attempted to carve out a sphere of social life marked 'no joking'."[8] These almanacs, on the other hand, carved out an uproarious, rebellious, giddy sphere of "all joking," and are exactly the plentiful deposits of humor that Rourke describes. Their eye-catching front and back covers, their promotional "Notes to Patrons," and their prescient product placement (they self-referentially advertise themselves within jokes and illustrations across publications) *also* screamed information to the public about the value of laughter. Printers quickly saw the potential profits in marketing pure fun, and began chiming in at the marketplace in order to sell supreme risibility.

Initially, the *ACA* strove to play within early American boundaries of normative good humor, good taste, and morality.[9] Its advertising spoke obsequiously to an

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[7] The inclusion of comic material in an almanac was not entirely innovative; Benjamin Franklin's famous quips and witticisms in *Poor Richard's Almanac* can be seen as predecessors to the abundant comic material found in the *ACA*. Also, a book published in Frankfurt, Kentucky by Lunenburg Abernathy in 1832 presages the popularity of comic almanacs. Entitled *Laughing Anecdotes*, its title page tells readers that its material is "Selected from the last thirty three years' almanacs, from the Funny Companion, Jemmy Twitcher's Jests, The Gridiron, The Post Chaise Companion, and from various other sources."

[8] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 172.

[9] Looking to an earlier, elite comic publication, such as *The World Turned Upside Down, or, the Comical Metamorphoses* (Boston: John Norman, printer, 1794), one can see the hint of a tradition of selling laughter as moral uplift for the whole family. The title page of *The World Turned Upside Down* lauds itself as a "Work entirely calculated to excite Laughter in Grown Persons and promote Morality in the Young ones of both Sexes." Comprising a series of verse poems in which dolls carry children, women are soldiers, fish fly, and birds swim, the book pointedly instructs its readers in what

idealized audience that believed in a necessary balance between seeking pleasure and managing serious pursuits. Consider how modestly the *ACA* presented itself upon the scene with its first issue.[10] The cover of that 1831 *ACA* coyly offers the following rhyme, which introduces the almanac's jocularity to readers: "We every month have something new,/ And mostly deal in what is true:/ Informing all, and cheating few." The comic conundrum of this rhyme rests in its mock-confessional elements. It toys with the superlative language of advertising by daring to temper its claims to truth and honesty. It claims slyly to be "mostly" true, and to cheat only a few readers. If an almanac's viability as a useful document depended upon its truthfulness and accuracy; why would an almanac even joke about containing lies? The *ACA* was in 1831 offering consumers a hybrid product – a pamphlet one part disingenuously comic and one part sincerely informative. The cover-page rhyme, however, establishes the *ACA* as an almanac that offers *useless* comic content as the main reason for purchasing it. Inutility is thus aligned with pleasure, and the idea that pleasure could be the *primary* end in and of itself was foreign to these texts which were born out of practical needs.

Would consumers choose this hybrid? Although the *ACA* cautiously included appeals to moral responsibility, within several years it turned to using persuasive rhetoric that pushed the benefits of consuming the publications.[11] The ads shift from promoting

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deserves laughter (as a form of ridicule): "Never attempt to quit your sphere,/ Nor prompt the world to laughter;/ 'Twill end in ruin while you're here,/ And may perhaps hereafter" (36).

[10] Notably, the same year of the first issue of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*.

[11] You can see the *ACA* negotiating the useless pleasure/useful morality dichotomy in its first few years of publication. The cover of the second issue of the *ACA* in 1832 sports an illustration of a calm domestic scene: an avuncular man in a rocking chair, with a young girl at his knee looking up to him lovingly as he reads from the almanac. The rhyme at the bottom of the page now lilts: "We tell you when the sun will rise,/ Point out fair days and cloudy skies,/ And you'll acknowledge we are wise." The 1832 note to the patron on the inside cover carefully posits that: "The editor acknowledges his obligations to the public, for their liberality and their indulgence in the reception of the first comic almanac. Of the

their moral propriety to promising good health and heartiness to those who laugh; it is at this point that the body, through laughter, becomes more insistently visible. Images and anecdotes began to imagine Americans in the act of literally "consuming" the texts: stabbing them with forks, swallowing pages, setting out feasts of risible/edible texts. The cover for the 1833 *ACA* features an engraving of a very fat man displaying his girth on a platter and inviting the reader to "Sit down and feed and welcome to our table."[12] The enthusiastic note to patrons extends an invitation full of analogies between commercial consumption and eating, digestion and laughter.[13] Such enthusiastic consumption was assumed to produce good health. On the back page of another almanac, a promotional adieu wishes readers "freedom from the 'Cholera' and all other diseases, physical or mental—and as the doctor's recommend cheerfulness and good humor, we will endeavour to keep up your spirits, by appearing next year with entire new matter and illustrations." Ellms's decision to enter laughter into medical discourse as a natural manner of fortifying oneself against disease became a pervasive way of viewing laughter among a great many rising rival comic publications.

Rival publications added their voices to the marketplace, iterating and exaggerating the call to "laugh and grow fat" and, now, that of "laughter as the best medicine." *Elton's Comic All-my-nack* came upon the market in 1834 with significant,

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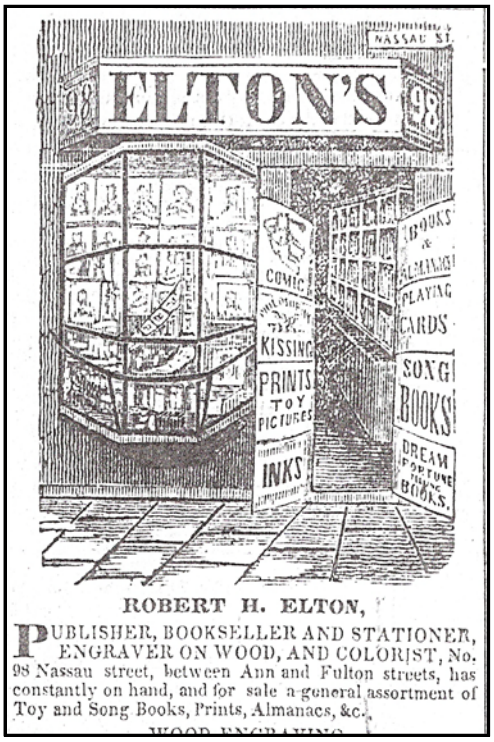
merits of the present one, he leaves them to judge. As nothing of an indelicate nature has been admitted in its pages, it is intended for the ladies as well as the gentlemen."

12 *The American Comic Almanac for 1833* (Boston: Charles Ellms & Willard Felt & Co., 1832).

13 Ibid. The inside cover reads: "Reader! are you an honest good humored jolly laughter-loving fellow? If you are my boy, here's my book for you! […] A mellow story—a gay song—a flash of wit—a facetious detail; a bright thought; an eccentric idea; a vivacious anecdote; and indeed all such risible commodities are with me always in season. Hence, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, have I decked with various comicalities! My publisher has secured the Copy *Right*.—I leave the public to prevent his having a copy *left*."

unexpected success, as it went through at least five printings to keep up with demand.[14] Its publisher Robert H. Elton was skilled in making his products seen, as the window displays, long shelves of print products, and the open door lined with bold-faced ads evince in the ad below. This New York storefront pictured is the same as that discussed earlier in the chapter, without the crowds:[15]



ROBERT H. ELTON,

PUBLISHER, BOOKSELLER AND STATIONER, ENGRAVER ON WOOD, AND COLORIST, No. 98 Nassau street, between Ann and Fulton streets, has constantly on hand, and for sale a general assortment of Toy and Song Books, Prints, Almanacs, &c.

Elton was adept in the use of metaphor, extending the laughing-as-eating metaphor from the *ACA*. Emphasizing its abundance of engravings, *Elton's* cover boasts: "A well set table, containing a sufficient quantum of the usual solids, set off with a most luxurious desert of laughter loving side cracking jokes, droll stories, and comical quiddities."[16]

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[14] The American Antiquarian Society holds the 1st, 4th, and 5th editions. Between these editions one can see that small changes were made between printings, including the addition of engravings and the order of presentation.

[15] An ad for "Robert H. Elton, Publisher, Bookseller and Stationer, Engraver on Wood, and Colorist" from *The New York Arena*, Vol. 1, No. 62, Tuesday, May 24, 1842. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

[16] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1834* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1833), front cover. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Using this language of feast and consumption, *Elton's* enticed consumers, including those who made up the *ACA*'s public.

In addition to employing the trope of gastronomical hedonism, promotions began to allude more frequently to the ambiguous delight of witnessing immorality. One of Elton's contributions to the comic industry included maintaining an association between comic publication and the seedier sides of amusement: pornography, scandal, and sensation.[17] The ad above ran in a "racy" gentleman's newspaper, one to which Elton also contributed engravings. Within the ad, we see the other publications in his shop include cards, books of dream interpretation, and a book on the art of kissing (an amusing text that serves as an excuse to examine women's anatomy). *Elton's Comic All-my-nack*, a mainstay, was rapidly printing new issues with additional grotesque engravings and making sales with its more salacious product. The *ACA* retaliated with a clever game of scandal in the newspaper. In 1834, a Massachusetts newspaper *The Pittsfield Sun*, ran a review of the *ACA* which declared: "A more revolting instance of sheer mal-effort has, perhaps, never been let out to broad public view than is seen in a late publication entitled, 'The American Comic Almanac, 1834'."[18] The lengthy review, importantly, contains all necessary information for anyone who might wish to purchase the almanac after reading the scandalous assessment! It is, in short, a tantalizing advertisement rather than a real, scathing review. The "reviewer" asserts that "it is morally certain that [the *ACA*] will operate injuriously upon those whose principles and tastes are yet in the forming process" and that "uncorrupted youth and childhood… cannot touch it without being contaminated" as it is "a mass of diffusible pollution that will necessarily soil whatever

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[17] One finds Elton's dirty engravings in gentleman's newspapers like *The Wag*.

[18] "Review of The American Comic Almanac for 1834," *The Pittsfield Sun*, February 6, 1834.

comes in contact with it less defiled than itself."[19] The language of plague, of contamination, filth, and corruption found in this "review" colorfully exaggerates real contemporary arguments against selfish amusement and immoderate laughter. However, one recognizes the perversion of the effort, and is reminded of the Duke and the Dauphin drawing up playbills for the "Royal Nonesuch" in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Huck tells us, the biggest font is reserved for the line: "LADIES AND CHILDREN NOT ADMITTED." The *ACA* used this "review" to appeal to people in Massachusetts who enjoyed a little thrill of transgression, perhaps even a bit of moral superiority – but all for the sake of a healthy laugh.

In the *ACA*'s 1835 printing, Ellms cleverly plays both sides, not denying his product's potential immorality, but emphasizing the idea that laughter is *always* good for people, at least physically:

> A Few Words to Our Patrons: The approach of a good bone is not likely to alarm a hungry dog; neither will our jolly readers be so by our timely appearance. If "Laugh and grow Fat" be a questionable maxim, "Laugh and grow Old" is an indisputable one: for so long as we can laugh at all, we shall never die unless it be of laughing. As to performing this operation in one's sleeve, it is a base compromise; no more comparable to the original, than a teeth-displaying simper to that hilarious roar which shakes the wrinkles out of the heart, and frightens Old Time from advancing towards us. There is no wisdom more profound than that which develops itself by our risible faculties. (Inside cover)

This passage depends upon laughter as an utterance to bear the weight of creating value for the almanac, and pleasure itself is bound up in this idea of what laughter does to a human body. The *ACA* promises its readers not only that it will give them pleasurable laughter, but that laughter will ultimately engender success (as "growing fat" implies) *and* promote longevity. The language now leans almost entirely upon the somatic

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[19] Ibid.

benefits of laughter. Laughter is presented as fundamentally natural, and as necessary as eating. The next gesture in the note is to alter “Laugh and grow Fat” to “Laugh and grow Old.” By preferring “Laugh and grow Old,” the editor can posit laughter as an utterance akin to the fountain-of-youth, a cure-all, “for so long as we can laugh at all, we shall never die unless it be of laughing.” It proposes a difference between laughing “in one’s sleeve” and “the hilarious roar,” in which case propriety sets a limit to the somatic benefits of laughter. Here, laughter is an eminently physical event. The body must shake violently in laughter to produce the desired effect of de-wrinkling the heart, of terrifying time personified.

The story of these two major almanac publishers vying against one another, each scrambling to call out more loudly and persuasively in the marketplace, locates the cultural shift from selling laughter as an utterance of moral consequence to the increasingly popular argument that laughter was beneficial to the body. Laughter's relationship with the fate of soul and spirit could be downplayed, or even dismissed. Additionally, a new trend in advertising sparked the imaginations of promoters and pushed publics to correlate laughter directly with amoral bodily function: the exaggerated promotion of panaceas, or patent medicines.

Patent Laughter

In 1832, William Swaim ran a six-page advertisement for Swaim’s Panacea in *The Farmers and Mechanics Almanac*, taking advantage of the wide distribution of the publication to reach a sizeable consumer population. Although patent medicines such as “Widow Read’s Ointment for the Itch” were advertised in early, reputable farmers’

almanacs like Franklin's *Poor Richard's*, it was not until the 1830s that the almanac became the advertising gimmick of choice for patent medicines and panaceas.[20] Medical quacks began to sell their peculiar and expensive concoctions by passing out free almanacs containing lengthy ads with a distinctive, compellingly overblown language of panacea. An ad for the infamous Bristol's Extract of Sarsaparilla (1843) exemplifies the outrageousness of medicinal claims in the promotion of patent medicines:

> Certificates of Cures of most inveterate, long-standing cases of Scrofula, Cancer, Leprosy, Chronic Fever and Ague, the frightful diseases caused by a misuse of Mercury, Dry Gangrene, Prolapsus Uteri, Secondary Syphilis, Cutaneous Affections, Chronic Rheumatism, Liver Complaint, Erysipilus, Ulcers in the Stomach, Chronic Inflamation of the Eyes, Hip Complaint, Lupus, or Noli-me-tangere, Tic Doloreux, Dyspepsia, &c., in many instances of which the patient had been given up by the Faculty, are in possession of the Proprietor, and have been before the Public in his various publications. In all these complaints, and many others not enumerated, Bristol's Sarsaparilla is a safe and certain remedy, and in some of them the ONLY one that can be relied on for a prompt and permanent Cure.[21]

Typically, these claims were paired with exuberant (and generally fake) testimonials as to the medicine's efficacy. Those who were selling laughter noticed how these patent medicines were being sold, with absurd success. Printers of comic almanacs had at their disposal already the language of laughter-as-healthy. With the proliferation of these patent-medicine ads, they found a recognizable, exceedingly pervasive style of

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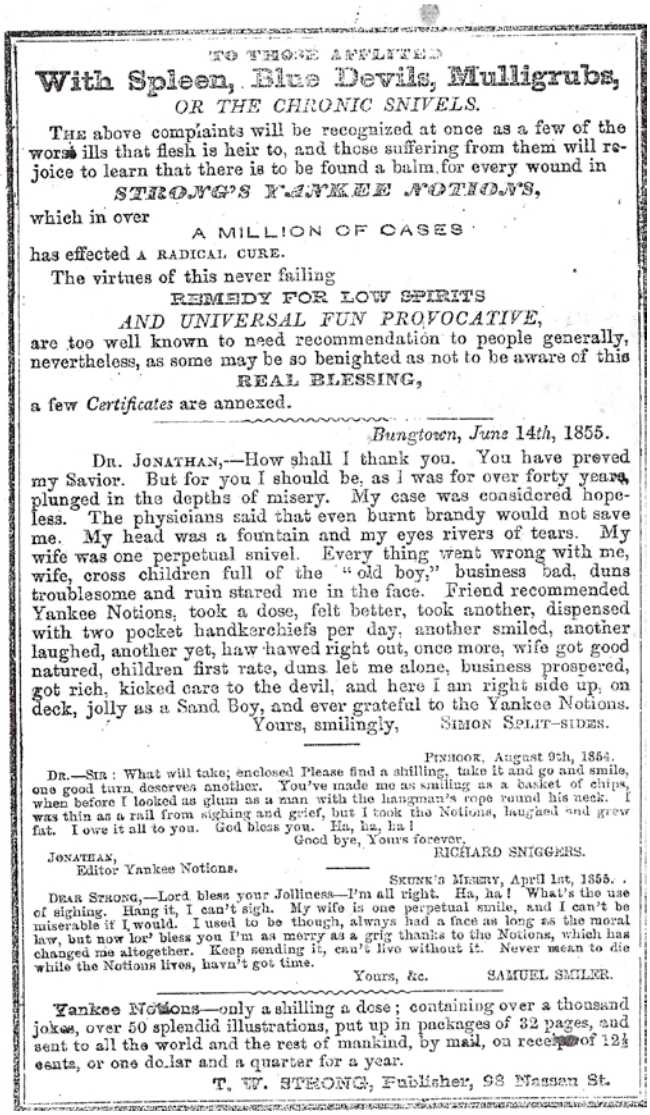
[20] Robb Hansell Sagendorph, *America and Her Almanacs: Wit, Wisdom, Weather, 1639-1970* (Dublin, NH: Yankee, 1970), 254. Sagendorph writes disdainfully of health almanacs, that they "made their first appearance in 1817 and, by the latter part of the 19th century, had increased to millions and millions of copies each year. Their medical advertisements, outlandish health recommendations and lavish, phony endorsements were a far cry from those passages in the farmer's almanacs which dealt with medicine and health[…] There seems to be no evidence – at least none that I can find – of the widespread use or sale of quack patent medicines in this country until at least 1830[…]" (254-255).

[21] *Bristol's Free Almanac for the Year 1843* (Buffalo, NY: Thomas Newell, 1841), unpaginated; from The National Library of Medicine, *Time, Tide, and Tonics: The Patent Medicine Almanac in America*, JPEG http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/almanac/images/bristols1843.jpg (accessed June 8, 2009).

advertising which usefully made the consumer's body, rather than the consumer's soul, the utmost priority.

Promotions of comic materials utilized the language and imagery of panacea to varying degrees, but the parody quickly became an influential commonplace. *Wyman's Almanac* (1856) reproduces the genre of patent magazine advertising perfectly and unabashedly: [22]



TO THOSE AFFLICTED

With Spleen, Blue Devils, Mulligrubs,

OR THE CHRONIC SNIVELS.

THE above complaints will be recognized at once as a few of the worst ills that flesh is heir to, and those suffering from them will rejoice to learn that there is to be found a balm for every wound in

STRONG'S YANKEE NOTIONS,

which in over

A MILLION OF CASES

has effected A RADICAL CURE.

The virtues of this never failing

REMEDY FOR LOW SPIRITS

AND UNIVERSAL FUN PROVOCATIVE,

are too well known to need recommendation to people generally, nevertheless, as some may be so benighted as not to be aware of this

REAL BLESSING,

a few *Certificates* are annexed.

Bungtown, June 14th, 1855.

DR. JONATHAN,—How shall I thank you. You have preved my Savior. But for you I should be, as I was for over forty years, plunged in the depths of misery. My case was considered hopeless. The physicians said that even burnt brandy would not save me. My head was a fountain and my eyes rivers of tears. My wife was one perpetual snivel. Every thing went wrong with me, wife, cross children full of the "old boy," business bad, duns troublesome and ruin stared me in the face. Friend recommended Yankee Notions, took a dose, felt better, took another, dispensed with two pocket handkerchiefs per day, another smiled, another laughed, another yet, haw hawed right out, once more, wife got good natured, children first rate, duns let me alone, business prospered, got rich, kicked care to the devil, and here I am right side up, on deck, jolly as a Sand Boy, and ever grateful to the Yankee Notions.

Yours, smilingly, SIMON SPLIT-SIDES.

PINHOOK, August 9th, 1854.

DR.—SIR: What will take; enclosed Please find a shilling, take it and go and smile, one good turn deserves another. You've made me as smiling as a basket of chips, when before I looked as glum as a man with the hangman's rope round his neck. I was thin as a rail from sighing and grief, but I took the Notions, laughed and grew fat. I owe it all to you. God bless you. Ha, ha, ha!

Good bye, Yours forever.

JONATHAN, Editor Yankee Notions. RICHARD SNIGGERS.

SKUNK'S MISERY, April 1st, 1855.

DEAR STRONG,—Lord bless your Jolliness—I'm all right. Ha, ha! What's the use of sighing. Hang it, I can't sigh. My wife is one perpetual smile, and I can't be miserable if I would. I used to be though, always had a face as long as the moral law, but now lor' bless you I'm as merry as a grig thanks to the Notions, which has changed me altogether. Keep sending it, can't live without it. Never mean to die while the Notions lives, havn't got time.

Yours, &c. SAMUEL SMILER.

Yankee Notions—only a shilling a dose; containing over a thousand jokes, over 50 splendid illustrations, put up in packages of 32 pages, and sent to all the world and the rest of mankind, by mail, on receipt of 12½ cents, or one dollar and a quarter for a year.

T. W. STRONG, Publisher, 98 Nassau St.

[22] *Wyman's Comic Almanac for the Times, 1856* (New York: T. W. Strong, 98 Nassau St., 1855), back cover. Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University.

This advertisement for the joke-book "Yankee Notions" takes up the entire back page of *Wyman*'s. It imitates the lengthy lists of sesquipedalian ailments found in ads for panaceas by essentially cataloguing slang synonyms for melancholy, promising to cure those who complain of the "spleen, blue devils, mulligrubs or the chronic snivels." Ads such as this, with their accompanying testimonies by endorsers such as "Simon Split-sides" and "Richard Sniggers," worked to reinforce – indeed, clinch – associative links between laughter and medicine, laughter as a balm to the body. We can infer from an abundance of comic publications advertising in this manner that there was a significant demand for this happy form of "cure" for the mulligrubs and blue devils. People were heeding the clamor, and choosing to give their sixpence in exchange for salutary laughter. Customers would, remembering the folk wisdom of "laugh and grow fat," consider an investment in laughter much more pleasant than bitter herbal concoctions, or a visit from the doctor.[23] Ellms jokes on the back cover of his 1834 *ACA*:

> Life is surrounded by so many perils, not only by the graver accidents of appetites, diseases, and *doctors*, by war, pestilence and famine […] that it is a perfect marvel, how we contrive to shuffle or glide, slip or wriggle in safety, from the 1st of January to the 31st of December, but so it is! (*Italics mine*)

The jest that doctors are as much a horrifying prospect as war, famine, and *disease itself* rings true considering the heroic medical techniques of the era: blisters, cupping, and bleeding. The slight chance that laughter might cure an ailing body tempted consumers. I argue that because of the popular proliferation of laughter as panacea, this understanding of laughter was accepted – consumed – more readily. Laughter was linguistically conventionalized, therefore, as "bespeaking" good health. Using the

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[23] This preference for this less intrusive form of medicine endures today. Consider the long-running section "Laughter Is the Best Medicine" in *Reader's Digest*, or the contemporary craze for Laughing Yoga.

language of panacea alongside the *ACA* and *Elton's*, there was *Blue Beard's*, *Finn's*, *Fisher's*, *Broad Grins*, *The Ripsnorter* (one of many others published by Elton), and *Turner's*, and Crockett almanacs, to name a few.[24]

Crockett almanacs were the most popular and most widely read of the comic almanacs. Written in eye-dialect and chocked full of puns, this style of humorous publication was easily imitable; even Elton gave the style a shot with *Crockett's Yaller Flower Almanac.*[25] Elton takes advantage of the Crockett's punchy language to renew the language of panacea, and to cross advertise his other comic almanac:

> Oh cricky! What lots of Fun, ki eye! If that 'ere Elton's Comic All-my-nack for '36 aint a screamer, I'm blessed; the way it takes with me is a caution. There now, if you've got the hypo., cut your stick, marvel I say, up to 134 Division street, and the way you'll be cured is no man's business. Just peep at his songs, ballads, jesters, omnibus's caricatures, and for almanacs, there's no end to the assortment, mind I tell ye. [26]

Celebrating rough-and-tumble heartiness, Crockett almanacs linked the idealization of healthy democratic masculinity to bold, gut-shaking, profuse laughter. Indeed, laughter was as much the language of the "common man" as was unorthodox orthography. Tales of Davy Crockett boast that he could "run faster, dive deeper, stay longer under, and come out drier than any other chap this side of the big swamp; and can *grin the bark off a*

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[24] One playfully disgruntled complaint found in the *Christian Recorder* in 1863 describes the prolific printing of the pamphlets at the extreme height of their popularity as an infestation: "The world is afflicted with almanacs. Society and the printers are mad about almanacs. Almanacs infest one's house like paper ghosts." This text was first printed in Dickens' weekly *All the Year Round*. *The Christian Recorder*'s decision to reprint this British blurb testifies to a transatlantic phenomenon of almanac inundation.

[25] See Franklin J. Meine and Harry J. Owens, *The Crockett Almanacks: Nashville Series, 1835-1838* (Chicago, The Caxton Club, 1955). In discussing the popular explosion of comic and Crockett almanacs, they cite S. N. Dickinson, a publisher of almanacs and other popular texts, who wrote in 1844: "About ten years since, the first Comic Almanack that was ever published, was the American Comic. The idea was a novel one, and not more than two seasons had passed before a covetous spirit brought into the field other Comic Almanacks. A few years later and the Crockett Almanack was started, by us, and we thought the idea quite as novel as that of the Comic. But one season passed before Crocket Almanacks sprang up spontaneously, almost, in different parts of the Union" (xvii).

[26] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1841* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1840).

tree—look a panther to death—take a steam boat on his back."[27] The size and duration of the Colonel's laugh relates to just how heroically larger than life he is:

> While I was in Texas, I met my old friend General Jimmy Raymond, the wild best collector for all creation; he wanted about fifty men to go into Mixico, to catch an all tearin she tiger, and her young cubs for his great Zoological Institute. Well, soon as he spoke o' fifty men, I broke out instinctively into a horse laugh fit that lasted nearly an hour. It fairly shook the clothes off my back.[28]

Such manliness does not merely laugh off danger; it "instinctively" ridicules to excess what would otherwise be considered conventional masculine pursuits. Crude, healthy, and audacious, Davy expresses his belief that laughter renders a man authentically masculine and American in these almanacs. In an anecdote called "Real Corn Cracker of Old Kaintuck," one man's laughter confirms the reality of his backwoods origin, and earns him the Colonel's approval. Davy jokes that the man is part alligator and part steamboat, but ultimately approves, saying: "He had a real Horse laugh."[29] In fact, an impressive ability to laugh is enough – according to one Crockett almanac – for a strange man to gain acceptance in Kentucky, over a number of other typically masculine skills:

> We consider a feller a flunk and a sneak if he don't take an eye-opener in the morning and an antifigmatic about nine o'clock. […] If he can't hunt, perhaps he can fight; and if he can't fight perhaps he can scream; and if he can't scream, *perhaps he can grin pretty severe*; and if he can't do that, perhaps he can tell a story.[30]

Laughing is one acceptable way of proving that one isn't a "flunk and a sneak," of evincing one's sincere manliness. The final line suggests that one might either laugh, or tell the kind of story that could make others laugh; the uproarious audience and the

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[27] *Crockett's Yaller Flower Almanac for '36* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1835), 17, (italics mine).
[28] *Crockett's Almanac for 1846* (Baltimore, MD: J. B. Keller, 1845).
[29] Meine and Owens, *The Crockett Almanacs*, 109. This particular example is from the 1837edition.
[30] *The Crockett Almanac for 1841* (Nashville: Ben Harding, publisher, 1840), 12.

humorist are leveled democratically in this description of how to be accepted into male community. After all, the person in question is always assumed to be a “he.”

The Crockett almanacs were concerned overwhelmingly with male experience and masculine culture, and generally presumed a male readership. They contained stories brimming with adventure and violence, as well as humor. Laughter – which these publications caused abundance – was in this figuration the common *man*’s voice, literally. Since a “he” was both the topic and readership, a man's right to laugh became aligned with and metaphorically linked to his right to vote. Hilarity inscribed upon anything other than white male bodies might potentially undermine the reality of universal white male suffrage. Buying laughter in the form of these almanacs was not only a panacea for the body, but a way to avoid effeminacy – for young men to claim with hearty, heroic guffaws their place in a vocal male community.

Administering the Remedy from the Stage

The comic industry also encouraged consumers to celebrate their voices and fortify their bodies through other more public entertainments than print. Laughter was sold as a panacea from the stage as well, and from this imminently physical venue, the divide between who could laugh and who was relegated to being laughed at grew. Look, for example, at the following ad for an 1846 performance by William Valentine (also known as Dr. Valentine) in which the actor dressed up as “an old woman of 80” as well as “Miss Tabitha Tiptongue, the inquisitive old maid”:

[31]

The passage beneath the portraits reads:

> **Dr. VALENTINE**, begs leave to remind the public that there are three muscles to draw the mouth up and only one to draw it down, which signifies that we are to laugh three times as much as we cry. In order to decide on things and matter properly, it is necessary that the internal organs should be maintained in a healthy state of action and this can only be preserved by occasional relaxation from business. Some resort to medicine, to restore this healthy state of mind, but Dr. Valentine does not hesitate to say, that **A HEARTY LAUGH** is the most effective remedy prescribed by nature, and may be relied upon as a complete antidote to the **HORRORS, THE BLUE DEVILS**, and a thousand other evils that the flesh is heir to. Dr. Valentine proposes to administer this remedy on Tuesday, 10….

The ad collapses differences between laughter and medication, audience and patients, as well as performer and physician – in fact, laughter is championed as *better* than patent pills or tonics – as it is a "remedy prescribed by nature" administered by a benevolent (cross-dressing) doctor. The playfulness of the ad is clear, with its charming "muscle" logic concluding that "we are to laugh three times as much as we cry." The choice to advertise this comic impersonation show as if it were a public administration of "a complete antidote" depends entirely on a cultural suspicion that that laughter could be

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[31] "Dr. Valentine" Broadside (United States: s. n., 1846), *American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series 1*, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive (object no. 6688; accessed June 8, 2009). From American Broadsides and Ephemera, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, inc.

key to preserving a “healthy state of mind” and of body. The reference at the end of the passage to the “evils that the flesh is heir to” is delightfully ironic, for it points to physical illness, rather than sin. The body is so much at the center of the system of values found in this ad that the reason for laughter need have no reference to morality, and one detects no scruples in this broadside for ridiculing and mocking stereotypes of elderly women; such ridicule and mockery is salubrious for producing a laughing audience. Laughter transcends moral responsibility in this construction of its value.

A guilt-free construction of laughter in the marketplace was, in this case, a subtle dismissal of the performance’s misogyny. Blackface minstrelsy ads and reviews also employed the “laugh and grow fat” axiom liberally, and, like the Dr. Valentine ad, they put any potential progressive morality in the wings while “healthy laughter” takes center stage. In 1847, a fervently positive reviewer of the Christy Minstrels effused:

> […] we must express our preference for the Christy Minstrels. We do not go to see these gentlemen, no matter what band they belong to, for the expansion of our sentimentalism, but to laugh and grow fat. At Palmo's, we listen and are pleased, but leave with little desire to return. At the Mechanic's Hall, we listen and laugh, and have a desire to go again, and again. And in this feeling, we think the great majority of the people are with us. We have no desire that either company should fail, and if we could, would willingly ensure the success of both.[32]

The reviewer distinguishes between going to the theater to laugh, and going to the theater “for the expansion of our sentimentalism,” highlighting a distinction between pleasure and moral edification. Furthermore, the reviewer frankly confesses that laughter produces “a desire to go again, and again,” contrasting his luke-warm approval of whatever more somber entertainment would have been playing “at Palmo’s.” Eric Lott’s research into minstrelsy confirms that

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[32] Unsigned [William T. Porter], *The Spirit of the Times*, New York: 16 October 1847.

> …assertions of the genuine fun [blackface performances] inspired turn up with some frequency in the commentary on blackface, and they offer compelling evidence of the kind of pleasure minstrelsy afforded – so supremely infectious that it begged to be repeated. While we know a fair amount about the overt ideological meanings produced in blackface acts, their more immediate and embodied effects remain poorly understood, as does the relationship of these pleasurable effects to ideology itself.[33]

What Lott sees as a compulsive drive to repeat "infectious" pleasure, the reviewer constructs as a drive in terms of healthy activity; one returns to laughing just as one would return to eating. Indeed, the preference of comic over sentimental production is constructed as a natural preference. The laughing bodies of the audience, growing hearty through risibility, are the bodies that antebellum audiences place at the foreground. The reviewer uses the axiom "laugh and grow fat" to cleverly elide concern around the cause of the laughter (the blackened white bodies); one need only to laugh for the consumer's body's sake, and not fret over what actually provokes the laughter.[34] Lott writes that "the minstrel show obscured" the relations between the performances and their reliance upon stealing black culture in the framework of the horrific oppression of slavery "by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural."[35] I would add that this additional force was at work, enabling the obfuscation of ethical issues around who could laugh at whom. In 1858, an anonymous music critic wrote of blackface minstrelsy that "It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind, for it made hearts lighter, and merrier, and happier; it smoothed away frowns and wrinkles, and replaced them with smiles. Its effects were visible alike on youth and age."[36] The critic

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[33] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 141.

[34] The distinctly racist pleasure that white American audiences received from blackface minstrelsy is addressed by scholars including Lott and W. T. Lhamon.

[35] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 3.

[36] Unsigned, *Dwight's Journal of Music*, Boston: 3 July 1858.

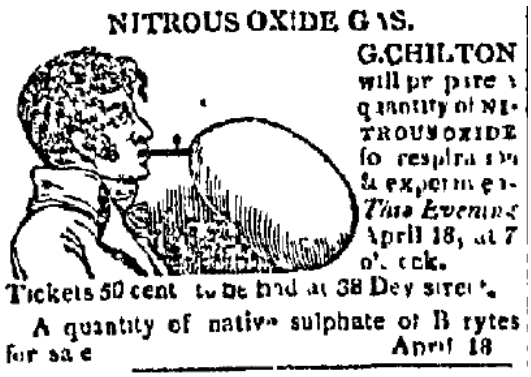
lists positive effects upon a mass of faces in order testify to the inherent virtue of the music as comic even if it is a "species of insanity." The argument for minstrelsy is as much about bettering bodies ("smoothing away frowns and wrinkles") as it is about producing pleasure. Indeed, the same critic complains of "the sickly sentimentality" of some minstrelsy performances, neatly bolstering the dichotomies of laughter/health and sobriety/sickness in the process of praising the minstrel show. The medical discourse which the antebellum marketplace superimposed upon laughter proposes that laughter is *always* good for the body – although presumably a white body – and this proposition enables a comic marketplace in which morality may at least temporarily be forgotten.

GAS-GAS-GAS!

The divorce of laughter from morality in the minds of antebellum consumers was also due in part to another contemporaneous trend: public exhibitions of the effects of "exhilarating gas," also known as "laughing gas," or more scientifically, nitrous oxide. Until the 1830s, early exhibitions advertised themselves in the respectable genre of "Rational Amusements" in which the audience could witness science in action. [37] Below is an ad from an 1809 New York newspaper, petite in size and containing little more than the necessary information for attending the lecture: [38]

[37] "Rational Amusements," *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), June 24, 1820.

[38] "Nitrous Oxide Gas," *American Citizen* (New York, NY), April 17, 1809, *American Historical Newspapers*, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive (SQN: 10A5254D651E3A50, accessed July 7, 2009). From Early American Newspapers, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, inc.


NITROUS OXIDE G \S.
G.CHILTON
will pr pire \
q ntity of NI-
TROUS OXIDE
fo respira \n
& experimen-
This Evening
April 18, at 7
o'. ck.
Tickets 50 cent to be had at 38 Dey stre't.
A quantity of native sulphate of B rytes
for sa e
April 18

Proposed medical uses of "laughing gas" were such things as a safer substitute for alcoholic intoxication, a possible dental anesthetic, or an anesthetic for women during childbirth. Although these public exhibitions were intended to advertise scientific discovery, and promote knowledge of the substance, Ellen Hickey Grayson describes how they were eventually transformed into exceptionally profitable, low-brow freak exhibitions which "proved more successful in mobilizing audiences than even the most highly developed network of ministers and moral reformers."[39] While much of the allure of the shows rested in the politically-intricate freakishness of watching a person slide into an altered, intoxicated state, the potential for witnessing chemically-induced laughter and then joining in the laughter was clearly a significant part of the draw, as we will see from later ads.

Broadsides from the 1830s and on excitedly and tantalizingly describe the effects of nitrous oxide:

> The gas produces great exhilaration, an irresistible propensity to laughter, a rapid flow of vivid ideas, and an unusual fitness for muscular exertion; the taste of the gas is sweet, and its smell peculiar and agreeable; those that have inhaled once generally wish to inhale again. [40]

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[39] Ellen Hickey Grayson, "Social Order and Psychological Disorder: Laughing Gas Demonstrations, 1800-1850" in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 108.

[40] Quoted in Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 172.

Typically, limited numbers of people from the audience were invited to inhale the gas. Therefore, there was always the chance, though perhaps small, that anyone in attendance might enjoy the gas’s artificially-induced laughter. Although later ads for laughing gas shows still frequently made reference to “scientific amusement,” we can see from an 1862 broadside below that the *scientific* was not what advertisers thought to be the primary draw. Rather, the ad appeals to the consumer’s desire for *amusement*, laughter, and spectacle. The promise of laughter for the audience was imperative for producing the appeal of these shows; the large and eye-catching font “laughing gas” (much larger than “nitrous oxide”) is telling: [41]

[41] “Scientific Amusement!” Broadside, *American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series 1,* http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive (object no. 23923*;* accessed June 8, 2009). From American Broadsides and Ephemera, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, inc.

SCIENTIFIC AMUSEMENT !

"Care to our coffin adds a nail no doubt,
While every grin so merrily draws one out."

DR. COLTON,

WILL GIVE THE

2d Exhibition

OF THE

NITROUS OXIDE,

—OR—

LAUGHING

GAS

—AT—

MECHANICS' HALL,

THURSDAY EVENING, JULY 31, 1862.

SIXTY GALLONS OF GAS WILL BE MADE AND ADMINISTERED.

A Strong Railing will be erected around the Stage to prevent those who inhale the Gas from coming in contact with the audience.

Twelve Stout Men will occupy the Stage, to protect those under the influence of the Gas from injuring themselves or others.

The Effect of the Gas is to develope the most prominent traits of character. Some will

Laugh,
Sing,
Dance,
Declaim,
etc., etc.

The Gas will be administered only to gentlemen of the highest respectability. To an intellectual person, the sensations produced by it are delightful beyond all power of language to express.

TWELVE GENTLEMEN

Will inhale the Gas on this occasion, embracing several prominent citizens.

The couplet at the top of this broadside proposes that: “Care to our coffin adds a nail no doubt/ While every grin so merrily draws one out.” This rhyme implies that thinking about somber or sorrowful things contributes to illness, while engaging in the happy act of laughing contributes to health. It is fascinatingly unclear whether the rhyme is positing the health benefits of using the gas, or laughing at someone using the gas; most likely it is both. One can see that the potential impropriety of people (especially of the

"several prominent citizens") under the influence of the gas was likewise a significant part of the appeal of attending these shows. The ad plays up the potential for impropriety and spectacle by emphasizing the amount of security necessary to contain it: a railing separating audience from exhibition, and "twelve stout men" who would attend to the stage – a nineteenth-century version of bouncers.

In "Social Order and Psychological Disorder," Ellen Hickey Grayson argues that the laughter of audience members at laughing gas exhibitions was anything but Bahktinian, anything but subversive. Laughter at the impropriety of those who inhaled the gas and behaved outrageously, she says, "reinforced the parameters of middle-class codes of decorum."[42] However, in this marketplace, laughter is not purely collusive, either, because laughter-as-panacea permits audiences to see laughter as disengaged from morality. The cultural understanding of laughter as a panacea works to diffuse the expectations of decorum, at least partially. While these performances may not be exactly liberatingly carnivalesque (or, indecorous), they should not be quite so positively aligned with bourgeois morality either. It is anachronistic to deny that these spectacles were as much about laughing dosages (both for the people taking the gas, and for the audience members laughing at them), or drawing nails out of coffins, as they were about using laughter to critique aberration from the norm. Antebellum consumers endured a barrage of promotional material telling them that laughter was amoral, medicinal, and panacean. Certainly one implication arising from laughing gas exhibitions – that laughter *may* occur without a risible referent – further muddied how audiences understood the implications of laughing at or about anything.

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[42] Grayson, "Social Order," 117.

An 1835 *ACA* contains a cartoon that picks up how laughing gas exhibitions complicated the significances of laughter. If promotional materials had already established laughter as inherently somatic, healthy, mood-improving, the idea that laughter could be artificially-induced via chemicals fascinated. Embedded in a misogynist stereotyping of women as humorless – and married women as particularly so – a cartoon titled "Prescription for Scolding Wives" plays with the idea that gas-induced laughter could make shrews less shrewish.[43] In the center of the illustration is a man forcing a woman to inhale laughing gas. To the right is a woman looking insipidly content, grinning broadly. Another man stands to the far left with a sack emptied of laughing gas. The caption reads:

> The most valuable discovery of the present day is the making of Laughing Gas, for the cure of scolding women. Let a woman wake in the morning with a disposition like a "cross-cut saw," and who will box your ears till they sing like a tea-kettle, or attempt to "break your head" with a poker, by forcing a little of this gas down her throat she will have a disposition like a turtle-dove all day. Many a poor hen-peck'd fellow who is kept "under the thumb" of his better half, is not aware of this invaluable remedy. We shall give a recipe for making it in the mode of giving it. In the engraving opposite, the lady who sits laughing in the chair, has received her morning dose, while the other lady is receiving hers. That there is danger in giving the gas will be seen by the illustration below, which represents two gentlemen in not a "very enviable" situation. They have got overcome themselves in attempting to overcome their wives with the gas.[44]

The peculiar turn of this passage is in the sentence: "We shall give a recipe for making [this invaluable remedy] in the mode of giving it." Parsing this sentence, we understand that the almanac does not give a recipe; the recipe *is* the cartoon. The rest of the passage

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[43] *The American Comic Almanac for 1835* (Boston: Charles Ellms & Willard Felt & Co., 1834), 42. I have found that the cartoon is a reprint of Robert Seymour's *Living Made Easy: Prescription for Scolding Wives*, colored etching, London, 1830, cited in Grayson, 114. The transnational nature of this cartoon does not inhibit Grayson from using it in her discussion of American laughing gas exhibitions.

[44] Ibid.

is then a description of the cartoon engraving. The cartoon turns in upon itself by then representing a laughing gas dosage gone wrong. The joke is that the men in the cartoon will get their enjoyment no matter, for either the women get the dose and stop scolding, or the men will breathe the botched, escaped dose and be intoxicated into contentment, oblivious to their wives. This certain hilarity is important in emphasizing who has the prioritized right to laugh. The spectators to the show (the most-likely male readers of the cartoon) get to enjoy all the possible humorous outcomes, and get their dose of laughter as well. The almanac and its cartoon elicit laughter, just like gas, by offering a representation that comically reproduces the spectacle of giving laughing gas. In this way, the cartoon claims to be as beneficial as the laughing gas, blurring (or obliterating) the importance of the object of laughter. The cartoon asks of the reader if there is, at all, any difference between laughing due to ridicule, absurdity, or the inhalation of a chemical. The *ACA* appropriates for its purposes the medicinal, mood-altering, and freak-show elements of laughing gas exhibitions in one fell swoop.

As this cartoon and its accompanying passage demonstrate, performances including the inhalation of laughing gas complicated and pathologized nineteenth-century understandings of laughter. One *could* laugh without the aid of comic material. An 1845 ad, in addition to a laughing gas exhibition, even offers "laughing pills" which are made "entirely of risible ingredients":

> MORE FUN. –We are happy to announce that Mr. Norton, the renowned 'Laughing Gas Man,' has returned to town, and that he will give an entertainment, showing the effects of the Nitrous Oxide or Exhilerating Gas when inhaled, this (Thursday) evening, in the unoccupied Store next south of Wightman & Turner's, in Lawrence's New Building.
>
> Since Mr. N.'s absence he has invented a new *medicine*, which he calls 'Laughing Pills,' and sells for 12 ½ cents each, with directions for use. They are composed entirely of risible ingredients, and are perfectly

> innocent, whole families having taken them without the slightest inconvenience, ☞*provided their buttons and laces are not too tight when the fit comes on*!! [45]

These pills, which I take to be as real, are dubbed with italic emphasis as *medicine*. The advertiser assures consumers that they are "perfectly innocent" and healthy for the whole family, but jocosely includes the addendum that they are convenient "*provided [the family's] buttons and laces are not too tight when the fit comes on*!!" This rather singular ad for laughing pills (I have come across no other like it) attests to the cultural currency of a medical approach toward risibility in which laughter could be completely detached from the problems of the public arena, and simultaneously made the public conform to the standards of white male citizenship. The laughing pills could, and are in fact intended to, be pocketed and then taken in the private space of home and family. The phenomenon of laughing gas exhibitions, and even laughing pills, worked to solidify the idea that laughter was a product of the body, and therefore could generally be assumed to serve the purposes of the body, no matter what the root cause of the laughter. This pathology unavoidably complicates laughter's relationship to the realm of morality.

Laughing gas exhibitions (and pills!) might have done companionable work for the cause of temperance, but they simultaneously damaged causes which tried to assert the humanity of stigmatized people by placing their laughter under overtly racialized scrutiny. Although many un-stigmatized figures (white doctors and white male audience members) did allow themselves to become spectacle by taking the stage and inhaling gas during the many years of these shows' popularity, something different happened when race became a part of the show.

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[45] "More Fun," *The Morning News* (New London, CT), April 3, 1845 (emphasis original).

One gets a sense of the merger of laughter and race-spectacle from a newspaper promotion for an 1831 show by James Hewlett, an African-American actor. It promises that this performer of Shakespeare would "sing a number of Songs, and give Imitations of several celebrated performers […] Mr. Hewlitt [sic] will take Exhilarating Gas."[46] In a narrative of Hewlett's career, scholar Shane White hones in upon the actor's decision to incorporate the inhalation of gas into his performance, hypothesizing that it evinces the performer's tragic downfall from respected actor to freak: "My guess is that Hewlett's earlier appearances had not drawn as well as suspected […] and the proprietors of the New York Museum had insisted that, if he were to reappear in their venue, he would need to demean himself in this manner" (172). Hewlett's decision to take gas would have been viewed through a different, and indeed, demeaning lens. Inhalation of the gas was, by this time, touted not only for inducing hilarity, but also beginning to be promoted for its "ability […] to reveal 'true character.'" [47] Those who came to see Hewlett take laughing gas were also probably expecting to see his character revealed. The racial essentialism of the antebellum era, gathering ideological steam alongside the growing abolitionist movement, necessitates that we realize that many audience members were expecting to see the "true nature" not only of *this* black man, but of *the* black man; Hewlett would be considered representative of his race in a state of hilarity. The growing popularity of blackface minstrelsy propagated the stereotype of the "laughing darkey" and served to corroborate the argument for the happiness of Africans and African Americans under the institution of slavery. It is telling that Hewlett's audiences might be less desirous of seeing him perform Shakespeare than of seeing him inhale laughing gas; they were more

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[46] Notice in the *New York Evening Post*, July 12, 1831, as quoted in White, *Stories of Freedom*, 172.
[47] Grayson, "Social Order," 115.

willing to put down their money to see a black man laughing than participating in Western high culture.

The 1830 ad below, which promotes an exhibition of "Three Indian Chiefs" inhaling laughing gas, reinforces the idea that audiences were invested in knowing how the gas exposed the true nature of a race. Unmentioned but certainly well-known cultural stereotypes – that Native Americans were humorless, stern, unflappable – were put to use in designing this spectacle of "witnessing the effect of this Gas upon these *Sons of the Forrest*." The emphasis upon these three men as chiefs points toward the popular notion that a few men could suffice as representatives of the "best" of their race:

> GAS—GAS—GAS.
> AT THE SOUTH STREET HALL.
> (OVER SCOTTI'S SALOON OF FASHION.)
> NITROUS OXIDE GAS.—The Three INDIAN CHIEFS will on FRIDAY EVINING, January 22d, inhale this Exhilarating Gas, by which the scientific, curious, and the public generally may have an opportunity of witnessing the effect of this Gas upon these Sons of the Forest. To persons who are not acquainted with the effect of the gas we would just say that when inhaled it produces the highest excitement the animal frame seems capable of undergoing.
>
> The Gas will be prepared and administered by a practical Chymist [sic], and all necessary precaution taken to prevent the persons to whom it may be administered from interrupting the visiters [sic], so that ladies and gentleman will have nothing to apprehend on that account. The Indian, before taking the Gas, will go through the peculiar customs of their nation, both in War & Peace.
>
> N.B. Any person so disposed can take the gas after the Indians. Performance to commence at half past 7 o'clock. Admission 25 cents, tickets to be had at the door. [48]

Note that the ad addresses the potential audience as having three possible characteristics that would draw them to the show: "the scientific, curious, and the public generally." The show is marketed as simultaneously scientific and strange, informative and freakish.

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[48] "Gas-Gas-Gas," *The Baltimore Patriot*, January 22, 1830.

In the second-to-last paragraph, the ad offers the audience the chance to witness, before the gas spectacle, “the peculiar customs of [the Indians’] nation, both in War & Peace.” In exploiting laughter, stereotypes, and otherness, antebellum comic promotion such as this shows that the work of selling laughter to consumers was very often the work bolstering prejudices, as well as eliding moral anxieties. A performance of James Hewlett or “Three Indian Chiefs” inhaling gas addressed stereotypes head-on, allowing for a white audience to test their cultural hypotheses and be certain of confirmation. However, in the midst of a market-culture that disclaimed the relevance of the cause of spectator-laughter, claiming instead that it is purely healthy to laugh, we can see how the comic industry encouraged consumers to rationalize and reduce the moral implications of their enjoyment.

On the other hand, even while the comic industry celebrated white male rights through white male laughter, representations of *who* would benefit and grow fat from shaking their sides in merriment was not monolithic. The comic industry addressed a more diverse population than idealized genteel audiences and white men. The shift from affirming the morality of the consumer to affecting the consumer’s body enabled a new entrance for the comic industry to attend to the question of who had the right to laugh, to be heard.

Growing into the Right to Laugh

The question of who had the right to laugh was tied to the question of *when* and *whether* members of the American public would be able to bear democratic responsibility. The comic industry promoted laughter as a panacea-like utterance which

renders people healthy, happy, and better able mentally and physically to bear the responsibility of democracy. For white male readers and audiences, laughter was both a way of confirming their right to be enfranchised (in laughing at those who were not), and also by maintaining body and mind for the republican ideal. However, under the same assumptions about laughter, the utterance had progressive potential for disenfranchised groups, too. Humorous publication and its promotion became a forum for playful consideration of antebellum anxieties over citizenship and human rights through its overt examinations of who had the right to laugh – as well as when, and how. Debates about children's laughter mirrored debates about whether white women and non-white adults deserved full citizenship.

The comic materials I have been examining in this chapter emerged coevally with shifts in American beliefs about childhood as a formative stage. Childhood historian Steven Mintz explains that during the antebellum era, religious liberals began to embrace “the Romantic emphasis on children’s innocence and promise” while orthodox Calvinists and evangelicals continued to “stress the importance of breaking a child’s sinful will and instilling respect for divinely instituted authority.”[49] Across the spectrum of beliefs about children’s inherent nature, however, there was a common belief that responsible parenting was necessary for eventually preparing children for their adult roles in the American democracy. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues, one sees “in the rearing of each and every child the processes of social formation are reproduced in miniature.”[50] She specifies that the insistence upon children’s dependency upon parents until they are ready

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[49] Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Boston, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004), 81.

[50] Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago; London: The Chicago University Press, 2005), 186.

for both adulthood and the empowerment of citizenship informed all discussions of "both personal agency and of national or institutional relationships."[51] Leslie Ginsberg has explained that beliefs about children's dependency provided a metaphorical framework for the justification of slavery, which was "predicated on an increasingly literal analogy between the peculiar institution and the more familiar pattern of subordinations upon which the antebellum family was built."[52] Ginsberg cites several defenders of slavery who use precisely this analogy, such as William Drayton, who wrote in the 1836 publication *The South Vindicated* that "the negro is a child in his nature, and the white man is to him as a father." Ginsberg also cites the infamous social theorist George Fitzhugh whose pro-slavery argument ran: "We do not set women and children free because they are not capable of taking care of themselves" and "If the children were remitted to all the rights of person and property which men enjoy, all can perceive how soon ruin and penury would overtake them. But half of mankind are but grown-up children, and liberty is as fatal to them as it would be to children."[53]

These paternalist metaphors of social dependency are reflected in the comic industry's advertisements for their products. In this cartoon from *Turner's Comic Almanac for 1843*, the host who is pictured in the center is

> determined to surprise and cure a few of his dyspeptic friends with a jaw shaker, and therefore invited them to dine with him on a particular afternoon, assuring them that he would present for their palates such a novel dish that would not only serve to make the dullest epicure's mouth water, but would shake from their bodies all traces of disease, debility, and blue devils.

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51 Ibid., xiv.

52 Leslie Ginsberg, "Of Babies, Beasts, and Bondage: Slavery and the Question of Citizenship in Antebellum American Children's Literature," in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 90.

53 As quoted in Ginsberg, "Babies, Beasts, and Bondage," ibid.

His young daughter, his maid, and his servant Cuffee are all in on the joke. As you can see, the feast to be revealed to the guests is a feast not of food, but of laughter. After much anticipation of a "fattening" meal, the host reveals to his guests a copy of the most recent comic almanac. The happy effect is captured in the accompanying cartoon below:[54]

Within the cartoon, we see the idealization of the power of paternalist laughter to create the perfect antebellum world in microcosm. The hearty gentleman gathers his smilingly collusive household around him. He holds the center, directing the laughter, therein raising healthy children, and maintaining amiable maids, contented servant/slaves, and welcome guests.[55] One guest is cured instantly, and laughs uproariously; the other

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[54] *Turner's Comic Almanac for 1844* (New York: Turner and Fisher, 1843). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

[55] Within the anecdote, the woman in the image is explained to be a maid. Interestingly, then, this household does not appear to include a wife/mother, at least in this idealized snapshot. Perhaps the

appears to be willing at least to "taste" the hilarious delicacy. The host guides all in how to laugh properly *with* him and they are healthier and happier for his benevolent, good-humored fatherliness.

However, this vision was not the only one promulgated by antebellum humorous publications. After all, the comic industry was just that – an industry. Publishers and promoters were motivated to promote inclusiveness for the sake of money. In the free North (where most of this material was printed), a larger, diverse public equaled the possibility of a larger revenue. Therefore it was potentially beneficial to imagine individually-motivated consumers other than white men. Consider this promotional passage in which Turner's confronts the public very inclusively:

> Be it known throughout the twenty-six sovereign states, and the three territories of Uncle Sam, and to all the men, women, and little boys and little gals thereof, and to others who desire to laugh, love and grow fat, that this year will be distributed for the benefit of So-sigh-e-ty, the digestive organs, and the risible muscles, the titter-i-cal, crack-your-side-i-cal, stretch your face-i-cal Comic Almanac of the said Turner and Fisher, known as professors of comic philosophy and laughing salvation. Therefore, come ye forth and laugh, one and all, and the lord save your sides.[56]

The advertisement asks not only men, but women, children, and "others" to "come ye forth and laugh." Crossing "So-sigh-e-ty's" boundaries of gender and age, this ad's reference to "others who desire" *suggests* racial inclusion and, indeed, international inclusion – people not living within Uncle Sam's empire – in the prospect of "laughing salvation." This capitalist attempt to reach out to all comers imagines the possibility of not just an expanded national market, but an expansion of the right to laugh beyond those who would have been generally considered "proper" consumers, or legally considered

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cartoon comments upon gender expectations in regard to class by rendering the wife/mother absent from the scene of hilarity.

[56] "Proclamation X-traordinary" to *Turner's Comic Almanac for 1844* (Boston: Turner and Fisher, 1843).

citizens. Rather than a paternalist vision of a white man gathering a dependent community around him, we have here people of all genders, ages, races, and nations choosing for themselves a "comic philosophy" as a form of empowered self-improvement. This ad lacks any discussion of dependency; in its place, we are carried along by an inferred confidence that all people may, by their own efforts – *and purchases* – achieve health and happiness in society.

Consider also, these two ads. First, is the back cover of *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1839,* an ad for the upcoming year's publication: [57]

[57] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1839* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1838), back cover. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The engraving depicts a crowd swarming around the printer's storefront in New York. At first glance, one sees an impressive mass of people around the doors of Elton's store, with many figures holding copies of the 1840 almanac and laughing. Most members of the crowd are white men, and one's eye is drawn to the large man in the white coat standing front and center. Looking more closely, however, one notices two unusual figures. In the front right is a middle-aged, bonneted white woman, smiling down on her copy of the almanac. To the left periphery is a well-dressed black man looking up to the sign above the store front. These two figures are marginalized within the image – a formal parallel to their status as citizens within the antebellum nation.[58] However, even though she is pushed to the far right, the woman *has* her copy while the black man looks up to the sign with a curiously somber face. It is quite likely a look of desire, the desire to participate in the fun.

Compare that image of desire to this engraving, from the back cover of *Turner's Comic Almanac for 1844*:[59]

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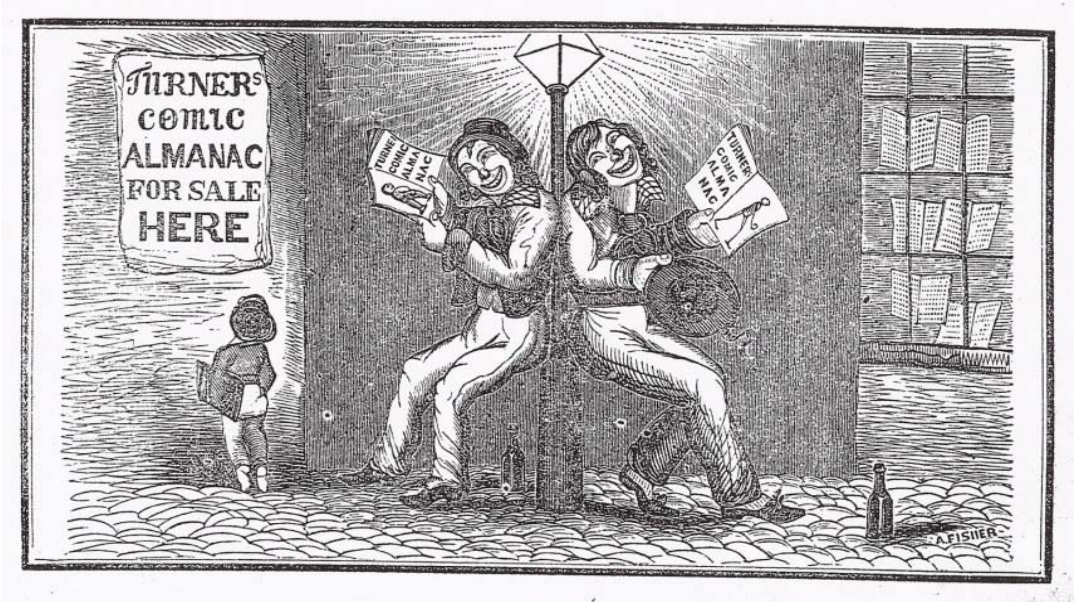
[58] In his social history *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), Albert Boime employs his knowledge of "visual encoding of hierarchy and exclusion" to show how "prejudices, fears, hopes, and every type of moral assumption are channeled through images that serve as instruments of persuasion and control" (15, 1). Boime avers that visual structures can be used to parallel, reproduce, and bolster the social structures that inform them. Although I use Boime's argument in reading images which were part of the effort of selling laughter, extending the idea of placement hierarchy to attend to hierarchies of embodiment, I also argue that commercial images and texts were not merely tools of ideological support and reproduction, but also of interrogation.

[59] *Turner's Comic Almanac for 1842* (Boston: Turner and Fisher, Boston, 1841), back cover. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



Here we see in the center of the frame two young men leaning against a lamp-post, heartily enjoying their copies of Turner’s almanac. Their faces both resemble the mask of comedy – there is no tragic mask in this scene.[60] However, judging from the bottles in close proximity to each of them, they were also enjoying being, in the language of the era, “uncommon drunk.” Slightly off to the side we see a small school boy, on his toes, looking up at a poster informing the public that “Turner’s Comic Almanac Is For Sale Here.” The child is holding under his arm a different text, probably a reader for school – but judging from his eager, tippy-toed gaze upon the sign, we can assume that he is more interested in the comic almanac. For the likely reader of Turner’s publications – young working-class men – seeing a child within this frame reminds them of their progress toward social and political freedoms which they now may fully enjoy, among them: consuming, larking, drinking, and voting.

[60] Thanks to Barbara Ladd for pointing out the resemblance of the men's faces to the masks of tragedy and comedy.

In each of these ads are depictions of longing from the margins. Both the black man and the white schoolboy are contrasted with white adults who *do* have access to the comic marketplace. Both are gazing intently at the promise of laughter while white adults are already in the throes of hilarity and serve, in part, to remind those who do have rights to enjoy them. But there is also in each image a sense of waiting for one's turn in these particular ads, a sense that at a future date these figures *will* attain their right to laugh.

The child – the soon-to-be adult, the potential citizen – becomes a figure that both plays with and cements the association between the right to laugh and the rights of full citizenship. The comic industry was aware that the adult public was hesitant to give children access, too early, to funny materials. The ad with the two drunken revelers and the small child even seems to be playing with the idea that laughter could be a path toward degeneration. Publishers of humorous fare were clearly aware of the debate going on in American households and in religious circles about how children should behave, how they should play, when they should laugh. Debates about the propriety of children's laughter were in sermons, medical pamphlets, and parenting texts. In 1838, Dr. William A. Alcott's guide *The Young Mother, or Management of Children in Regard to Health* included an entire chapter on children's laughter. Alcott argues for both the medical and moral benefits of youthful hilarity, saying:

> Laughing, like crying, has a good effect on the infantile lungs; nor is it less salutary in other respects. 'Laugh and be fat,' an old adage, has its meaning, and also its philosophy… It is strange that it should be so, but I have seen many parents who were miserable because their children were sportive and joyful. Oh, when the days of monkish sadness and austerity

> be over; and the public sentiment in the Christian world get right on the subject![61]

Turner’s Comick Almanack for1839 takes up the same argument in a promotional anecdote. A responsible mother confronts her children who are screaming with laughter:

> ‘Children, what are you laughing at?’ said a mother to her youngsters, who were rising greatness itself,--as they sat shaking their fat sides. ‘Nothing,’ roared the young ‘uns. ‘Nothing,’ exclaimed she, ‘Children, my dears, I did not think you were so foolish as to laugh at nothing.’ ‘Well then, Mother, we’ve got TURNER’S COMICK ALMANACK, and it’s so FUNNY, we couldn’t help laughing, no how.’ So the youngsters laughed on, till the whole universe became convulsed in one continual roar!!![62]

This passage nods to the fact that children are not ideal consumers, but that laughter is *preparing* them to be both ideal consumers and ideal citizens – they are “rising greatness,” after all. While figured as having to answer to higher authority of their mother right now, they are also blossoming, “rising” citizens, with their “fat sides” and their young voices hyperbolically come to dominate the universe. The mother, satisfied that her children aren’t fools, permits them to continue their perusal of the almanac so that they may rise to greatness.

When African Americans are imagined to have these laughable texts in their hands, may they rise to greatness as well? Like children’s hilarity, black laughter inspired control and even censure. Saidiya V. Hartman lays out the ways in which slave owners brutally enforced merriment, particularly in the slave pen and auction block, which was “a conspiracy of appearances, acts to repudiate the claims of pain, compulsory

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61 William A. Alcott, *The Young Mother, or Management of Children in Regard to Health* (Boston: George W. Light, 1 Cornhill, 1838), 262-263.

62 *Turner's Comick Almanack for 1839* (New York: Turner & Fisher, 1838), unpaginated.

displays of good cheer."[63] Without a white authority overseeing these performances of good humor, however, black laughter was often a threatening utterance to anxious white listeners. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, William Lloyd Garrison's account in the *Liberator* of Frederick Douglass walking in New York down Broadway in the company of two white women reveals that un-coerced black laughter clearly signaled much more than merely finding something funny to those white men who heard it. They heard it as an utterance of empowerment; like the children in the anecdote above, Douglass was vocalizing the possibility of his rising to greatness, of expanding his dominion. Douglass is viewed as an "impudent scamp" because of his public "laughing and sneering" in the presence of white men and women calls attention to his racialized body, and its clear ability to emit "the voice of the common man" in the metaphorical form of hilarity. The fantasy of a white onlooker being able to thwart his right to laugh parallels the fantasy of preventing African Americans the rights of citizenship. It is a fantasy of violent dominance, in which laughter signals an uprising that needs to be suppressed.

Women in the Margins and in the Foreground, as Foils and Participants

This frontispiece to a compilation of jokes and anecdotes called *The Humorist's Own* from 1833 is captioned "The Capital Joke." Four men, young and gentlemanly, are in the throes of laughter while a young woman, mostly obscured, looks on with an appearance of complete composure. Her hands are clasped affectionately on the shoulder of one of the men, and her face could be

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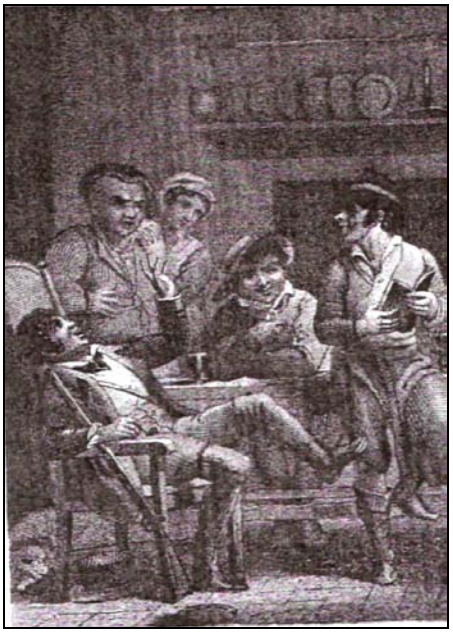
[63] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39-40.

read as satisfied. While her presence in this image is peripheral, it does the work of demonstrating the propriety of the book: [64]



She looks on like a sentinel of morality, and the inclusion of her presumably sensitive tastes affirms that although the men are grimacing and (as is the case of the seated man) in the act of knee-slapping, the content of the joke is not inappropriate. The joke is "capital" because it can cause hilarity among the men under her un-offended gaze.

The Humorist's Own is a bound book, neatly printed on much finer paper than the almanacs. Its physical existence suggests that it was in the hands of a more affluent public, and its contribution to the discussion of where women belong as citizens is clearly patriarchal; women are the private check to men's public behavior. The picture envisions a world in which women's voices are not heard, particularly raised in raucous laughter, but rather, their quiet moral approval is valued. On the cheap pages of almanacs, however, women rarely figured into the picture so demurely. The cover of the

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[64] *The Humorist's Own*, (Philadelphia: Key & Biddle, 1833), frontispiece. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

1835 *Elton's* uses a woman as a negative proof to the literal interpretation of the axiom "Laugh and Grow Fat":[65]

A blithe, robust-looking fellow peruses the almanac as he sits beside a pathetic, gaunt-looking woman reading *On Dyspepsy*.[66] He cordially drinks cordials; she frowns down upon bitters and seltzer. The man who has "consumed" humor is stout, and the woman who ruminates upon dyspepsia looks as if she has long suffered the digestive illness. Her hair – or her bonnet, perhaps – has come to resemble a head of cabbage. (Cabbage was a vegetable used in home remedies for peptic ulcers.) In this cartoon, the woman serves as a physical contrast to the fat male consumer, a lesser collaborator in the masculine promotion of laughter. Her body is differentiated from the man's body not merely by gender, but by her haggard frame, which within the promotional scheme signifies that this woman is ill-humored, unhealthy, and unnatural. Similar in representation is an engraving in the 1847 *Elton's* that accompanies the story of a character named Grinnibus. The cartoon collaborates with the text to position a laughing temperament as a masculine

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[65] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1835* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1834), cover page. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

[66] The *ACA for 1835* also contains this engraving in its pages, titling it pointedly "Here I and Sorrow Sit." The publishers of these comic almanacs were quick to borrow, steal, and alter each others' materials.

virtue. Grinnibus, born a "jovial soul" because his mother read *Elton's*, laughs whether on the playground or in the church. Aware that his uncontrollable hilarity in the latter was problematic, he sought ways to control his own giddiness with little success. He at last

> …married the ugliest Old Maid in the town, after trying every other remedy, but it wouldn't do, the more he looked at her the more he roared out, until the old critter got her dander up and put him out of the world by a short cut, she didn't try arsnic [sic], not she, she was too wise for that, no she went to Old Comic ELTON, got the proof sheets of his last Almanack [sic], and give the whole thirty-six pages at one dose, it did the job, his last grin shook the house and he made his exit in a grand roar! (unpaginated)

The faces of the Old Maid (made wife) and Grinnibus are, in the center of the cartoon below, similar to the masks of tragedy and comedy in their tremendous size and exaggerated features:[67]

Accordingly, her frame is slight while his is ample. Her intolerance of his laughter – perhaps rightful, as it is not only excessive, irreverent, and at this moment, directed at her in ridicule – shows that she does not appreciate his good humor. The fact that she uses a "full dose" of a comic almanac to murder her husband reveals that she presumably understands the beneficial (or, potentially lethal) somatic effects of laughter that one

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[67] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1847*, (New York: R. H. Elton, 1846), unpaginated. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

might receive from consuming the publication. The representation of her body is clearly meant to show that she herself rarely enjoys a good laugh, though she knows where to find one.

This sort of inclusion of a female figure in this illustrated commercial anecdote does bring up the question of whether she – or any woman – would naturally ever be a hearty, healthy, laughing citizen. However, as often as the image of an emaciated and, by extension, naturally ill-humored woman appears in humorous advertisement, women are as frequently imagined as eager and even welcome participants in exuberant comic consumption. The cover of *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1836* even foregrounds a woman’s grin:[68]

In this woodcut, *Elton’s* includes two women among four men. At the bottom of the frame is a young woman (in her collar we can see Elton’s signature), and at the top right, a bonneted woman. Neither are unflattering visages. There are more men than women in the frame, and a man is the focal center, but the women are considerably prominent,

[68] *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1836* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1835), cover illustration. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

publicly engaged in the act of laughing in the company of men. The image suggests no significant difference between these happy consumers. Rather than call them marginalized, I would consider the faces of these laughing women as something of a “punctum” according to Roland Barthes. The one woman’s atypical placement, so primary, at the front of a crowd of men, consuming as they consume, attracts the individual viewer with curiosity as to how she got there. Why would *Elton’s* imagine her there – does her laughing voice count as much as a man's? She is an “accident which pricks” the imagination, but the ad itself offers no concrete answer beyond suggesting that women might laugh for reasons which are more like men’s than not.[69]

The Slippery Business of Sales

Advertisements for antebellum humorous publications are a slippery business because, in the end, analyses are always potentially leaning on a joke, and jokes are bottomless. One oscillates between collusive and subversive interpretations when confronted by ads such as the following, titled “A Side Archer,” which transcribes a conversation between a doctor and his patient, who has been cured by reading an almanac:

> Ha, ha, ha, Doctor, sich a rich one, I shall laugh out my bill-ous liver, and be a laughing liver, by sich lights. Dr. Ha, ha, ha, this is enough to make a horse laugh his collar off on a dying man, grin death and consumption out of countenance. I think I’ll buy a few thousand and send ‘em south to fatten the negroes; I’ll send some Down East and elsewhere to drive off the millennium tremens and stop the ending of the world.[70]

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[69] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27. Barthes is interested in the gap between photography as a truthful depiction of reality and its inherent subjective reception… but the idea of the “punctum” as something which calls attention to the existence of a subjective viewer works, I think, even for this stylized woodcut.

[70] *Turner's Comick Almanack for 1845* (Boston: Turner and Fisher, 1844), unpaginated.

On the one hand, the ad falls within the realm of coerced merriment, which ultimately benefits slave owners, as the ad proposes an investment in comic publications as a way of "investing" in slave labor, treating people like animals to be fattened. On the other hand, there is something subversive about the suggestion of sending literature – written text – to people living within an institution which prohibited them literacy. Rather than forced performances, almanacs in the hands of slaves would not only produce genuine laughter, and the equal possibility of mental and physical improvement, but they would have access to texts and all the useful, powerful information held in an almanac alongside the jokes. But, of course, a reader might dismiss this potential subversion, laughing off the possibility of slave literacy as a joke. Do these advertisements embrace democracy, mock it, or simply play with it along the lines of race, gender, and age?

The antebellum comic marketplace was an arena in which people, as consumers, readers, and audiences, were laughing their way through debates about citizenship and human rights in the nation. Much of the material examined in this chapter suggests that the dominant culture patronized publishers and performers that told them that their laughter was merely salubrious, and that causes of their hilarity were of no moral significance. At the same time, the laughter of already-marginalized subjects was often interpreted as bespeaking their “natural” weaknesses – weaknesses that justified their oppression and disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, interrogation and even subversion of these insidious views of laughter were also present in the comic marketplace. While wondering whether or not these ads are promoting the expansion of the right to laugh and the rights of citizenship, readers *did* find themselves envisioning social scenes that were not always consistent with the antebellum *status quo*.

Chapter 2: Resuscitating Reformists

The United States of the 1830s, 40s and 50s could be said to have been in something of a capitalist comic riot. Comic almanacs, newspapers, and magazines filled the shelves of print shops; bold-font broadsides advertised impersonators, comic lecturers, and blackface minstrel shows. However, the insistent and increasingly amoral cries of "Laugh and Be Fat" by humor-mongers ringing through the antebellum marketplace were accompanied by the equally insistent voices of reformists seeking change. One would think of reformists and proponents of the comic industry as being part of two different worlds, but the reality was that they were confronting the same cultural environment, and also offering their publications and performances to overlapping publics. What Ronald Walters calls "an incredible proliferation of reforms in the pre-Civil War years" – a proliferation which included anti-slavery, women's rights, temperance, prison and asylum reform, and many other causes – grew up and thrived alongside the comic industry.[1] Here, too, was a commotion – a reformist riot. Social and economic conditions gave birth to these twins; both reformists and humor-mongers took advantage of cheaper publishing, easier transport, the comfortable ruts of lecture circuits, and – of course – a dynamic socio-political atmosphere full of things to either laugh at or work to change. Indeed, reform and humor grew up together often quite *literally* side-by-side, with neighboring print shops and sale offices, shared distributors, and sometimes even the same printed material.[2] Editors of both comic and reform almanacs often used

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1 Ronald Walters, "Preface" to *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), xi. In his preface, Walters describes the variety of reform causes that arose during the era, but emphasizes that most reformists espoused many causes. If one was anti-slavery, one might also promote temperance and education reform, etc.

2 For example, Elton's advertises his wares for sale at 98 Nassau Street in New York, while the Anti-Slavery Society sold theirs from 143 Nassau.

the same meteorological charts, and on occasion, one can find "borrowed" quips, rhymes, and words of wisdom between the two kinds of publications. Consumers, then, would choose which sort of material – comic, reformist, or otherwise – they preferred to encase their calendars, weather predictions, and news.

Reformists reacted to the ambiguities of the comic industry with their own ambiguous views on laughter. To many reformists and other serious-minded American citizens, laughter could therefore be bracketed as trivial at best, and morally distracting or degenerate at worst. Comic materials were often considered morally suspect, and laughter was often represented in terms of moral illness. Not surprisingly, these differences of opinion about laughter show up in advertisements like the following, which also exhibits traces of commercial sibling rivalry:

> We caution our readers, who want new Almanacs, not to pay their sixpences for useless trash under the name of *Comic Almanacs*, or any similar collection of nonsense, while the Anti-Slavery Almanac may be obtained for the same price, at the Anti-Slavery Office, 143 Nassau street.[3]

This brief 1839 ad for the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac* (the *AASA*) directly acknowledges competition between itself and comic almanacs, and frankly addresses the financial stakes. Money, however, was not the only reason that reformers were anxious about the comic industry. Frustration with exuberant language promoting and celebrating laughter – a language that is glib, light, and frequently dismissive of the sobering aspects of life – also leads the promoters of the *AASA* to encourage consumers to spend for a cause. The sincere and succinct advertisement is cast as a benevolent warning, a "caution," against wasting one's money on "useless trash" and "nonsense." The ad brings a different set of values to the table in its assessment of material which elicits

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[3] *The Colored American* (New York, NY), January 12, 1839, (emphasis original).

laughter. This explicit confrontation between abolitionism and the comic industry is as commercial as it is ideological.[4] Reform movements and the comic industry were vying against each other for attention and patronage, and the debate over what laughter did to/for consumers was important as to whether money flowed toward comic entertainment or moral uplift.

Reformists could declare the comic industry a "waste of time." The laughing retort was often, then: "Where's your sense of humor?" Yet another reason that reformers were anxious about the comic industry's hilarity was that it was, at times, specifically directed at them for being too serious. As we have seen in the previous chapter, a favorite gag of antebellum comic publications was playing pranks on humorless types. In comic promotional materials, sour, wrinkled, emaciated caricatures served to contrast the contented, glowing, plump consumers of humorous products, and were targeted for salvation through laughter, as shown in the cartoon, discussed earlier in this dissertation, of a patriarch hosting a feast.[5] The cartoon shows the end of a prank in which a gentleman invites two dyspeptic and cranky acquaintances to his home for a "feast" of good humor. The accompanying anecdote makes much of the unhealthy state of these guests, describing them both as having "longing eyes over a pair of vinegar faces such as always accompany the foe to fun and laughter, for they are the consequent and

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[4] The *AASA* was published out of Boston by Isaac Knapp, its publication overlapping with that of the Boston-born *American Comic Almanac* for several years of printing. The *ACA* was published from 1831 to 1838. The *AASA* ran from 1836 to 1841. For the most part, however, advertising for the *AASA* maintained the rightness and righteousness of the publication's cause, and did not often see a need to confront the ideology of comic publications. In its first issue, Nathaniel Southard writes in the preface that: "As a reason for issuing a new Almanac for 1836, I would merely call your attention to the fact that SLAVERY exists in the United States. While it continues, I shall deem it an imperative duty to lift up my voice in the behalf of the master and the slave." Moral immediacy persuades readers to offer their attention and financial support to the abolitionist cause. The language relies upon the value of efficiency and work ethic to convey this urgency: time has been lost and wasted as the job has not yet been completed; labor, as well as "redoubled zeal and industry," are necessary.

[5] See page 55 of this dissertation for this cartoon.

the certain victims of the blue devils and dyspepsia.”[6] One is teasingly called “Mr. Tapeworm,” because he is “of the tape worm turn, who's stomach had gnawed away all conscience, and nearly half of his bone covering, and who was never know to smile except when his hungry fancy caught him asleep, and coaxed a grin from him in a twelve hour dream of good eating.”[7] The rest of the good-humored household can hardly contain their hilarity as they consider the ridiculous men before them, “looking as sour as a snatched up snapping turtle.”[8] The energetic and enthusiastic laughter which ensues serves both to celebrate the risibility of Turner's almanac and to ridicule those who deny “the spirit of risibility.” Notably, there is little room in this formulation for being serious. The advertising message in this cartoon (and the many like it) is simple: Laugh and be fat; otherwise, be laughed at. From this point of view, one might ask what reforms were necessary beyond assuring that everyone got the joke.

The Question of Cures

The idealization of laughter as a cure-all was so potent coming from the comic industry that it was pervasive on the broader mass market. It is not surprising that authors writing fiction, poetry or essays – though publishing in more elite venues – incorporated knowledge of laughter culled from the pages of popular materials.[9] Laughter-as-panacea certainly had more currency with the American population than did the high-brow theories of Aristotle, Hobbes, or even Lord Chesterfield. With depictions

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6 *Turner’s Comic Almanac for 1844* (New York: Turner and Fisher, 1843), unpaginated.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Stubb in *Moby-Dick*, for example, laughs at everything, and in doing so believes he is protecting himself from bad moods and physical illness. Another later example arises with William Dean Howell's title character, Silas Lapham (whose surname clearly suggests laughter), as a type who is able to endure life's ups and downs with good humor.

of laughter as the great somatic, psychological, and cultural panacea available to "all," antebellum Americans could look around themselves at temperance societies, prison and asylum rehabilitators, women's rights activists, and abolitionists and ask: If laughter itself was the sweeping cure, then what was the purpose of this solemn work of reform?

Henry David Thoreau engages this question in his "Visitors" chapter of *Walden*, when he reflects upon the personality of an amiable Canadian woodchopper who "was so quiet and solitary, and so happy withal" and whose eyes brimmed "a well of good humor and contentment."[10] When asked if the world needed reform, the woodcutter laughs and responds "No, I like it well enough."[11] Free from both "vice and disease," Thoreau's visitor appears to confirm, through his own person, the comic industry's theory that a laughing world-view was all that was necessary for democratic happiness.[12] But although Thoreau's delight in the woodchopper's response suggests that reformists, too, were attracted to the idea that simple good-humor might serve to change the world, the transcendentalist hesitates. Thoreau confesses that he is unable to determine whether the man is "as wise as Shakespeare, or as simply ignorant as a child, whether to suspect him of a fine poetic consciousness or of stupidity."[13]

The question of whether a laughing philosophy would solve the world's problems, or merely provide a way to ignore them, appears across the range of genres of antebellum literature. A particularly clear-cut example can be found in *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville literalizes the question through the juxtaposition of Stubb (a vibrant

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10 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Wood* [1854] (New York, New American Library, 1960), 101.

11 Ibid., 103. Interestingly, Thoreau points out that the man's only books are "an *almanac* and an arithmetic" (emphasis mine).

12 Ibid., 101.

13 Ibid., 103.

personification of the comic industry; he is a walking comic almanac) and the other more serious characters, such as the temperate Starbuck or the exaggerated, monomaniacally serious Ahab. Among the prominent literati and lesser-known writers, most fell somewhere in the spectrum between Stubb's and Ahab's worldviews, conceding that laughter was beneficial if not a panacea – but also believing that there were benefits that emerged from the sincere efforts of reform. Indeed, Thoreau appears to approve of this middle-of-the-road approach, for he does not answer his own questions about the woodman's vice-free and misery-free state. Whether the virtue of reform or the virtue of laughter was the better tool of happy improvement was a question that could be held in cautious abeyance. After all, must laughter and reform be mutually exclusive?

As we will see in this chapter, they were not mutually exclusive, but were often claimed to be. Antebellum reformists tried a variety of methods for promoting their changes and ideals. David Reynolds points out that within the ranks of reformists, there were two major categories of reform methods that were essentially at war with one another: what he calls the Conventional (reform material which maintained calm appeals to goodness, and descriptions of rewards for virtue) and the Subversive ("immoral reform," or writing that would controversially wallow in descriptions of bad behavior, supposedly for the sake of engendering disgust in readers).[14] The danger of the latter was that readers might not read for the right reasons. Reynolds cites the example of Mason Locke Weems's anti-masturbation tract *Onanism*, which many critics faulted for being

[14] Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 57-58. Reynolds explains that both conventional and subversive methods "were ostensibly based upon an interest in preserving moral and physical healthiness, a belief in the sanctity of the home, and an identification of religion with moral practice...[b]ut the difference between the two groups lies in emphasis and imagery."

"rather a matter of diversion than serious consideration."[15] People found it funny, nothing more. Entertainment is problematic, in the logic of reform, when it becomes so pleasurable as to stymie edification.[16] The threat was that people would laugh without reflection at descriptions of sexual pleasure without reproduction. Just as sexual pleasure without reproduction was to be avoided, likewise laughter without reflection.

The meanings that nineteenth-century Americans perceived in the utterance of laughter made it, for reformers especially, an utterance to handle with care. If they ventured to shriek or even chuckle, they would generally do so with careful consideration. Was the laughter to be used out of ridicule or pity? Was it uttered for the sake of health or irresponsible amusement? A pragmatic concern was the degree to which it was culturally permissible for women and African Americans – a critical part of the demographic of reformers – to laugh in public arenas. In spite of these difficult issues, all sorts of reformists (Conventional, Subversive, and everything in between) risked pleasurable laughter in their work and considered it a crucial part of their efforts. We have evidence of their respect for laughter and the ideology of good humor in the form of jokes, transcriptions of laughter-inducing lectures, etc. Nevertheless, antebellum reformists are often represented as the "incurably stern" types of the era, and carried a reputation for humorless earnestness and sincerity.[17] Assumptions that laughter and good

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[15] Quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 60.

[16] Indeed, in my research I found several publishers of comic almanacs that also distributed "edifying" or informative publications that crossed the line of pornography. For example, Elton, of *Elton's Comic All-my-nack*, also dabbled in gentleman's racy newspapers. One finds his woodcuts there, reaching new heights of smuttiness.

[17] Wickberg writes that although nineteenth-century Americans "valued the sense of humor as necessary attribute of the individual, and saw benevolent humor as a welcome boon to sociality, they also attempted to carve out a sphere of social life marked 'no joking'" (*Senses of Humor*, 172). Wickberg is looking back from the twentieth century at the many times and situations in which joking was considered inappropriate during the nineteenth century; he sees generally sober arenas everywhere in

humor do not and cannot coexist with an activist agenda endures to this day, and still unfairly.[18] In this chapter, I will ask how and why antebellum reformists acquired a laughless reputation, and prove – contrary to even modern associations – that they did not earn it. Rather, the reputation grew out of a false dichotomy of serious/humorous constructed out of the residues of commercial and ideological competition, and out of reformists' less-than-carefree, but not dismissive, treatments of laughter.

Dehumanizing the Humorless

In 1856, popular impersonator and comic lecturer William Valentine, or "Dr. Valentine," published *A Budget of Wit and Humor*, a book of his lectures. As discussed in the prior chapter, Valentine playfully billed himself as a doctor because he claimed to administer doses of salutary laughter to his audiences, curing them of digestive illnesses and mental maladies like melancholy and the blue devils. Among the *Budget*'s collection of dialect speeches and comic treatises on the natural benefits of laughter we find "The Moral Reform Society on Newspapers," a short piece which parodies a meanderingly pointless reform meeting and suggests that reformers, in general, are themselves comically humorless.

Framing himself as a visitor to the society's meeting, Valentine recounts the proceedings of the meeting after its "regular business is concluded." (On stage, he would have stepped into the characters of Brother Snivel, Mr. Snubs, Mr. Weazel, Tabitha Twist, etc., bringing different voices and costumes for each.) In a series of monologues

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Victorian America. Of course no one was joking all the time – except perhaps those who were in the business of selling laughter.

[18] A contemporary joke that evinces the tradition of thinking of activists as humorless: Q: How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb? A: That's not funny.

filled with punning flurries of self-importance and incongruously stern treatments of trivialities, Valentine's moral reformists discuss the wickedness of newspapers. Here is a sample of Brother Snivel's contribution:

> "I have been thinking a great deal lately about newspapers, and the conclusion of my mind is that they ought to be put down. They are the destroyers of the morals of the young and rising generation. The press will squeeze every bit of good out of the world, and the sheets it sends abroad are the winding-sheets of truth. The newspapers have been laughing at our efforts of moral reform, and their charges for advertising have made an abominable hole, if not more so, in our treasury; and therefore I say that newspapers ought to be put down, and I move they are put down."[19]

Snivel's complaints hinge mostly upon wordplay – the press *squeezes* goodness out of the world, the press *squeezes* money from the reform society for its advertising. However, Snivel also laments that the newspaper "has been laughing at [the society's] efforts of moral reform," just as Dr. Valentine's readers are encouraged to do throughout this piece. Dr. Valentine's characters bring inflexibly sober, irrationally bitter attitudes to their work, which ultimately inhibits their ability to do good. All of the speakers stand to say their piece, and all have proven themselves unadulterated fools by the time they return to their seats. They are serious to no purpose and ignorant of their own impotence. The characters believe their goals are righteous, but their goals are subsumed and lost in Dr. Valentine's jokes of flawed personality. Mr. Weazel, speaking after Mr. Snivel, derides the "depravity of the press" but confesses in the course of his speech that he is most disturbed by having to pay for a newspaper. Miser! Mr. Squash votes to put down the papers, though he does "like to read the newspapers, it's so funny to read about the

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[19] William Valentine, "The Moral Reform Society on Newspapers" in *The Budget of Wit and Humor, or, Morsels of Mirth for the Melancholy* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 22 Ann Street, 1856), 59.

murders."[20] Perverse hypocrite! By the end of the sketch we feel that the newspapers are correct and just for laughing at these ridiculous reformists.

Dr. Valentine gets his laughs by questioning the separation between people's selfish urges and their good intentions, and by conflating their faulty morality with an equally faulty performance of seriousness. Although Valentine's reformists are flights of comic fancy, real reformists were confronting plenty of real, biting ridicule. In newspaper editorials, in novels, and even in parenting guides, ridicule of reformists very frequently targeted the folly of being too serious.[21] Considering the proliferation of pro-laughter material in the antebellum marketplace in the forms of mass and elite publications, lectures, shows, etc., to declare groups "anti-laughter" was to call into question their health, their sanity, and their humanity.

Therefore, even Dr. Valentine's gentle parody of the too-serious reform society participates – although not maliciously – in dehumanizing groups of people by imagining them without the vitally human ability to laugh. The representation of a group as humorless was a subtly powerful method of defusing or disarming a political, social, or even commercial opponent in the antebellum United States. The potency of robbing someone of the ability to laugh "healthily" was not only to rob them of the ability to make light of life, but also to imagine them as unable to enjoy what the culture of power decreed to be enjoyable – including such rights as self-governance. This method of dehumanization is distinct from the alteration of the meanings of laughter from marginalized bodies discussed in the first chapter. It tacitly bolsters the positive

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[20] Ibid, 60.

[21] In William Alcott's 1838 *Guide to the Young Mother*, we find complaints that an overly-active moral fervor can lead to stern parenting, which in turn prevents children's laughter and the development of their lungs (for citation, see 60-61 of this dissertation).

perception of the "laughing darkey" or the hysterical woman, as these types are imagined to be "more natural" than the severe and heartless figure of humorlessness. Dr. Valentine's generalized parody colludes to disparage real moral reformists by imagining them as impotent, bumbling, and ironically self-important. But his parody further lumps reformists together as a humorless and therefore inhuman group; as we'll see, this kind of lumping had uses other than urging a laugh from audiences.

The Case of *The Blithedale Romance*

Nathaniel Hawthorne shows himself to be particularly attuned to the antebellum era's gendered methods of treating reformists' senses (or absences) of humor when he created the not-indifferent and unreliable narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, Miles Coverdale.[22] The novel tells a story, from Coverdale's perspective, of the loves and heartaches of a group of reformists living together in a socialist commune (modeled after Brook Farm).[23] His narration utilizes assumptions about laughter and personality to several ends. Coverdale guides readers to sympathize with the character of Zenobia by carefully highlighting her laughter whenever she appears in the narrative. However, Coverdale also uses her laughter to explain away why he does not pursue her: "What *maiden* ever laughed as Zenobia did?"[24] Even as he "acknowledged it a masculine grossness," Coverdale is convinced that the openness of her laughter corresponds with an

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[22] See Kelley Griffith's "Form in *The Blithedale Romance*" for an excellent analysis of Coverdale's unreliability in *American Literature* 40, no. 1 (March 1968): 15-26.

[23] Hawthorne directly tells his reader in the preface that the population of Blithedale is fictitious, although it is based upon a real socialist commune that he visited named Brook Farm. He writes that his "whole treatment of the affair is altogether incidental to the main purpose of the romance," that he is not making a negative statement at all about Socialism, and that such characters as Coverdale or Zenobia "might have been looked for at Brook Farm, but, by some accident, never made their appearance there" (1-3).

[24] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* [1851] (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46, (emphasis mine).

openness of sexual experience.[25] He concludes that she must have been married before he knew her, or worse – that she was not a maiden, but had never been married at all. Coverdale uses the idea that laughter in women bespeaks a hidden romantic past in order to explain his (supposed) lack of attraction to her. Still, Zenobia's laughter makes her a likeable, if not virginal, character. Coverdale's attitude toward Zenobia reveals that she is trapped in an ideological paradox of powerlessness: she is a good, amiable, and attractive woman, so therefore she cannot be a "natural" reformist. He asserts that the only reason she even gestures at woman's rights is "by the pressure of exceptional misfortune" – that is, she turns to reform when she has been romantically rejected.

On the other hand, although Coverdale describes the philanthropist Hollingsworth as kind, handsome, and magnetic, the man will never recover from Coverdale's characterization that he is too serious. Hollingsworth never laughs in the course of Coverdale's narration. Coverdale pointedly expounds upon Hollingsworth's self-assessment that "the most marked trait in my character is an inflexible severity of purpose."[26] After much philosophizing on the goodness of this reformist, Coverdale ultimately intimates to his reader that "there was a stern and dreadful peculiarity in this man, such as could not prove otherwise than pernicious to the happiness of those who should be drawn into too intimate a connection with him…*He was not altogether human.*"[27] Upon reaching the end of the romance, Coverdale tells the reader the secret that throughout the story he actually has been in love with the mysterious Priscilla, who loves and marries Hollingsworth. One of the implications of Hawthorne's unreliable narrative is that accusations of inhuman humorlessness are revealed as a tool for personal

[25] Ibid., 47.
[26] Ibid., 43.
[27] Ibid., 70 (emphasis mine).

ends; they divert empathy from otherwise likeable characters. Upon reviewing the text, the reader sees Coverdale's subtle manipulations. The secret of his love throws "a gleam of light over [his] behavior" and also calls into doubt the veracity of his portrayal of others, especially of Hollingsworth.[28] The steady descriptions of Hollingsworth's furrowed brow and his dark countenance are part of Coverdale's attempt to void the humanity, and the lovability, of his romantic competition.[29]

Hawthorne built the "twist" into his romance by creating a narrator who uses the same tricks of anti-reformists (or, the "unregenerates," as the reformists deemed them) to build up and tear down sympathy with other characters for his own ends. Zenobia is attractive, good-humored; therefore she is no "real" reformist. Hollingsworth is too much the reformist, too serious; he is therefore "not quite human." Threatened himself with being the butt of the serious-reformist joke, Coverdale plays up his own ability to laugh off his experience for his readers, and distances himself from the Blithedale project:

> Meeting former acquaintances, who showed themselves inclined to ridicule my heroic devotion to the cause of human welfare, I spoke of the recent phase of my life as indeed fair matter for a jest.[30]

Hawthorne borrows the logic of humorlessness indicating sub-humanity, a logic widely in use in antebellum America, in order to complicate his fiction and also to condemn the subtle viciousness of the logic. It reveals the interestedness of the narrator, and forces one to rethink the whole of the story. A second reading is a revelation. In his preface, he asserts that the characters of Blithedale – whether we choose to see them through

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[28] Ibid., 247.

[29] Zenobia's (arguable) suicide could now be seen as selfish rather than driven. Hollingsworth is not cold, but Zenobia is irrational, jealous of her sister. Her laughter, as Coverdale records it, makes it hard to see her as anything but a lovely person terribly wronged. Reconsider, also, how devastated Hollingsworth is at her death; he is not at all as apathetic as Coverdale would have had it.

[30] Ibid., 195.

Coverdale's lens or not – are not in the least realistic, and should not be assumed to be at all resemblances of the real socialist/reformists who populated Brook Farm. Readers are meant to rethink the stories that circulated about the real reformists as well, keeping in mind the interests of real narrators.

The comic industry and the unregenerates (non-reformers) were narrators with interests, utilizing ideas about laughter in order to make sales or weaken their opposition. However, while not deserving of being represented as entirely lacking humor, reformers did actively engage in decrying brands of humor that dehumanized others. From a different angle, reformists cited laughter at such humor as an obstruction of, or at least distraction from, morality. For this reason, they encouraged the public to prefer their upright publications and lectures to comic ones. Still, reformists did not always decry laughter, but used jokes in their newspapers, pamphlets, and almanacs, and many lecturers enraptured their audiences with wit and humor. Deciding when, where, and how to employ laughter was, however, a more fraught business for reformists than for the comic industry, because of the culture's views of what laughter was and meant. When did laughter conform to reformist impulses, and when was it dissonant?

"Farewell High and Noble Feeling": Laughter as Moral Plague

An 1829 article in the *New Bedford Mercury* discusses "unpleasant companions." One of the most unpleasant and despised is the joker who provokes laughter:

> It is very difficult, in short, to say what a pleasant companion is; but not so hard to tell what he is not. […] He is not a jester. Professed jokers are wearisome company. They have, of all people, the *least real knowledge of the human heart* – though they often make it their boast, that they know human nature thoroughly; the *least tenderness* for those little infirmities which cling to the best of human beings; the *least sympathy* in bodily or mental affections;

> the *least reverence* for the image of God in the mind of man. When once the spirit of ridicule has taken possession, thenceforth *farewell high and noble feeling; farewell all hopes of partaking with such a one any of that deep communion which exalts and refines the human character*. Serious, even these jesters must sometimes be; but their seriousness is non-improving. […] We often feel affection for the individual who has extorted from us tears; but he who drags forth, hour after hour, *unwilling laughter*, is never regarded with complacency.[31]

The list of virtues which the joker's "spirit of ridicule" debases is long, and the tone of the passage is accusatory. The joker is ignorant of the human heart, and is wickedly heartless because laughter itself denotes a lack of tenderness and sympathy. It is crucial to note that the topic of discussion is unpleasant *companions* rather than simply unpleasant *people*. The jester is an unpleasant companion because he not only has a perverse and unkind approach to his fellows (with whom he has little sympathy), but because he draws forth from them – from anyone near him – unsettling, "unwilling laughter." His presence is contaminating. The author asserts that once the "spirit of ridicule has taken possession" of them, the joker's company can bid "farewell high and noble feeling."[32]

That one might be jested, unwillingly, into moral degeneracy is a striking suggestion. In modern culture, the idea that laughter is infectious has currency; however, important to this conception is that nothing but laughter itself is transferred among people. In this 1829 article, though, the persistent jester transmits immorality through laughter. Laughter – like a sneeze – becomes both a symptom and a contagion, but of spiritual rather than corporeal ill-health. If laughter in the comic industry is eternally innocent (it does not matter what we laugh at, for it is always healthy), then this passage

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[31] "Pleasant Companions," *New-Bedford Mercury* (New Bedford, MA), February 26, 1829 (emphasis mine).

[32] Notice how differently the "spirit of ridicule" is represented from the "spirit of risibility."

claims something parallel but opposite (it does not matter what we laugh at, for it is always morally unhealthy). The author of this passage is concerned that joking, and the laughter it provokes, obviates the positive attributes of humanity for a community. Perhaps the most dastardly accusation put to the joker is that he has not "the least reverence of the image of God in the mind of man." In this formulation, he who laughs is sick because he is ungodly. Indeed, laughter-as-illness in this passage is not far from demonic possession, a semi-Satanic obstruction between a human being and God.

Over thirty years later, several months into the Civil War, we find similar language in circulation as evidence of the persistence of the idea that humor is plague-like. An 1861 anonymous article "On Ridicule" in *The Christian Recorder* contains the argument that ridicule – that which produces critical laughter – is something unnecessary that takes up life-space. Wherever ridicule and laughter are, something more serious and valuable could be there instead. The article begins by effusing: "Life is too precious, love is too heavenly, friendship is too beautifully eloquent with happiness to be destroyed thus thoughtlessly."[33] The progression of this florid passage leads to supplications that readers "weigh" words and "strip" the "useless" elements from speech in favor of filling valuable life-space with all things not-comic, all things sincere. The aggressiveness of ridicule is the main target, but laughter itself – no matter what stirs it – is figured as vacuous, useless, and even prodigal as well; perhaps realizations of the stern realities of war further influence this language. Hilarity is vividly described, again, in terms of "fiendish" demonic possession: "It arouses the most fiendish passions; the eye flashes, the bosom heaves tumultuously over the feverish fire that rages within it, the heart beats

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[33] "On Ridicule," *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, PA), August 10, 1861.

wildly, and all control is gone."[34] The author presents the bodily act of laughing – forgetting what sort of risibility created it – as excessive, grotesque, and insane. The author then points toward the pulpit for the final word:

> The preacher tells us that "laughter is mad;" and the Proverb of the wise man adds a warning that "the end of mirth is heaviness." The habit of looking too much at the ludicrous side of life is always hurtful to the moral feeling. The pleasure is faint and vanishing, and leaves behind it an apprehension of disgrace. "It is not good to live in jest, since we must die in earnest."[35]

Similarly to the 1829 passage, this one moves from condemning a specific brand of humor – ridicule – to embracing a philosophy that is more broadly anti-laughter. It declares that a laughing approach to life is nothing less than "*always* hurtful to the moral feeling." Too much hilarity is a plague that ravages the moral and appropriate spiritual life; it both causes and signals wickedness and insanity.

The extremity of these two passages' assessment of laughter highlights how writers with more serious agendas, when confronted with nineteenth century humor in its many incarnations, could potently invert the language of panacea.[36] After all, ridicule, satire, and joking were used with frequency as powerful tools against reform movements, hence, the twentieth and twenty-first century uneasiness in confronting much nineteenth century humor.[37] What is now felt as discomfort or shame in insidious humor was, in the antebellum era, felt as practical moral outrage. So, while some activists did use humor for the cause (which I shall discuss next) many vocal reformists still disparaged its usage.

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Writers for both the *New Bedford Mercury* and *The Christian Recorder* were likely to have had serious agendas. *The New Bedford Mercury*, printed in Massachusetts, had a reformist bent in the articles it published and *The Christian Recorder* was published by the African Methodist Episcopal church. Both published many abolitionist and moral reform articles.

[37] In the classroom, one is drawn toward teaching from a small pool of blatantly subversive humor, rather than an ocean of collusive humor, so as to avoid discomfiting students. I believe the result of this sensitivity can result in a sugar-coated view of American humor.

The more moderate side of what I call the “plague” debate taking place in the antebellum marketplace consisted of a struggle to maintain a link between laughter and mind (prioritized over laughter and body) in order to make claims of moral responsibility. Moderates argued for different types of laughter – some moral, some not. The more extreme condemnation of laughter portrayed the utterance as functioning like plague, corrupting both mind and body of those who fell pray to infectious risibility. The pervasive presence of laughter in the antebellum marketplace threatened mass infection: plague.

Both the 1829 and the 1861 passages appear to be referencing laughter within a private, non-commercial environment. The 1829 passage comprehends the joker as a companion, rather than a performer. However, the joker is the center of the attention, and the company resembles an audience witnessing a show. Locating the argument against laughter in a private space works as a rhetorical device to conceal the author’s disdain for the frenetic comic promotion of the era. The final sentence of the 1829 passage contains what could be viewed as a rupture in the rhetoric; it is suggestive of the stage, comparing the moral value of the dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy: “We often feel affection for the individual who has extorted from us tears; but he who drags forth, hour after hour, unwilling laughter, is never regarded with complacency.” Furthermore, the author’s temporal conception of the joker eliciting laughter for “hour after hour” conjures the theater as much as the parlor. The 1861 passage addresses the laughter-market as well as an immoral, inappropriate realm by narratively removing the reader from a space of grotesque laughter (a theater exemplifying this space to many publics), and placing her in the virtuous public space of the church to hear the preacher’s words about laughter. Both

articles conceal an awareness of comic commercialism, and an anxiety regarding the destination of mass money and sympathy, while they discuss the moral contagion of laughter. However, in other reformist texts the issue centers around a question of whether laughter is an utterance which signifies ridicule or pity, and how those two evaluations of others should or should not be used in the process of reform.

Ridicule or Pity: What Excites Your Mirth

> Never laugh when you see a drunkard. What excites your mirth, draws tears and sobs of anguish from his family. Would you laugh at a maniac? A drunkard is destitute of his senses; but by his own fault. He is an object of pity, not of laughter.
>
> – Advice for October, from *The Temperance Almanac for 1833*

> A GOOD ONE: A Dutchman who had been in the habit of intoxication, was prevailed on by his friends to join a Temperance Society, whose pledge required total abstinence "except for medicine." He was afterwards taken ill and sent for a physician. The physician ordered that he should take one ounce of spirits per day. Not knowing exactly how much an ounce was, he asked a friend. The answer was, that eight drachms make an ounce. "Ah," said he, "the doctor understands my case, exactly. I used to take six drachms a day, and I always wanted two more."
>
> – Filler material, from *The Temperance Almanac for 1833*

Within this one 1833 temperance almanac, reformists were wrestling with the potential consequences of laughing. In the first passage, which pleads that the reader "[n]ever laugh when you see a drunkard," the underlying logic is that laughter is an unkind, thoughtless, and selfish gesture; a person who laughs at another's suffering is cruel.[38] To laugh, then, is to evince a lack of understanding, to fail to see that someone is "destitute of his senses" even if it is "his own fault." How then, does it happen that

[38] The view of laughter as cruel is old, theoretically. Hobbes's "superiority theory" in *Leviathan* describes laughter as the "grimace" which accompanies the "sudden glory" of realizing oneself to be better than, or in a better position than, another person.

within the pages of this very same almanac we find a joke about a man who mistakes apothecary measurements for bar measurements? One might argue that the joke of "A GOOD ONE" is not particularly cruel – that one laughs at the drunkard's fortuitous lexical mistake rather than at a drunkard's suffering, and yet the effect of the joke is still to laugh *at* a drunkard. To find pity in the joke would be a challenge, even if it could be argued to be less than antagonistic. The contradiction of putting joke (even a less cruel one) in the same pages as a plea for pity bespeaks a challenge that reformists confronted with regard to laughter. Is it better to propose pity, to ask readers to rethink their response to other people's problems, including that of drunkenness? Or is it better to mock and ridicule the state of drunkenness, so as to criticize the drunkard's foolishness and depict the state undesirable? Consideration of laughter among reformists and other serious-minded persons was not without nuance – reformists were by no means homogeneous. Humor was imagined as having positive moral potential, even if it might at times be precariously close to sliding into triviality or downright viciousness.

Pity and empathy are foundational to many of the reform agendas – women's rights, abolition, labor, asylum improvement, prison reform – and yet eliciting laughter risks obliteration of those feelings.[39] Pleas to halt laughing when it prevents pity are not difficult to find in reformist literature of all types. A didactic pro-asylum children's story called "Crazy Ann" opens with a little girl laughing "until she was red in the face" upon remembering the ravings of the local mad-woman. The rest of the story is Ann's; the

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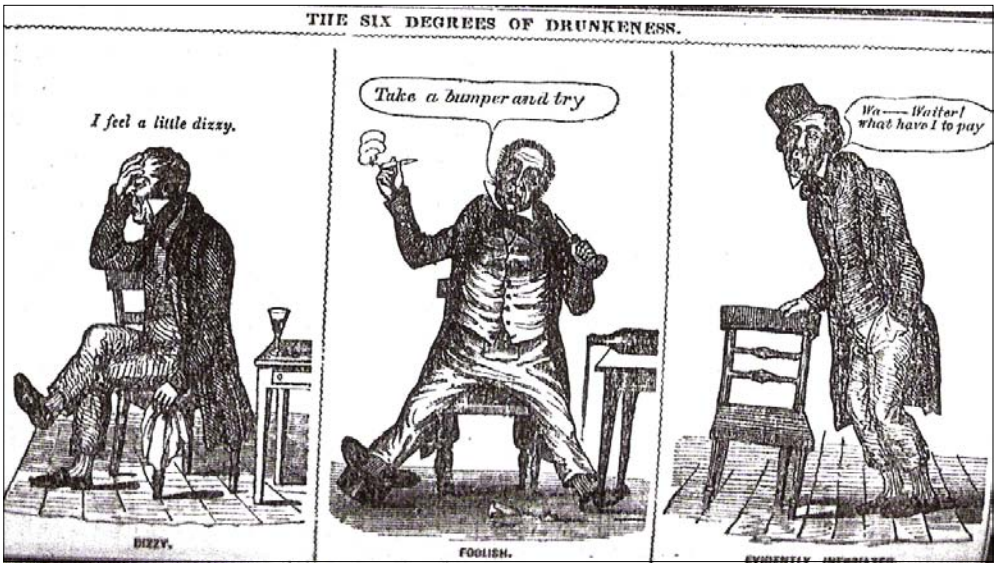
[39] This idea of pitiless laughter has endured. The much-cited theorist Henri Bergson embraced this view in his "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" (1901). In laughing there is an "absence of feeling"; even when someone beloved or pitiable might be before us, if we laugh at them "we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity" (63). He reasons that this is *why* it is corrective. Reformists are not so sure, and more credit to them! Bergson's understanding of laughter is steeped in 19th century American popular views, for he even goes so far as to consider philosophically why a black or blacked-up face is inherently funny (86-87).

little laughing girl learns from her father the sorrowful history that caused Ann’s madness and vows that she “shall never laugh and make fun of a crazy person again.”[40]

Insanity, drunkenness, slavery – these were often treated as funny by not only uninformed little girls, but by comic publications. In 1845, *Turner's Comick Almanack* printed a comic strip which traces the progress of a man from his first several drinks to losing consciousness:[41]



Our drunkard begins by being just a little too warm and fuzzy, grinning giddily into space; by the end of the strip he has mysteriously lost his shoe, has had a conversation with a sign-post, and is finally carried home, "dead drunk" on the back of an exasperated friend:[42]

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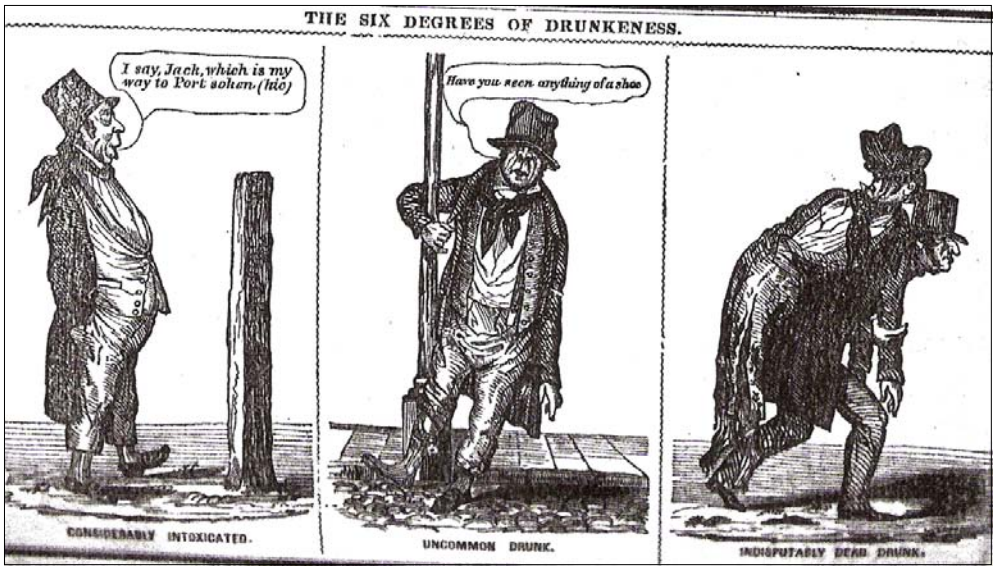
40 Francis Channing Woodworth, “Crazy Ann” in *The Boy’s Story Book* (New York: Clark, Astin, and Co., 1851), 31. Ann’s fiancé dies in a shipwreck just a day before his planned return.

41 *Turner's Comick Almanack for 1845* (Boston: Turner and Fisher, 1844), unpaginated. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

42 Ibid. In the first series, our drunkard is "Dizzy," "Foolish," and “Evidently Inebriated.” In the following, he is “Considerably Intoxicated,” “Uncommon Drunk,” and “Indisputably Dead Drunk.”



The comic treats drunkenness with a laughing wink; the drunk is loveable, silly, and innocuous. The strip depicts no consequences to his actions beyond the man's looking like a good-natured fool; even as he might be in danger, a friend steps in at the last minute to take care of him when he can no longer take care of himself.

A Currier & Ives lithograph titled "The Drunkard's Progress" (1846) smacks of a response to *Turner’s*. Rather than the linear and consequence-free story-line of the almanac's rough wood-cut comic, the "progress" is shaped like a set of stairs, with an upward climb, a pinnacle, and a downfall:[43]

[43] Currier & Ives, “The Drunkard's Progress, from the First Glass to the Grave,” 1846. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The fine lines, the symmetry of the drawing, and the attractive hand-coloring bespeak an attempt to address its viewers from a more elite, careful position. It pointedly inverts the location where laughter happens. In *Turner's*, the laughter belongs to the reader, who enjoys the harmless but thoroughly ridiculous adventures of the drunkard. Laughter is, in the temperance lithograph, notably internal to the narrative -- it occurs among the drunkards at the height of their inebriation, and signals their downfall. The lithograph positions the viewer to witness the whole of the narrative in one frame, and therefore tragically. Also, the pyramid-shaped narrative positions the laughing, celebrating drinkers in the top center, directly above the eye-catching red dress of a woman. Our eyes are brought down from this "house of mirth" image by the bright flash of color. The pleasures of drink are paired with the ultimate consequences: the suffering of his wife and

child. The suggestion is that the rupture of the home is the most dire consequence of his actions, still more than the man's suicide (he shoots himself in the head) at the far right.

A comparison of these two images might bring a reader to conclude that temperance advocates were adamantly anti-laughter, as laughter is formally aligned with suffering. Through its structure, the lithograph guides readers away from laughing at drunkenness, and goes on to suggest that laughter immediately precedes a fall. However, consider that "cold-water" (water without a dash of alcohol) advocates were also associated with laughing gas exhibitions, as temperance displays had toured with exhibitions, and also, nitrous oxide was considered as a possible substitute for alcohol.[44] Relocating laughter away from the comic industry's consequence-free hilarity, and these exhibitions positioned the gas, and its resultant laughter, as something that might be enjoyed carefully (unlike alcohol). Temperance advocates proved themselves aware of one of the main reasons that people drank to excess – a dearth of joy – and carefully argued that signing a pledge would bring a better kind of happiness:

> DIFFERNTIATING JOYS: It has been a prevailing, but erroneous opinion, that the excitement produced by drinking wine or strong liquors was favorable to the development of genius; and that the brightest thoughts which adorn the pages of wit, owe their birth to the wine cup. It may be that some dissipated men have exhibited at times of high excitement, (half drunk,) happy flights of imagination, but which have been found when tested by sober reason, to be but feverish ebullitions.[45]

This offering of wisdom does not condemn wit, happiness, or “high excitement.” It acknowledges them as joys, but questions the reality of that joy when it is produced by

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[44] Ellen Hickey Grayson argues that Dr. Gardiner Quincy Colton, who toured the United States in the late 1840s with an enormous temperance painting called “The Court of Death” as well as scientific shows like laughing gas exhibitions, used the latter’s hilarity ultimately to “assert cultural authority and advance [his] own agendas” (“Social Order,” 103).

[45] *Temperance Almanac for the Year of Our Lord, 1832* (Rochester, NY: Hoyt, Porter, and Co., 1831), unpaginated. “Differentiating Joys” is the note for the month of February.

alcohol. Temperance advocates did not want to align completely the decision to be sober with a decision to be somber; they appear aware that this alliance would not gain pledges. Nevertheless, they did have to treat mirth and laughter with care.

Women and the Risk of Too Little or Too Much Laughter

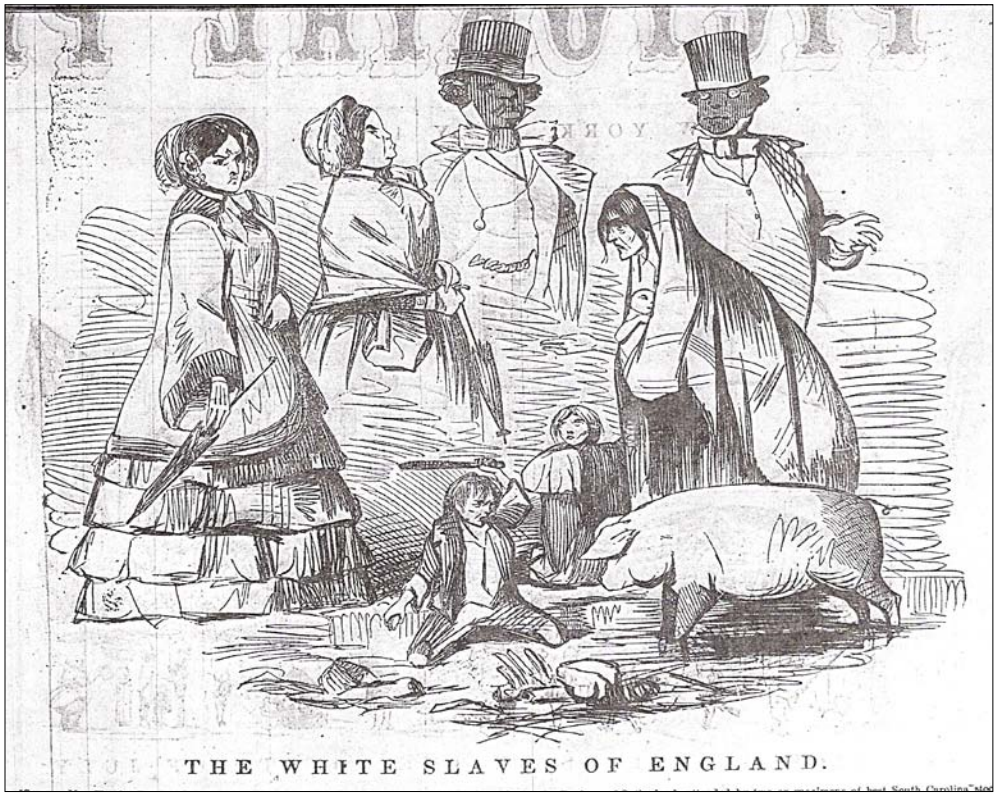
To be a reformer – or any other marginalized person in antebellum culture – meant being prepared to negotiate with care rather peculiar expectations of humor. Women in general faced contrary perceptions of the meaning of their laughter to male auditors, but women reformists, in particular, were between a rock and a hard place. In not laughing enough, they were considered unattractive. Too much laughter, however, was unbecoming. Take, for example, this blurb published in *Life in New York*, a racy gentleman's newspaper:

> Some of the women of this country are determined to make a fuss and insist upon having the same rights, politically, as their brothers, husbands, sons, and sweethearts. They hold a convention next month, in Worcester, Mass. on the subject, when there will be a vast waste of eloquence—There's one comfort at any rate. These women who make themselves so conspicuous, and seem so determined to unsex themselves, are generally old, ugly creatures, whose blandishments never could captivate the heart of a male being, or tough, nasty wives, whose hen-pecked husbands are living examples of what the world would come to could these fanatic, mad ones have their own way in the re-construction of society.[46]

The writer of the blurb disagrees politically on the rights of women by imagining women reformists as unsexed "old, ugly creatures" and "tough, nasty wives." Imagining their appearance and deportment to be anything but cheerful, optimistic, or good-humored, the writer suggests that these women are not quite human. His circular joke/insult (I imagine

[46] *Life in New York* (New York, NY), Saturday, October 5, 1850.

it must be a man as the author) is that "old, ugly" women must necessarily have equally detestable political goals; and furthermore, having such goals renders one ugly. In a cartoon from a similar publication, notice the stern, unaffected faces of the women, which accompany this bitter joke about abolitionists being so perversely obsessed with freeing black slaves that they ignore the suffering of white Europeans:[47]



The women, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Duchess of Southerland (and two African-American abolitionists, one noted to be Frederick Douglass) in this cartoon are rendered inhumane through their unsmiling, unkind features. Their harsh faces are either turned critically upon or apathetically away from another woman's suffering. All women activists, no matter what their cause, could be trapped in the bitter joke that too much care

[47] "The White Slaves of England," *The Pick, or the New York Pictorial* (New York, NY) Saturday, July 3, 1852. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

placed upon a political reform makes one otherwise uncaring, and therefore unwomanly. Women were trapped in a sophist mobius strip of powerlessness by being accused of being so serious about reform as to “unsex” themselves, or lose their power of amiable domestic sympathy. Both the blurb and the cartoon reveal the power in attacking a woman's ability to care, and one must note that these attacks portray women reformists as not only humorless, but ill-humored. The language of the passage vividly conjures up frowning, unforgiving faces like those seen in the cartoon; there is no room for goodness or kindness in this vision of unsmiling, and ironically uncaring activism.

Of course, representing a women reformer as cruelly humorless was not less damning than representing a woman as overly eager to laugh. As will be discussed further, a woman who laughed too much might risk her excess of laughter being associated with an excess of sexual desire, or of having disease of the mind. A properly “sexed” woman laughs – to just the right degree, and at just the right things – but she does laugh, contentedly avoiding the pursuit of political rights for herself, skirting the political arena in general, and bringing smiles and kindness on a local level. An African American man, on the other hand, risked being viewed alternately as a smiling subservient or a conniving threat when seen with a laugh upon his lips.

Anti-Slavery and the Challenge of Black Laughter

In a brief review, Frederick Douglass suggests a differentiation between good comic performances and bad, in which laughter itself is not problematic. Frederick Douglass, reviewing the performer Ossian E. Dodge, writes in 1849 that:

> Black, and proscribed though we be, we love good music, and have no objection to lively wit and humour; and, therefore, we went to hear this

> inimitable comic singer. Dodge gives something more than concerts. They are entertainments, as instructive as they are amusing. We have seen many arch, shrewd, humorous, and laughable faces, but that of Dodge exceeds them all. […] Such gesticulations as he employs, when dispensing knowledge on this subject, were never before seen, and elicited shouts of laughter and applause from the delighted audience.[48]

Comic performances, in Douglass's assessment, are void of value until they include edification – until they are "as instructive as they are amusing." "Good music" and "lively wit and humour" offer to the audience "something more." Douglass would have attended this performance due to the performer's upright reputation, for Dodge marketed himself as a singer of "*moral* comic songs which he composed and wrote himself."[49]

In another review for *The North Star*, Douglass puts forth a suggestion to "an amateur class of colored young men" which he evidently otherwise admires: "We hope there will be a repetition of these entertainments in this city, as the effect cannot fail to be serviceable. We would however suggest the propriety of leaving out every thing like the coarse comic songs of the day. To do otherwise, would be to become the ministers of our own degradation."[50] The risk of "coarse comic songs," which I imagine were frivolous or dirty rather than racist (such would certainly incur more fire from Douglass's pen), is that they are void of the ethical "something more," and would therefore render the performers – as representatives of the race on the stage – "ministers of our own degradation." The comic, as we can see from these two reviews, is risky business in Douglass's eyes; what exactly an audience laughs at is a matter of grave importance to him.

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48 *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), October 19, 1849.

49 James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds. *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography, Volume II, Crane-Grimshaw* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1888), 194, (emphasis mine).

50 *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), January 19, 1849.

Douglass's condemnations of blackface minstrelsy in *The North Star* are well known, and make sense alongside his reviews of other entertainments. Douglass need not work too hard to show the racist collusion at work in minstrelsy's humor. However, Douglass takes a stand against humor in an entirely different venue in 1851. At the Congressional Union in England, Maine delegate Reverend Chickering gave a speech about American slavery that caused some controversy because it contained jokes and witticisms. In the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, we find Douglass's editorial description of the event, which first asserts that serious times call for serious approaches:

> It is well […] that the friends of liberty and humanity, at such a time, should be found availing themselves of every honorable means for counteracting the machinations of the enemies of man, and of bringing the moral sentiment of all nations in direct hostility to the inhuman system of bondage which now flourishes under our vaunted Republic, and in the very midst of all our equally vaunted religious institutions.[51]

Douglass argues that "every honorable means" should be used against slavery. However, in the subsequent narrative of the proceedings, Douglass discusses how laughter itself can be less honorable as he considers a speech by an American clergyman named Chickering:

> His speech seems a very adroit, sarcastic, and, in some of its parts, an impudent reproof of Englishmen, for presuming to raise their voices against the frightful monstrosity of human chattleism. [….] *He would turn off the most touching appeal to the tenderest sympathies of human nature into a thoughtless laugh, by a heartless witticism! God help the Slave! if among American divines there are none who espouse his cause with deeper sincerity, nor plead it with greater solemnity, than this Mr. Chickering.* He was called upon to explain something of the Fugitive Slave Law, […] But how did it wind up? *In a manner to provoke laughter*, rather than to deepen the detestation felt by British Christians against that atrocious enactment.[52]

Douglass does not accuse Chickering of being anti-abolitionist, but instead argues that the reverend's tendency to employ the comic is profoundly incompatible with the severity

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[51] *The Frederick Douglass Paper* (Rochester, NY), June 26, 1851.
[52] Ibid., (emphasis mine).

of the topic. Douglass specific condemnation of Chickering's "thoughtless laugh…heartless witticism" does suggest that laughter could be both thoughtful and kind. The provocation of laughter, is not necessarily antithetical to "deepen[ing] the detestation" of slavery, nor is the utterance itself is aligned with superficiality, distraction, thoughtlessness.

Although aware of the general insidiousness of commercial notions of risibility, Douglass himself was considered a brilliantly witty speaker who drew and charmed audiences while maintaining his dignity. Charles W. Chesnutt, writing a biography of the great abolitionist, emphasized the man's ability to provoke laughter in his lectures. Quoting from Johnson's *Sketches of Lynn*, Chesnutt records the description when Douglass was on stage, his listeners "never forgot his burning words, his pathos, nor the rich play of his humor."[53] Chesnutt carefully records both Douglass's earnest passion and his "contagious humor," which, in one anecdote even serves to quiet an antagonist:[54]

> When Douglass offered himself as a refutation of the last speaker's argument [that he was related to a monkey], Rynders replied that Douglass was half white. Douglass thereupon greeted Rynders as his half-brother, and made this expression the catchword of his speech. When Rynders interrupted from time to time, he was *silenced with a laugh*. He appears to have been a somewhat philosophic scoundrel, with an appreciation of humor that permitted the meeting to proceed to an orderly close.[55]

Reform lectures were often attended by antagonistic persons, who came not to listen but to disturb the gatherings. That Douglass was able to manage such a person as Rynders so

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[53] As quoted in Charles Chesnutt, *Frederick Douglass: A Biography* (Boston : Small, Maynard, & Company, 1899), 108.

[54] Chesnutt avers that Douglass could win arguments and persuade audiences because: "It was difficult for an auditor to avoid assent to such arguments, presented with all the force and fire of genius, relieved by a ready wit, a contagious humor, and a tear-compelling power rarely excelled" (Ibid, 111).

[55] Ibid., 113 (emphasis mine).

gracefully with humor testifies to one aspect of the power of laughter in the culture.[56] Douglass himself did not do the laughing, but rather had the audience expressing amusement as he wished. His management of laughter, through careful negotiation, transformed him before audiences from an ex-slave to a profoundly *audible* speaker. His ability to draw both laughter and tears guided audiences to imagine his full humanity, and therefore to listen to his messages.

Douglass was by no means the only African American lecturer who had audiences chuckling amiably. Transcriptions of speeches – many of the best being gathered in Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham's *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787-1900* (1998) – notably record audience reactions in brackets (for example, something like "[Uproarious laughter!]" might follow the delivery of a witticism) as a documentation of the speaker's success in engendering laughter in listeners. William Wells Brown's "I Have No Constitution, and No Country," John Mercer Langston's "There Is No Full Enjoyment of Freedom for Anyone in This Country," and John S. Rock's, "We Ask for Our Rights" are all examples of oratory which transcribers marked with proof of hilarity.[57] The success of such performances might very well have also engendered anxiety among pro-slavery advocates, who fought back by twisting the meaning of black laughter into something other than a mere reaction to comicality. Douglass's humane good-humor could not be used as evidence of his humanity, if that humor was somehow perverted. Returning William Lloyd Garrison's outrage at the article "Maddened Justice," the idea that black public laughter is a sign of impudence,

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[56] To read a truly wonderful instance of humor and laughter being used to contain "unregenerate" interference in a reformist lecture, see the transcription of Sojourner Truth's "Snakes and Geese" in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787-1900*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

[57] All speeches listed above are reprinted in Foner and Branham's *Lift Every Voice*.

disrespect, or indeed a gesture which taunts any white listeners is precisely such a perversion, transforming an elegant lecturer into a “brute.”

Garrison and Douglass both prefer open, critical laughter in the face of racism. They likewise refuse to allow blackness to determine the significance of laughter, as in paternalist representations of the “happy darkey.” Hence we have both a clever and witty lecturer like Douglass who actively criticizes the laughter of blackface minstrelsy, in which white perceptions of African-American bodies in hilarity transform them into contentedly laughing slaves or (often) innocuously sly tricksters. Walking a fine line, Douglass struggled both to claim an African American sense of humor and right to laugh, and to steadily fight against racist readings of laughing black bodies:[58]

[58] "Uncle Tom's Cabin" from *Comic Sketches of American Life* (Philadelphia : John Weik, publisher and importer, 1854-1857?). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

This beautiful hand-colored lithograph is from a German series called *Comic Sketches of American Life* (1854-1857). Willfully misreading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the artist imagines a grinning, banjo-picking Aunt Chloe with her plump children happily reposing behind her. The plantation tradition is spread out in bright (happy) colors across the page; one can hardly imagine that this picture represents the same system which allows Chloe's husband Tom to be left to die on the floor of a barn after a brutal whipping. The laughter in this image tells a story which insidiously highlights a romanticized form of happiness and obscures suffering. The work that African American intellectuals needed to do to evade or disable these projected misunderstandings of laughter was no small task.

Reforming Laughter

Reformers did, however, realize that one's right to laugh was linked to one's civil rights. In a fascinating acknowledgement of this connection, a book called *The Little Keepsake, or Easy Lessons in One and Two Syllables* offers young readers the following story:

> THE SWING: Here is a nice swing. It is made of a grape vine, which hangs from two large oak trees. What a fine place for a swing is the shade of these old trees in a hot day! Here are John, and Charles, and Ann, and Jane, all come to try the grape vine swing. That one now on the swing is Jane. What sport they all have, and how they laugh and shout. They have just come out of school, and they enjoy their play all the better for having spent a good part of the day at their books.
>
> Just back of one of the trees we can see two or three black boys and girls. They wait for their turn to swing. Soon our white young friends will go home, and then these will take their turn. Which do you think will have the most sport?[59]

[59] *The Little Keepsake, or Easy Lessons in One and Two Syllables* (Connecticut: Sydney Babcock, pub., 1825), 16. Accompanying illustration courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The story is accompanied by this illustration (much enlarged, as the book itself is about the size of two postage stamps):

The “easy lesson” that children are to learn from this story and its illustration involves the question of who has the right to enjoy themselves. The “easy” answer then, is: Those who work hard at their studies enjoy their play the most. The answer is offered within the text: John, Charles, Anne and Jane (in particular) “play all the better for having worked hard at their study.” The black children – unnamed, uncertainly numbered, hidden and waiting on the periphery – presumably do not have the privilege of attending school. The rhetorical and iconographic function of the black children is to remind the white children, from their position, to appreciate their privilege, and the other benefits it brings, which at this moment is to laugh, shout, and play “all the better.” This little story is not antagonistic toward the black children. Rather it raises questions for its young readers, such as why some children are educated when others are not. It opens the door potentially, for children to discuss with their parents race and social rights by questioning the right to play, be sportive, and to laugh. The little book acknowledges the relationship between education, improvement, and pleasure.

As we have seen in these two chapters, those whom the comic marketplace invited to laugh most frequently – though not always – were those who already enjoyed the full privileges of citizenship. Those who were denied privileges of citizenship in antebellum America were also denied the privilege of care-free laughter, because their laughter was often interpreted by the dominant culture as being different, as evincing deviance or damage. In a catch-22, when African Americans and white women sought to reform their nation and their communities, they were very often made the object of laughter by the comic industry because they were “too serious.” Amidst these challenges and paradoxes, however, reformists persisted in their efforts, thoughtfully considering when laughter was or was not appropriate, and when it was or was not damaging to their causes. The prospect of arousing laughter *in support of* one’s cause, or *in recognition of* one’s humanity, was perhaps worth the risk.

Chapter 3: Melville’s Laughing Evangel

It is better to laugh & not sin than to weep & be wicked.
-- Marginalia of Herman Melville

The above axiom is scrawled on a blank leaf in the seventh volume of Melville’s large-print edition of Shakespeare, heading a series of notes concerned mostly with witchcraft and madness. Most scholars agree that Melville made these notes in his volume of Shakespeare before or in the midst of revising the work he had done on *Moby-Dick*, making them central to Melville criticism and exegesis.[1] However, this religiously toned axiom about laughing, weeping, and sinning has not received much attention, partly because its origin has been unknown until quite recently. A testament to Melville’s wide reading and his urge to make connections across texts, the axiom is Melville’s reformulation of an introductory apology for a book of comic fables. Its origin has been traced to Wyllyam Coplande’s introduction to the German folk tales of the prankster Howleglass, or Thyl Eulenspiegel, which he translated in the sixteenth century.[2] Coplande excuses the frivolity of the stories saying, “Methinke it be better to passe the tyme with such a mery jeste, and laugh thereat, and doo no synne, than for to wepe and do synne.”[3]

Melville’s reaction to reading this passage was to translate the sentence into modern English and, in the process, convert it from an apology into an ethical truism.

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1 Geoffrey Sanborn, “The Name of the Devil: Other Extracts for *Moby-Dick*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47, no. 2 (September 1992): 212-235. Sanborn traces Melville’s notes about madness and witchcraft to Sir Francis Palgrave’s essay “Superstition and Knowledge.”

2 For this information I am indebted to John Bryant, who pointed me to Scott Norsworthy’s essay before it was published as "Melville's Notes from Thomas Roscoe's *The German Novelists*" in the October 2008 issue of *Leviathan* (10.3). Coplande was a sixteenth-century translator of the Howleglass tales cited by Roscoe in his early nineteenth-century anthology of English translations of German literature.

3 Thomas Roscoe, ed., *The German Novelists: Tales Selected from Ancient and Modern Authors in That Language* (London: Henry Colburn, New Burlington Street, 1826), 149. Melville read Coplande’s introduction as it was quoted in Roscoe.

Quite literally at the top of his thoughts while jotting notes for *Moby-Dick*, Melville's transformation of Coplande's words into "It is better to laugh & not sin than to weep & be wicked" is decidedly not the uncompromising mantra of Ahab, but it might be the mantra of the novel. Melville crafts the authoritative assertion that while it would be best to confront the sorrows of life as sincerely as they deserve – with a bodily reaction that connotes mourning – such undiluted sorrow leads, sinfully, to despair. Belching out a hearty horse laugh might be better than weeping over ineluctable suffering since it can at least promote hope and good behavior. The character in *Moby-Dick* who best exemplifies Melville's axiom is Pip, whose behavior and message are informed by the tradition of evangelical juvenilia and whose "crazy-witty" laughter is socially redemptive. Acknowledging Pip's central, redemptive role recasts the novel as an exploration of the choice between laughing and weeping in response to human suffering, and suggests that Melville promotes Pip's hope over Ahab's despondency.[4] Through Pip, Melville writes against desperation and, more specifically, against a form of "wickedness" that the author ultimately reviled: the act of suicide. Suicide, to Melville, was not merely the act of killing oneself but the act of removing oneself as a source of comfort and assistance to others. Little Pip, though the most "insignificant" of the crew,

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[4] Pip could be viewed, also, as Melville's literary response to Hawthorne's views on hope and despair. Consider Hawthorne's character Ethan Brand, whose search for "the unpardonable sin" leaves him mad with despair – which is, indeed, the unpardonable sin. Remember that the romance of Ethan Brand opens with his maniacal laughter ringing across the hills and that the story closes with the man's suicide, throwing himself into a kiln. In an 1851 letter to Hawthorne, Melville wrote his reaction to the story: "He was a sad fellow, that Ethan Brand. I have no doubt you are by this time responsible for many a shake and tremor of the tribe of 'general readers.' It is a frightful poetical creed that the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart. But it's my *prose* opinion that in most cases, in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams. And though you smoke them with the fire of tribulation, yet, like veritable hams, the head only gives the richer and the better flavor. I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!" In this letter Melville also discusses why reformers are "almost universally laughing-stocks," why "truth is ridiculous to men," and also how "humorous, comic songs" erupt after times of trouble. *Correspondence/Herman Melville*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993) 190-194.

confronts the question of "to be or not to be" and, through strange circumstances, is able to both choose death *and* return to his crewmates to deliver life-affirming wisdom.[5]

Pip is a powerful, prophetic figure in *Moby-Dick*. He draws the attention of the seamen because of his ghostly hilarity, which becomes a unique force upon the ship. His laughter is different from that of other members of the crew. Laughter, with its fleshly associations with base pleasure and amorality, seems an inappropriate response to human affliction. After all, the giddiest man aboard the *Pequod*, Stubb, is happily resistant to suffering thanks to his good humor, but is also frequently accused of inappropriateness and even cruelty in his jests. Stubb's characterization proves that laughter can be an insidious tool of dismissal, a way of emotionally avoiding the pain of others, an utterance bespeaking a "straw-man" philosophy that offers little more than a veneer of amiability. Indeed, Pip, babbling at the famous golden doubloon, laughingly calls Stubb a literal straw-man, a "scare-crow," because the man and his joking are morally empty.[6] Pip's "crazy-witty" banter, however, alters Ishmael's view of the world and transforms his narration. The cabin boy teaches Stubb the difference between comic indifference and communal good humor. He guides Queequeg away from prideful suicide, reminding him that one always has a "little duty on the shore."[7] When Pip threatens to inspire Ahab to give up his destructive hunt, Ahab orders the boy to the safety of the captain's cabin.

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5 See F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1941). Matthiessen argues that Melville's reading of Shakespeare and Hawthorne led him to believe that "other minds might go as far" in questioning the meaning – and choice – of human existence (373). He cites Melville's assertion that there was "hardly a mortal man, who at some time or other, has not felt as great thoughts in him as you will find in Hamlet" (373). I argue that Melville puts those "great thoughts" of "to be or not to be" in Pip, an unexpectedly democratic placement in antebellum American culture.

6 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* [1851], eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), 362. All citation of *Moby-Dick* in this chapter comes from the authoritative text in this Norton edition. In this passage, Pip asks: "Ain't I a crow? And where's the scare-crow?" He then sees Stubb and cries, "There he stands; two bones stuck into a pair of old trowsers, and two more poked into the sleeves of an old jacket" (362).

7 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 398.

Once Pip resigns himself to Ahab's orders to remain in the cabin, we hear no more of the "poor Alabama boy" who had charmed and haunted the crew of the *Pequod*.[8] In the final climatic chapters in which Ahab steers himself and his crew to their devastating end, Melville never again mentions Pip. As scholar John Bryant puts it, by having Ahab remove Pip from the decks "Melville puts his tragedy back on course."[9] The containment of Pip at the end of *Moby-Dick* testifies to the power of the little black cabin boy's unlikely ability to affect those around him.

Embarking with the *Pequod* as the ship's minstrel, jester, and servant – a role for a black child adopted from the mainland with little alteration – Pip is transformed into a figure so compelling that he must be banished from the narrative in order for it to continue. Pip's redemptive role in *Moby-Dick* makes him more than a fool or a trickster, figures from Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy that are considered by many scholars to provide the inspiration for Melville's creation. These influential stage figures with their traditions of comic antics can be seen to inform Pip's subversive, ludicrous activity on the ship. However, failing to look beyond these parallels relegates Pip to a marginal figure of comic relief. Pip's predicament and his behavior do not conform fully to either tradition; the meaningfulness of Pip's actions and his laughter outstrips their expectations. Although he is tragic-comic in the manner of Lear's fool, and although Melville clearly references blackface minstrelsy (in which black bodies are "inherently" humorous), the boy is not merely a fool or a minstrel, for he does not elicit laughter as

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8 Ibid., 108.

9 John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 227. My argument is very much indebted to Bryant's essential argument that Melville, as an ethical artist, was never exactly a nihilist but rather a man seeking a balance between acknowledging suffering and trying to continue to live. As Bryant puts it, "Like Daggoo shouldering Flask in a rocky whale boat on choppy seas, it [one's intellect] must be perpetually in and out of balance" (13). The struggle to balance is, however, ultimately a life-affirming effort.

much as he himself laughs.[10] At the hub of Melville's explorations of the differences between benevolent and malevolent madness is a childish, racialized character that appears familiar rather than exotic to Melville's readership, offering a trajectory other than tragedy to the crew of the *Pequod*.

In many ways, Pip is a youthful and domestic reformulation of Babbalanja, the happily mad philosopher of Melville's *Mardi*. Babbalanja waxes long and giddily on the nature of suffering and its complex relation to laughter:

> Ha! Ha! Let us laugh, let us scream! Weeds are put off at a fair; no heart bursts but in secret; it is good to laugh, though the laugh is hollow; and wise to make merry, now and for aye. Laugh, and make friends: weep, and they go. Women weep and are rid of their grief: men laugh, and retain it. There is a laughter in heaven, and laughter in hell. And a deep thought whose language is laughter.[11]

His "screaming" philosophical diatribe (which continues for several pages) proceeds with axiom after axiom, a pithy but chaotic intensity reminiscent of Emerson. Acknowledging the moral pitfalls of hilarity ("laughter in hell"), Babbalanja argues the case for laughter furiously. Called mad by his companions, he urges still more fervently that "We must laugh or we die; to laugh is to live."[12] In the end, Babbalanja inadvertently argues against suicide by promoting living through laughing. Pip offers the same argument when he becomes a "babbling angel" who ridicules practices destructive of either the self or of the community.[13] Melville moves away from Babbalanja's frantic philosophy of

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[10] Bergson, *Laughter*, 87. Bergson builds his argument upon the nineteenth-century perception that blackness is inherently funny as he explains the complexities of why blacking up in minstrelsy – which he considers a form of masking – is for so many audiences risible.

[11] Herman Melville, *Mardi, and A Voyage Thither* [1849] (Boston: The St. Botolph Society, 1928), 542.

[12] Ibid., 543.

[13] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 379n1. Remarking in this footnote that Melville often chose names that provoked ambiguous connotations, Matthiessen writes that "Babbalanja suggests 'babbling angel' or perhaps merely 'babbling on,' your connotations depending upon what you think of philosophers."

laughter and instead puts the "deep thought whose language is laughter" into the mouth of a suffering child, transforming the boy into a living angel who laughs without sinning.

Pip is capable – by having lived, "died," and returned – of bridging what Jenny Franchot calls "the abyss" of Melville's theodicy. Franchot argues in "Melville's Traveling God" that "[a]ll of Melville's art faces toward this abyss" – a chasm that represents the impossible distance between humanity and god, and is furthermore "an antiredemptive presence that speaks an ethic of endurance rather than glory."[14] Like the child evangels he so closely resembles, Pip commands an exceptional wisdom of worldly life and a unique vision of glory due to other-worldly revelation. Ishmael tells the reader that to Pip

> Wisdom revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs.[15]

Pip's ambiguous confrontation with "the abyss" does not fit in with Franchot's formula in the case of *Moby-Dick*, for he emerges from having seen "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" and returns to the *Pequod* insistent upon speaking to the crew and offering more than merely the loneliness of individual endurance of suffering. He offers the possibility of compassionate community.[16] Indeed, Pip promises this earthly form of redemption to his fellow crew members and, because he is both a child and black, unexpectedly becomes Melville's most optimistic voice in the novel. It is clear that Melville created Pip so that his readers – familiar with his "type" and expecting him to play a typical, unexotic role in this piece of American fiction – might heap assumptions

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[14] Jenny Franchot, "Melville's Traveling God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 181.

[15] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 347.

[16] Ibid.

upon the frame of an African-American child and then have those assumptions radically challenged. Pip's youth, his small racialized body, his heavenly inflected speech, and his mysterious laughter all bear witness to endless iniquities in human nature while also offering hope for salvation. Pip, who rises not only out of Shakespeare and minstrelsy, but also out of antebellum Christian reform materials and comic production, contains such an unlikely mixture of good-humor and sorrowful wisdom that he appears mad and *worth hearing*. With Pip, Melville imagines the improbable laughing child evangel.

The Expressive Bodies of Child Evangels

> Sometimes James was reproached, because he was not more fond of play; and persons who visited his mother would inquire, if he was not unwell. When they were gone, James would say, "Mother, I wonder why those people think children should always be playing!"
>
> – Miss Susan Paul, *Memoir of James Jackson, the Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, Oct 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months* (1835).

Little James Jackson, the boy who did not care to play and resented the reproaches of his visitors, conforms to the image of the good child in the Christian tradition. Indeed, Dr. William A. Alcott, the prolific publisher of health manuals discussed in chapter one, was writing against the idealization of the somber, reflective, pious child who, like James, righteously wastes away due to a lack of laughter and play.[17] Alcott was writing his advice from a liberal perspective against pervasive representations of children by Calvinists and orthodox evangelicals who stressed "the importance of breaking a child's sinful will and instilling respect for divinely instituted authority."[18] Religious and reform juvenilia, focusing upon children when other genres gave them only

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[17] As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pages 60-61.

[18] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 181. Mintz offers a thorough discussion of shifting religious views of children in antebellum America.

nominal notice, were published voluminously by such organizations as the American Sunday School Association and reform papers like Garrison's *Liberator*.[19] Dr. Alcott was reacting to one particular aspect of this literature that had trickled into antebellum ideas about childhood: that children's bodies reflected their godliness and/or their devilishness. Within this system, an energetic and laughing child could be perceived as overly "of the flesh" and therefore wicked. While many of these fictive and biographical texts gave children relatively powerful voices and significant social sway, they also tended to erase children's diminutive bodies. In the tradition of texts like James Janeway's *A Token for Children, being an exact account of the conversion, holy and exemplary lives and joyful deaths of several young children* (1672), many stories and poems featured uncommonly serious and mature children who willingly forsook their earthly bodies as quickly as possible in pursuit of heaven. Published in this tradition, the *Memoir of James Jackson* recorded his goodness for the sake of inspiring Christian benevolence in readers.[20]

Evangelical juvenilia depicted blessed children endowed with Godly control over their own bodies and minds, often with intuitive knowledge that laughter is "of the flesh." Indeed, the narrative structure of the genre could be described as tracing the steady disappearance of a child's body from the world, representing the disappearance of his or her will into God's. An early, God-glorifying death is the end of young evangels; they

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[19] Deborah C. De Rosa, "Introduction" in *Into the Mouths of Babes: An Anthology of Children's Abolitionist Literature* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger Publishers, 2005). As De Rosa writes, "juvenile antebellum literature […] reveals that nineteenth-century women who opposed slavery created a literary space and public forum for their views through the seemingly nonthreatening genre of children's literature" (xv). So this literature was not only an avenue for children to receive attention, but for women to find a political voice.

[20] Lois Brown, ed., "Introduction" to *Memoir of James Jackson, the Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, Oct 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months* [1835] (Cambridge, MA and London: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Brown posits that it is quite likely that Susan Paul herself would have read Janeway (36).

tend to be beautiful, wan, and delicate of constitution. The inquiries of visitors into James's health in the epigraph above might have been biographer Susan Paul's subtle way of foreshadowing the boy's death. On the other hand, the record of the visitors' concern might just as easily testify to the common association of mental and physical health with normal "sportive and joyful" behavior – it is a point of revelation that this child is not "merely" sick, but special. James, upon falling ill and receiving wishes for his recovery, pointedly tells his teacher: "I do not want to get well, I would rather die for then I shall go and be with God, and the blessed Savior."[21] His desire to die speaks to the despicableness of the world and serves to entice others to repent, convert, and emulate him in his complete submission – body and mind – to God.

However, James Jackson was a special case even within the genre of evangelical juvenilia. James – the subject of one of the earliest African American biographies and the first "real rather than imagined African American child" featured within a work of evangelical juvenilia – was born to a respectable free black family in Boston.[22] While Paul wrote James's memoir in a tradition of "didactic fiction in circulation in the late 1820s and the 1830s [which] included numerous accounts of extremely conscientious children for whom morality and holiness were paramount," she further positioned James as a counterargument to racism in this world.[23] Lois Brown argues that the story of James's life and death not only encourages Christian conversion, but also provides "a record of antebellum African American education, [promotes] its constructive results, and [challenges] the myth that the race's enlightenment threatened society and the nation."[24]

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[21] Paul, *Memoir*, 99.
[22] Brown, "Introduction" to *Memoir of James Jackson*, 1.
[23] Ibid., 61.
[24] Ibid., 21.

Paul states in her preface that she hopes that "this little book do something towards breaking down that unholy prejudice against color" and allow for African American children to be educated, to draw the "gems" out "from among the rubbish and polished."[25] Brown suggests that James's story is unique in the genre as "the usual portrayals of juvenile death scenes are 'the natural culmination of the progress to perfection,'" but James's death is actually accelerated by the contaminating existence of slavery in the world.

Memoir of James Jackson presents for a paradigm a child who is uniformly sincere and remarkably without laughter because laughter would too potently remind readers of his body as it fits within racist formulations – the popular representation of an African American child, the carefree picaninny. James's life is piously joyful, but his happiness is expressed lucidly in words, or most passionately when the child erupts into hymns, the lyrics of which Paul records on the page in order to emphasize his intelligent ability to recognize their wise spiritual import. Within the memoir, Paul provides no textual evidence that the child *ever* laughed. Notably, many ministers point out that Jesus weeps but never laughs within the New Testament. For the majority of the memoir, then, James *is* disembodied text – he is little else but his words. To compare James to a widely familiar, curiously good child in the tradition, the fictive little Eva of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1851 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is to realize just how hard Paul was striving against unsavory cultural renditions of black laughter as wild or as a symbol of servile contentment. James's body is never described except in its sufferings and only then for the purpose of recording extraordinary pain. By contrast, Eva's body receives ample admiration. Eva's culturally white body may acceptably speak for her in life; James's

[25] Ibid., 67.

black body may only speak through death. Eva may laugh; James must not. Stowe introduces Eva:

> The shape of her head and the turn of her neck and bust was peculiarly noble, and the long golden-brown hair that floated like a cloud around it, the deep spiritual gravity of her violet blue eyes, shaded by heavy fringes of golden brown,--all marked her out from other children, and made every one turn and look after her, as she glided hither and thither on the boat. *Nevertheless, the little one was not what you would have called either a grave child or a sad one. On the contrary, an airy and innocent playfulness seemed to flicker like the shadow of summer leaves over her childish face, and around her buoyant figure. She was always in motion, always with a half smile on her rosy mouth, flying hither and thither, with an undulating and cloud-like tread, singing to herself as she moved as in a happy dream.*[26]

Although each author presents children in a romantic tradition of inherent youthful goodness, Stowe permits Little Eva a relatively normal childhood while Paul must be careful with the real memory of James throughout the entirety of the *Memoir*. Stowe can describe Eva's response to a disagreement with her mother about Mammy's humanity in which "Eva looked sorry and disconcerted for a moment, but children, luckily, do not keep to one impression long, and in a few moments she was merrily laughing at various things."[27] Paul's story of James's life never wavers in its description of his pious purposefulness. Eva may be both an evangel and a laughing child, while James's blackness engenders different standards and precludes him from laughing without inviting stereotyped connotations. Looking to another figure in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we see that Stowe's characterization of Topsy throughout the novel clearly confirms this threat. Wicked, funny, energetic Topsy proves her humanity and goodness (though she

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[26] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1851] (New York: Random House Publishing, 1938), 181 (emphasis mine).

[27] Ibid., 226. Pip's laughter, unlike Eva's, is not forgetful.

"did not at once become a saint") only by dropping her drollness, practicing sober behavior and, in adulthood, becoming a missionary to Africa.[28]

As a child and an agent of prophesy, Pip resembles the figures of child evangelism that were prevalent in the children's books, pamphlets, and reform newspapers of the antebellum era. However, because he is black like James Jackson, he is more readily seen by readers as a figure like Topsy. To challenge his readership's racist tendencies in understanding Pip, Melville has Ishmael borrow heavily from the language of child evangelism when describing the boy, albeit with peculiar perversions. Ishmael speaks of Pip as a diamond lit up with "unnatural gases" rendering him "infernally superb."[29] Child evangels are often compared to precious stones; Ishmael is offering an altered version of Susan Paul's language when she contends that James Jackson is a gem that should be "pulled from the rubbish and polished."[30] In both cases, these children are imagined as preciously reflective of some other-worldly light that illuminates this world for those who meet the child evangel. Pip, as we will see, works upon those who notice him and affects their behavior. But Pip also laughs; the utterance becomes a fundamental aspect of his wise insanity. He is effective in getting people to hear him because his laughter resists being heard within the paternalist convention of "natural" racial contentment. Instead, it demands a different sort of listening – a listening predicated upon understanding Pip's short but compelling personal history. Characters in *Moby-Dick* will speak of God and heaven when they speak of Pip, but Melville's evangel is offering visions of a different life on earth, not necessarily making promises about an

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28 Ibid., 535.
29 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 345.
30 Paul, "Preface" to *Memoirs*, 67.

afterlife. Because his laughter continually recalls his bodily presence, his plea for the conversion of the crew is specifically a plea for a better *embodied* life.

Pip's Despair

Pip's peculiar life-after-death is madly literal, and his "death" reminds others of their social responsibility to one another in life. Melville's depiction of the boy evinces awareness and defiance of the problematic ways in which childhood mattered to antebellum Americans. Melville maneuvers through and around cultural expectations of childhood *and* blackness in order to make the cabin boy's behavior haunting, strange, and affecting. As a narrator, Ishmael is initially prone to stereotype, which puts Pip's deviations from the stereotype in sharp relief for the reader. Even though Pip behaves more like James Jackson than like a "normal," healthy, happy child during the course of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael insists to the reader that Pip is "very bright, with that pleasant, genial, jolly brightness peculiar to his tribe."[31] Ishmael then goes on to make the sweeping statement: "For blacks, the year's calendar should show naught but three hundred and sixty-five Fourth of Julys and New Year's Days."[32] Anyone familiar with the plight of African Americans would recognize the pointed irony of Ishmael's claim that the Fourth of July, a holiday designed to celebrate freedom and independence, would be an uncomplicated day of celebration for enslaved people.

Although Ishmael consumes and propagates insidious myths of natural racial temperament, Melville subtly undermines them with recognizable irony. He makes Pip – before his "death" – decidedly unlike Ishmael's paternalist vision. Pip is, for instance, by

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31 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 345.
32 Ibid.

no means carefree. He is aware that he is "insignificant" to those around him. Such knowledge contributes to his jittery, nervous presence in the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Pip's fear for his own life is always mingled with a racial awareness, even though the ship claims to be based on a different, better system of values than that which governs the antebellum United States. In Chapter 40, Pip is dragged from his bed "sulky and sleepy" to provide music for the sailors.[33] Like Susan Paul's James Jackson, Pip complains against the expectation that he, as a black child, should be playful and eager to amuse others. Pip's concessions to the expectations of minstrelsy are hesitant, resistant. He retrieves his tambourine according to the sailors' commands, but they then demand that he play so hard that he "break the jinglers."[34] Soon after he begins to play, he dutifully notes that he has broken his instrument for the sake of their revelry, making an indirect plea that they allow him to stop. They, with a response commensurate with the grotesque imagery of blackface minstrelsy, demand that he "rattle [his] teeth."[35]

Pip is rightfully unsettled and worried by this demand. The violent language of fun that the sailors use with Pip foretells the violence to come later in the chapter. Tashtego, sitting apart from the scene, comments to himself: "That's a white man; he calls that fun: humph!"[36] To punctuate the atmosphere of racial tension, the dancing and cavorting session ends with a confrontation of color metaphors between a Spanish sailor and Daggoo ("Thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind" and "White skin, white liver!"), a racist squall that only dissolves because of a real squall. Tashtego again

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33 Ibid., 150, in Melville's stage directions for Pip.

34 Ibid., 151.

35 Ibid. The response is reminiscent of representations of black laughter in comic almanacs of the times. In the cartoon discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, a passage beneath the image of a black man laughing says: "Cuffee's teeth rattled together like 'de dry music bones'" (*Turner's Comic All-my-nack for 1844*, back page). Interestingly, this connection seems to suggest that the sailors are telling Pip to laugh, which at this point, he certainly does not do.

36 Ibid., 151.

comments: "A row a'low, and a row aloft—gods and men—both brawlers!"[37] Cowering from both the row and the storm, Pip questions the logic of the people around him even more critically than Tashtego, asking "Jollies? Lord help such jollies!"[38] Realizing that his crewmates view him, because he is black, first and foremost as an accompaniment to violent "jollies," he notes how the value of whiteness instilled in the crew devalues him. Continuing his soliloquy, Pip cries "what a squall! But those chaps there are worse yet—they are your white squalls, they. White squalls? white whale, shirr! shirr! Here have I heard all their chat just now, and the white whale—shirr! shirr!"[39] It is unclear whether the ensuing rain or the thought of cruel white men makes him shiver; Melville maintains the ambiguity.

In *Whiteness Visible*, Valerie Babb persuasively argues that *Moby-Dick* functions as an allegory for antebellum race relations. She discusses Melville's use of materials from the surrounding culture in order to depict the nation's destructive pursuit of an ideal of whiteness, rather than of expanded democracy. Babb writes:

> The work's many allusions to literature, art, history, philosophy, theology, and pseudoscience mount a critique of how, over time, all these disciplines contributed to a complex system of values exalting whiteness as a racial and cultural ideal. Its engagement of a variety of cultural visions questions the privileging of a western European vision that subordinated others to its own.[40]

The "variety of cultural visions" in *Moby-Dick* also amounts to Mikhail Bakhtin's "heteroglossia," the play of competing voices that arises as one of the principles of novel

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37 Ibid., 154.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 155.
40 Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 93.

writing and reading.[41] Of all the voices in *Moby-Dick*, Pip's is the most socially low, since he is viewed by his culture as a dependent due to both his age and his race. However, his voice is provocative and demanding. Melville attacks the tangibly terrible reality of a national culture of oppression directly through Pip's commentaries on his social predicament on the *Pequod*. One must note that Pip's predicament becomes maddeningly worse *after* he prays that "thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel fear."[42] The prayer reveals that the language of social dependency hides cultural rationalizations of inhumanity. Pip has to ask the "white God" for protection from those who have claimed power by tasking themselves with his protection. Through Pip's prayer we see how "dependency" and "protection" function as code words for subjection and diminished social status; he is actually *more* endangered when viewed as a dependent. When Pip reappears in Chapter 93, "The Castaway," his forebodings come true. His youth and his blackness make him appear as mere collateral damage to a group of men pursuing literal and metaphorical whiteness, but Ishmael's reverent narration works against this devaluation of Pip.

Pip's laughing evangelism haunts Ishmael's narrative, bringing an aura of hope to an otherwise predetermined story. The little boy's presence, experience, and prophesy provide a frame through which Ishmael contains and understands the story of the *Pequod*, but it also allows the reader to imagine the possibility that the ship's fate could have been otherwise. Through Ishmael, we are given access to the tension between Pip's laughing

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41 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). See Carol Colatrella, *Literature and Moral Reform: Melville and the Discipline of Reading* (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002) for further discussion of Melville's polyvocal narrative style.

42 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 155.

madness and Ahab's frowning despair, a tension which resolves into the message of the axiom "It is better to laugh & not sin than to weep & be wicked." While Ishmael respects the ontological woe afflicting both characters, Pip's laughter affects, draws in, and convinces the narrator to choose the cabin boy's formula for action rather than the captain's. Others also are affected by the haunting humors of Pip. With its marked ephemeral lightness, Pip's voice, especially his laughter, is peculiar when contrasted against much of the hefty theatrical hubbub that Ishmael testifies to hearing on the ship. Pip's laughter becomes a site of multifarious meanings for several characters on the *Pequod*, not unlike the golden doubloon nailed to the mast. Ishmael, Stubb, Queequeg, and Ahab all react very strongly to the "crazy-witty" laughter of the cabin boy after he goes mad. They fall back on the lexicon of evangelism to express the effects that Pip's insane hilarity has on them.

Chapter 93, "The Castaway," contains Ishmael's interpretation of the day "a most significant event befell the most insignificant of the *Pequod*'s crew," the day that Pip's companions left him behind in the ocean while they pursued the "more valuable" whale. Pip's time in the open water, bobbing in the wake of Stubb's neglectful whale-ship, is *not* the "significant event" that drove the boy insane, as Ishmael suggests it to be. Ishmael is too literal. In a gesture of empathy, he imagines himself in Pip's place after the boy turns "his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest."[43] The narrator projects his own awe of the sea onto Pip, blaming the "awful lonesomeness" of the open ocean and the "intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity" for the boy's loss of wits.[44] He cannot imagine the

[43] Ibid., 347.
[44] Ibid.

reality of Pip's abandonment, however, for as a white man Ishmael cannot be told that his body equates to a certain amount of money. The reader must remember that Ishmael, having himself spent time bobbing in the ocean alone, experienced being a survivor rather than a castaway.[45] His assessment of Pip's experience through his own is falsely correlated. As Sharon Cameron notes, Melville carefully informs his reader through Ishmael that "what drives Pip to the depths of reason is not the actual danger into which he is fallen, nor the arduousness of keeping afloat, but the pure horror of abandonment."[46] For Pip, his hours of hopeless solitude in the ocean are no worse, technically, than the "heartless immensity" in which Pip finds himself while still among his companions in the boat; it is before he becomes a castaway that Pip confronts the horrifying prospect that he is already a castaway.

The "significant event" that "drowned the infinite of [Pip's] soul" is narrative rather than experiential; that is, the reality of his body alone in the ocean did not damage him, but rather his being told that this was the fate he deserved.[47] Unaccustomed to being in a whale boat during a chase, Pip leaps from the boat in fear when a whale knocks up against it. He becomes entangled in the harpoon ropes. Stubb and the crew rescue Pip from his first leap from the boat. Even Tashtego, "full of fire of the hunt" and hating

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[45] After the crew pulls Pip – mad – from the ocean, Ishmael tells the reader that "in the sequel of the narrative, it will be seen what like abandonment befell myself" (347). Ishmael identifies with Pip and learns his overarching philosophy toward humanity from him. Indeed the narrator's decision to ask his readers to "Call me Ishmael" alludes to a tale of exile that better references Pip's experience than the narrator's. The story of Ishmael in the Bible has to do with race, enslavement, and abandonment. Abraham prefers his younger son, Isaac, who was born to his wife, rather than Ishmael, who was born to Hagar, an Egyptian bondwoman. Why would Ishmael identify with this story, if he were not first identifying with Pip, when he is less an exile from community and more an orphan by chance?

[46] Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self*: *Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 25.

[47] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 347.

"Pip for a poltroon," stands up to cut the rope tangled about Pip's chest and neck.[48] Pip's face "blue, choked… plainly looked, Do, for God's sake [cut the rope!]," and the harpooner reads and complies with the boy's legible expression of dismay.[49] The fact that Stubb and the crew choose Pip over the whale makes Stubb's order of "Damn him, cut!" less damning.[50] A tacit agreement upon his humanity and its value necessitates their decision.

But, in the process of advising the rescued Pip, Stubb makes a fatal move. Not wanting to leave Pip "too wide a margin to jump in for the future," Stubb turns to an argument of Pip's less-than-human monetary value to deter him from jumping again.[51] Stubb explains, "We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama. Bear that in mind, and don't jump any more."[52] These words signify a failure that Ishmael does not quite understand; however, this failure destroys Pip's faith in his whale-ship community to value his life. A (perhaps too complacently philosophical) Ishmael observes that "though a man loves his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence."[53] This sentence smacks of an ugly rationalization of slavery from the otherwise progressive Ishmael. Having just been demeaned by the dehumanizing language of slavery and having been told that he is thirty times less valuable than a whale, consider that Pip then *makes a second leap from the whaleboat*.

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48 Ibid., 346.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.

Ishmael compassionately but condescendingly considers Pip's second jump the folly of a scared little boy. Notice, however, that the narrative's tone while describing the second leap is completely resigned. Pip is quiet; he makes no plea with his voice or his face this time. Rather, his leap resembles a conscious act – a suicide. Silent, pensive, looking toward the sun instead of toward his community, Pip turns *his* back on the crew, knowing that Stubb has turned his back on him. The elegance of Pip's tragedy in "The Castaway" results from the quiet depth of the boy's feeling, the depth of his revelation that his perception of his own life as priceless is not shared by those around him. This revelation occurred because of Stubb's truly damning words. Stubb's half-humorous admonishment is reason-based and altruistic, but his use of the economics of slavery completely negates any effort to be kind. Pip does not even look back to see if Stubb would act upon his dehumanizing words.

Words devastated Pip's hopes; could actions have salvaged them? If Pip had not spent several hours on the open sea, would he still have gone "about the deck an idiot" for the remainder of the novel?[54] Stubb knew there were two boats close behind that would rescue Pip, and it was only by terrible accident that they did not see him. Ishmael ponders whether Stubb intended to leave the boy behind, and his answer is an emphatic "No." Ishmael pleads Stubb's innocence of being so cruel as to abandon Pip purposefully, but cannot see the irrelevance of apologetically cataloging Stubb's intentions. On the other hand, Stubb's actions – even without ill intentions – may damn him. In a text that serves as a source for this scene, J. N. Reynolds' "Mocha Dick" (1839), a captain confronts the urgent moral decision of saving men or pursuing a whale,

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[54] Ibid., 347.

and the minute description of his emotions while he ponders this choice seem to inspire Melville's more complicated moral question in the story of Pip. The passage reads:

> The boat had been struck and shattered by a whale! 'Good heaven' I exclaimed, with impatience, and in a tone which I fear showed me rather mortified at the interruption, than touched with the proper feeling for the sufferers; 'good heavens!—hadn't they sense enough to keep out of the red water! And I must lose this glorious prize, through their infernal stupidity!' This was the first outbreak of my selfishness. "But we must not see them drown, boys." I added, upon the instant, 'cut the line!'[55]

For all of the excusing that Ishmael does for Stubb, claiming that abandoning crew is part of the business, this story suggests that a social commitment to one's crew might have been part of the business as well. From this source text, Melville picked up on the narrator's expression of great deal of compunction for even *thinking* selfishly.

Melville's complicated rendering of the story of Pip's new state of mind as he is finally drawn back into the ship asks the reader to recognize that social failures can generate a madness of despair in individuals. The social failure Melville references is not just Stubb's, but the nation's practice of slavery. Melville's broad argument is that without some degree of faith that the community cares about the well-being of its members, individuals lose the ability to hope. In Pip's case, he discovers that something as arbitrary as his skin color makes him more likely to be a human sacrifice to greed. Slavery's legacy – its systemization of making human beings so worthless as to be owned and exchanged – is an intellectually devastating reality, proving that community does indeed fail. Here are the foundations of despair. How does one recover from such knowledge? How is it, then, that Pip returns to the ship newly powerful and jocular? For Pip is not, as Sharon Cameron describes him "stabbed to silence by what he feels, unable

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[55] J. N. Reynolds, "Mocha Dick," *The Knickerbocker, New York Monthly Magazine* XIII (May 1839): 377-392.

to tell for himself the terror of his selfhood."[56] He laughs; he speaks. With "mummeries," nonsense, and laughter, Pip bears witness to his own suffering and well as that of his crewmates, assuming a hopeful form of agency in his interactions once he is pulled from the ocean. Mad and having experienced the depths of despair, Pip returns to preach community *still*. His confrontation with God and "the abyss" makes him wise, benevolent, and more playful than he had been before his act of despair. Pip emerges transformed and laughing from the water, prepared to mock and even to evangelize those who once failed him.

Guilt and the Doubloon: Stubb Hears Pip

> "Ha ha! old Ahab! the White Whale; he'll nail ye!"
> – Pip in Chapter 99, "The Doubloon"

Even though Pip is declared an idiot after he is pulled from the ocean, few of the central characters treat him as such. Much like Ishmael, who wonderingly hears Pip and avers that he "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it… so man's insanity is heaven's sense," they recognize a heavy import in Pip's insane ranting.[57] Indeed, each time that Pip appears in the text after his "significant" experience, his words and laughter alter those who hear it. The first person to whom he appears is, appropriately, Stubb. In "The Doubloon," Stubb listens to his fellows soliloquize to the gold piece nailed to the ship's mast, each bringing their own worldview to bear in interpreting the meaning of the doubloon. Characteristically, then, Stubb takes his turn and playfully interprets the final meaning of the doubloon to be a call for perpetually carefree laughter and good humor, that all trouble might be ignored: "Oh, jolly's the

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[56] Cameron, *Corporeal Body*, 25.
[57] Ibid., 347.

word for aye!"[58] Remember, of course, that Pip has quite early in the novel questioned the nature of white men's "jollies," which are violent and abusive. Soon after Stubb reaches his wholly predictable conclusion, Pip approaches, eliciting from Stubb the following aside:

> This way comes Pip—poor boy! Would he had died, or I; he's half horrible to me. He too has been watching all of these interpreters—myself included—and look now, he comes to read, with that unearthly idiot face. Stand away again and hear him. Hark![59]

Pip's presence and his "unearthly idiot face" work on the second mate as powerfully as, though in a different manner from, how Stubb's words worked on the boy – they are debilitating. Pip's potency depends upon Stubb's personal realization of his own guilt. Stubb does not wish to hear Pip; the boy needles his conscience and terrifies him. When Stubb realizes that Pip has not only heard the other crew members' interpretations of the doubloon but his own, Stubb recoils from the space in which he laid claim to irresponsible good humor under Pip's surveillance. He even wishes to himself that either he or Pip had died, for he here acknowledges his role in causing Pip's madness. Ashamed, he gives himself (and the reader) the precise imperative of "Stand away again and hear him. Hark!" He does not want to listen, but he must.

What does it mean that even Stubb's indefatigable good humor cracks upon listening to Pip conjugate and jabber? After all, this is the character who actually does die laughing, grinning down a whale. When Pip appears in Stubb's presence, his language takes on almost too much meaningful meaninglessness for the humorist to bear. Pip's assertion that he himself is a crow and that Stubb is a scarecrow is a thinly veiled allusion to the false authority that whiteness gives Stubb to scare Pip into believing he is

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[58] Ibid., 361.
[59] Ibid., 362.

commodifiable because of his blackness. Stubb tries to joke about being called a scarecrow by Pip, saying "Wonder if he means me?—complimentary!—," but he withdraws from the joke by adding "poor lad!—I could go hang myself."[60] Such language from Stubb is shocking; the man is rattled to the core, and leaves the scene "for [his] sanity."[61] Stubb finds he can take no more of Pip's "crazy-witty" muttering and elects to go where he cannot hear it. Stubb – a veritable personification of the comic industry– finally encounters the laughter of wisdom, rather than of shallow, selfish attention to personal health.[62] Pip brings the plump, pipe-smoking humorist to realize that a joking nature alone will not guarantee health and sanity. Indeed, Stubb guiltily becomes aware that even if he keeps his sanity, his jocular behavior played a role in depriving Pip of his.

As Ahab does later in the novel, Stubb sees a homeopathic "madness" in Pip – and it works to cure him of his problematic, solipsistic view of laughter. Pip's "crazy-witty" perspective does in fact resemble Stubb's tenacious good humor, except that it acknowledges suffering and ridicules unjust American politics of citizenship and the demeaning system of slavery, which quantifies the value of human life. Pip absorbs and reconstitutes Stubb's irreverent humor into jokes that project his disgust for greed and for the Pequod's mission:

> Here's the ship's navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel and what's the consequence? Then again, if it stays here, that is ugly, too, for when aught's nailed to the mast

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60 Ibid., 363.

61 Ibid.

62 Stubb might have well stepped out of a comic publication. He is in admirable good health and good humor. He is plump, jokes all the time, and even teases the more somber crewmen for their "tic-dolly-russ," etc.

> it's a sign that things are desperate. Ha, ha! old Ahab! the White Whale; he'll nail ye![63]

Pip opens with a crude joke about unscrewing the navel leading to one's ass falling off, which turns into a joke about how, ultimately, the greedy and uncaring get "screwed" themselves. As John Bryant argues:

> By virtue of his blackness and his prophetic role… Pip is a constant reminder of the crew's and Ahab's failure to find a social cohesion beyond their mutual greed and quest. His portentous conjugation of the verb "to look" at the end of "The Doubloon" serves a similar function. Unlike the others, he does not interpret the coin but embodies the process of searching they enact. His critique is that everyone is looking at the doubloon but no one is seeing. None of these lookers—Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb—breaks out of solipsism. Pip calls the coin the ship's navel—the omphalos of self-absorption…[64]

I would argue, though, that Pip shakes Stubb out of his comic solipsism, and this is why Stubb runs away from the child. Stubb flees the scene, feeling all too powerfully his own failure in responsibility toward Pip, who is left to speak to no one but the reader. Pip's prophetic role, his evangelical message to look and see, turns outside of the narrative. Quickly crude jokes about the doubloon evolve into "crazy-witty" banter about "an old darkey's wedding ring" found deep in the bark of a tree – the source of which I still cannot determine.[65] Still, the analogy creates a racial connection to Pip's perspective on the doubloon and his mad state. He shifts suddenly to declare "Oh, the gold! The precious, precious gold! The green miser'll hoard ye soon!" as he slides into minstrel

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63 Ibid., 363.

64 Bryant, *Melville in Repose*, 225.

65 See Daniel H. Garrison, "Melville's Doubloon and the Shield of Achilles" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 26, no. 2 (September 1971): 171-184. Garrison does not offer a source for Pip's memory, but he does argue that the significance is that Pip is prophesying that the doubloon will be lost inside the mast just as the ring was lost inside the tree, becoming meaningless and story-less within layers of material forged over time.

songs.[66] These exclamations mock the value put upon objects – cold metal and money – over humanity. The sarcasm of his tone of praise for the gold, and the bitter satisfaction he expresses in knowing its end reflects Pip's wound. He laughs at a collapsing system, ridiculing its failures for the *benefit* of anyone who hears, including the reader. Melville insists upon Pip being heard – the reader will hear the bells that warn of failed community – but the crier cannot be heard by the rest of the crew yet, in part because of a refusal to listen. However, Pip will have auditors again, though, before he is permanently immured.

The Reminder of a "Little Duty Ashore," or Queequeg's Pip-Talk[67]

When Queequeg is sent into the bowels of the ship to do the less-than-romantic work of shifting around casks of oil to check their soundness, he gets ill. Manhandling heavy casks stored deep within the *Pequod*, he is, according to Ishmael "seized with a fever, which brought him nigh to his endless end."[68] Chapter 110, "Queequeg in His Coffin," turns comically upon the idea that Ishmael's pagan friend believes he has – and does indeed appear to have – the power to choose the time and manner of his "endless end." All of the crew is convinced that Queequeg will die, and when he "suddenly rallie[s]" they are shocked.[69] Ishmael captures their incredulity over the story:

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66 Melville, Moby-Dick, 363. In this monologue, Pip also enigmatically talks about God "going a'blackberrying." Pip might be reference a particularly cruel antebellum pun. In one antebellum comic almanac that I have examined, that phrase was used specifically to pun on "burying" in a caption which accompanied an image of a white man pulling a cart of dead black bodies. See *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1834* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1833), which also contains joke poems that are partly abolitionist in tone.

67 The section title, punning on Pip's "pep-talk" to Queequeg, was suggested to me by Jeannine DeLombard.

68 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 395.

69 Ibid., 398.

> … he, in substance said, that the cause of his sudden convalescence was this; – at a critical moment, he had just recalled a little duty ashore, which he was leaving undone; and therefore had changed his mind about dying: he could not die yet, he averred. They asked him, then, whether to live or die was a matter of his own sovereign will and pleasure. He answered, certainly. In a word, it was Queequeg's conceit, that if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him: nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable, unintelligent destroyer of that sort.[70]

One is so baffled and impressed by Queequeg's conceit that one forgets the other side of the coin. If a man may make up his mind to live, he may also make up his mind to die. Good-humored, proud, dignified Queequeg had decided to die, was essentially suicidal – why? Furthermore, what could be the "little duty ashore" that functions so potently as an impetus for his quick convalescence?

Queequeg's value on the *Pequod*, his prestige as a harpooner, rests on the fact that "dignity and danger go hand in hand."[71] However, his high status does not keep him from doing menial labor, for Ishmael explains that "till you get to be captain, the higher you rise the harder you toil."[72] Ishmael's explanation of Queequeg's illness suggests that he suffers from a disease of dignity as much as, if not more than, an illness of body. The way his work is viewed is degrading. Ishmael tells the reader that, "stripped to his woolen drawers, the tattooed savage [Queequeg] was crawling about amid that dampness and slime, like a green spotted lizard at the bottom of a well."[73] Spatially, all those hierarchically below him on the ship are able to look "down upon him there," not only in a mean position, but practically naked and – even in Ishmael's loving eyes – as tiny and dehumanized as a lizard. Queequeg may well get a fever under the dank conditions, but according to his own formulation, he allows the fever to kill him. As Queequeg is dying,

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 395.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 394

Ishmael describes him becoming more and more wan, emaciated, and ethereal. His eyes attain a "strange softness of luster" and on his hammock he awes those who look upon him.[74] As he is so close to calling the hammock his deathbed, Queequeg regains his dignity and pride, and Ishmael's language, again, shows the change. Now the harpooner is no lizard; he is "an author from the dead" of "last revelation."[75] He skyrockets from animal to authority. Now he is not lowly, but "lifted higher and higher towards his destined heaven."[76] At this point in the text, Queequeg appears to be the dying evangel, not Pip.

However, at this moment of Queequeg's reification in the eyes of the crew, Pip enters to chime in, to comment. Queequeg has dramatically situated himself in his coffin to try it out and, with spiritual calm and pithiness, declared: "'Rarmai' (it will do; it is easy)."[77] Ishmael's translation, which grants two meanings to Queequeg's utterance, evinces the manner in which those who watch and listen hang upon his words and gestures. By contrast, Pip approaches the coffin not to listen but to speak. Furthermore, as Pip comes to speak of Pip, he decenters the romance of Queequeg's deathbed. Weeping over the coffin, he asks Queequeg to run an errand for him in the afterlife: "Seek out one Pip, who's now been missing long…If ye find him, then comfort him; for he must be very sad; for look! he's left his tambourine behind; I found it."[78] Starbuck interjects, commenting to himself that Pip's rantings are "in this strange sweetness of his lunacy, bring[ing] heavenly vouchers of all our heavenly homes."[79] Starbuck's remarks

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74 Ibid., 395.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 396.
77 Ibid., 397.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 398.

function to make us pay attention to the "heavenly" aspect of Pip's nonsense rather than Queequeg's looming final words.[80] Starbuck emphatically tells the crew (and the reader) to listen: "Hark! he speaks again: but more wildly now."[81] Even Queequeg takes heed. Ishmael notes that "Queequeg lay with closed eyes, as if in a dream" while listening to Pip. The boy stands over the coffin shaking his tambourine, praising Queequeg's valor and condemning his own cowardice.

Pip chants that "Queequeg dies game! I say; game game game! But base little Pip, he died a coward; died all a'shiver; out upon Pip!"[82] Pip's words of ironic praise hang over the man in the coffin: Queequeg is choosing to die, choosing to give up, while all of Pip's actions (up to his second leap) begged for life. He only gave up on his life when he realized its valuelessness within the *Pequod*'s system; now, living in what could be viewed as a resurrection, Pip disdains the act of suicide as craven. The difference between Pip's and Queequeg's situations actually makes Queequeg's resignation seem more cowardly, for the *Pequod* is Pip's only system, the only community in which he draws his sense of self-value as a "dependent" child, while Queequeg the adult lives between cultures. Queequeg's exoticness flags his distance from the American system of slavery, for he cannot be told he is less valuable than a whale. Because Queequeg is in reality *not* "game" and is choosing to die because of a feeling of personal insult, Pip's chants ring out as sarcasm. Their fears are actually the same – they both attempted to flee devaluation. By the end of Pip's tirade, his cry of "No, no! shame upon all cowards – shame upon them! Shame! Shame!" reverberates in the dying man's ears as a

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80 Starbuck's near-perfect earnestness, and Melville's clear attempt to contrast him with Stubb, makes him appear like a (stilted) personification of reform culture. In this case, Melville seems to accuse reformers, just as the comic industry did, of being good, but lacking any mollifying sense of humor.

81 Ibid., 398.

82 Ibid.

condemnation of his suicidal resignation to death within a system in which he *does* have power.[83] Such resignation is more shameful than Pip’s rational despair, for while their suffering is analogous, it is not equivalent.

Pip – overstepping his boundaries even as an excusable idiot – is removed from Queequeg’s side. Moments after “Pip was led away,” Ishmael notes that “Queequeg suddenly rallied,” elected to live, and within a few days “pronounced himself fit for a fight.”[84] Pip rallies Queequeg by giving him a task, therein snatching him from self-pity and suicidal despair. No errand calls Queequeg back to the living other than attending to the responsibility of supporting his fellows while he can.[85] Pip reaches Queequeg; Queequeg hears Pip.

Hear Ye, Hear Ye: The Bell-Boy and Ahab’s Wicked Woe

> “Who art thou, boy?”
> “Bell-boy, sir; ship’s crier; ding, dong, ding! Pip! Pip! Pip!”[86]

Confronting the mad little boy who, perched at the rail of the ship, is crying that he himself is in the water, Ahab’s patient question implicitly and sanely asks: If Pip is in the ocean, who is the boy standing beside me?—How are you *not* you? The question

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83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 399.

85 Queequeg proves his conversion more thoroughly through his treatment of his own coffin. In Chapter 126, “The Life Buoy,” an anonymous member of the *Pequod*’s crew dies in a fall from the mast, and a life-preserver, thrown after him, sinks as well. To Starbuck’s surprise, Queequeg "hint[s] a hint" that his coffin might be used to replace the old life-buoy (430). Queequeg's hint reflects his new frame of mind, his transformation of perspective given him by Pip's laughter and ridicule. In a line of thinking akin to William Cullen Bryant's “Thanatopsis,” Queequeg has come to view the commonness of death, or the commonness of suffering, as a connection to his fellow human beings that makes life valuable enough to hold on to, to accept its hardships in the hopes of helping others. He no longer ruminates on his personal humiliation; the idea of equality in death is a path to good humor and salvation. Starbuck reads the coffin as detestable irony; Queequeg's response registers benevolent transcendence that he reaches with Pip’s help. Queequeg therefore sees his coffin, rationally, as potentially helpful, while Starbuck shudders at the innovation.

86 Ibid., 427.

gently – comically – highlights the incongruity of Pip’s ranting at the rail. Still, the madness of this frightened, “brightest” child of Melville’s *Pequod* is not illogical. Pip’s answer for Ahab is that Pip *is* no longer Pip. For the bulk of the novel he has become a call – a bell, a crier – a disturbing laughter that reminds all who will listen of his new state of non-existence. He is mostly sound and very little body, excepting that his laughter necessarily reminds us that he remains embodied. As in the tradition of child evangels, Pip’s voice must transcend his body. His voice floats to members of the crew through the fog; his laughter looms like a ghost over the decks. Although Ishmael with playful literality had called him “the most insignificant” member of the crew, Pip becomes arguably the most audible person on board, affecting those around him in deeply significant ways.

In Chapter 40, when the sailors are calling for him to play his tambourine, several hail him as “bell-boy.” Once mad, Pip plays with the term bell-boy, eschewing the standard definition of a boy who comes to serve those who ring a bell. Rather, he is calling himself a boy who tintinabulates, a boy-bell. Savvily inverting the meaning (but not the words), he suggests that others ought to listen to him. He literally performs his bellness subsequently with the cry “ding, dong, ding!” He succeeds this chiming with an echo of “Pip! Pip! Pip!,” ringing a reminder of his singular story and his personal despair. Although his cries recall despair, the boy remains eerily bright and comic in his delusional wanderings on the ship. The effect of his “ringing laughter” is that he can no longer be heard to laugh in the tradition of minstrelsy nor as a mere “picaninny.” Madness and transcendence become muddled. He continues to laugh, to sing, and to pun – with ponderous implications – but also with hope.

Hope is the one thing which the captain refuses to hear; he believes in a cruel God. The influential work of Lawrance Thompson in *Melville's Quarrel with God* (1952) has lastingly depicted an author in angry outrage rebelling against a strict Calvinist upbringing, portraying his works as complex subversions of religious orthodoxy. Thompson's reading has positioned Melville's literary messages in sympathy with Ahab's energetic despair. By allowing Pip to figure importantly in the novel, we may see a "more profoundly ambiguous" and, indeed, a more cautiously optimistic authorial vision take shape.[87] For while Ahab is unwilling to entertain the possibility that humanity has the ability to alter its own circumstances, Pip – in his hysterical way – actually effects change, as we have seen in his powerful influence upon Ishmael, Stubb, and Queequeg.

When Ahab conceives a fondness for Pip, it is because he believes Pip and he are similar in their madnesses. F. O. Matthiessen argues "the humanities" attributed to Ahab by Captain Peleg "rise to the surface in his relation to Pip," but I would say that it is essential to realize that his actions are not genuinely sympathetic.[88] We must see the incongruity of the match – not just of an old white man with a young black child – but of a hater-of-god and an evangel. Matthiessen remarks the moment in which, after recognizing Pip's madness, Ahab makes the shocking gesture of taking the boy's hand. Ahab touching another human being – let alone one as socially low as little Pip – seems like a tender, humane gesture. But it is a gesture that could only be Ahab's, for as he holds the hand, he simultaneously cries:

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[87] To use the language of Gordon Roper's review of Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel with God* in *Modern Philology* 51, no. 1 (August, 1953): 70-72. Roper writes: "Surely Melville's vision was more profoundly ambiguous than it is here made out to be, and his achievement greater than that of a gifted but spoiled boy deriding his elders?"

[88] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 449.

> Oh, ye frozen heavens! Look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines. Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touches my inmost centre, boy; though art tied to me by one woven of my heart-strings. Come, let's down.[89]

Ahab sees Pip's suffering, but misrepresents it. Unable to imagine suffering being caused by anything but God's hateful will, he does not – or will not – see that his own crew and he himself are the true abandoners. He does not recognize that he and Pip suffer differently. Pip's quiet response pointedly avers that no hand of God was necessary to help him: "Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this [Ahab's hand], perhaps he had ne'er been lost! This seems to me, sir, as a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by."[90] But again, Ahab does not hear Pip. Together they walk to the cabin, Ahab inveighing impotently against "the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude."[91] It is Ahab who is oblivious and knows not what he does; he is as blind to the suffering of his newly appreciated "idiot" boy as he imagines the heavens to be. What he loves is the *appearance* of confirmation of his own theodicy in the boy, not the boy himself.

Hindsight allows Ishmael to tell the story with an awareness of both Ahab's misunderstandings and Pip's profound insight. When he tells of seeing the incongruous pair together, he emphasizes the differences between their insane outlooks via their trademark sounds:

> …Ahab moodily stalked away with the weapon; the sound of his ivory leg, and the sound of the hickory pole, both hollowly ringing along every plank. But ere [Ahab] entered his cabin, a light, unnatural, half-bantering,

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89 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 428.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.

> yet most piteous sound was heard. Oh, Pip! Thy wretched laugh, thy idle but unresting eye; all thy strange mummeries not unmeaningly blended with the black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and mocked it![92]

In this passage, Ishmael toys with the conventional metaphorical linkage of seriousness, literal weightiness, and meaning. He reverses the metaphor: lightness is momentous. To suffer and to live on helpfully is, likewise, momentous. Pip's laughing perspective, altered through wretchedness, is privileged in this reversal. Ahab's stern sincerity rings hollow, just as the sounds of his weapon and wound ring hollow as he stalks the decks of the *Pequod*. Ponderousness is meaningless. Pip's laughter, on the other hand, floats buoyantly and significantly over Ahab's empty reverberations – offering meaning without self-important seriousness, truth without overly righteous sincerity.

Irresponsible ponderousness is the downfall of Ahab and of the *Pequod*. Ahab chooses to "weep and be wicked," to despair to the degree that he can no longer imagine himself or others as capable of affecting good in the world.[93] The captain's decision in Chapter 129, "The Cabin." to send Pip from his side reflects this despair. Addressing Pip, Ahab explains:

> The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health.[94]

Contrary to his homeopathic reasoning, Ahab's need to have Pip out of his sight betrays the difference between their madnesses. Ahab's madness drives all toward destruction; Pip's draws those around him in another direction. Ahab has rejected all hope and good

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92 Ibid., 405.

93 In Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," the title character seeks the "unpardonable sin," which is, ironically, to believe that there could be something a human being could do that was unforgivable by an all-merciful God. This revelation drives Ethan to kill himself, laughing maniacally as he burns to death in a kiln. Melville might have had his literary companion's story in mind as he wrote *Moby-Dick*.

94 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 436.

humor and, as Charles Olson puts it “dies with an acceptance of his damnation.”[95] Ahab therefore rejects the possibility of psychological recovery which tiny Pip gently offers to those who would hear him, and ultimately destroys not only himself, but an entire community.[96]

The crew of the *Pequod* listens to Pip’s laughter because of its strangeness and *hears* it because of their disrupted expectations; the utterance demands unconventional reflection to be at all understood. They must ignore traditions which essentialized and rationalized laughter from African American children, and instead consider the *specific* history behind Pip’s expression. It cannot be the laughter of a black child happy with his lot as a cabin boy on a whale ship. Nor is it the artificial jocularity of a minstrel performance. Each of the characters hears something different in Pip’s laughter, but Ahab’s decision to cease listening, and therein to cease interpreting, is the moment of the narrative’s turn.[97] Melville’s novel suggests that the end of listening is the end of hope. Through the character of Pip, the unstable position of the listener – the subjective interpreter of another person’s meanings – is imbued with a new degree of urgency. It is no matter that interpretations might be mistaken; one must care about what other people

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[95] Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville* (New York: Grove Press, 1947), 59.

[96] Ahab also cannot bear to listen to the blacksmith Perth, who endures his suffering patiently. He tells him: "Well, well; no more. Thy shrunk voice sounds too calmly, sanely woeful to me. In no Paradise myself, I am impatient of all misery in others that is not mad. Thou should'st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad? How can'st thou endure without being mad? Do the heavens yet hate thee, that thou can'st not go mad?” (403) Therefore, Ahab blasphemously christens a new harpoon with the blood of his pagan harpooners. Ahab is no longer simply monomaniacal. He consciously and unabashedly – fully aware of other possibilities – embraces what he knows to be a destructive mindset and course of action. His madness shifts to self-aware diabolism.

[97] Pip’s effectiveness as a voice and a figure within the novel depends upon who he is in American culture. For this reason, I take issue with Sharon Cameron’s reading of Pip as “not a discrete character, is part of Ahab’s mind” (*Corporeal Body*, 38). As much as Cameron’s reading coincides with mine (except perhaps, for her being as nihilistic in reading Melville’s text as Lawrance Thompson had been), her refusal to treat Pip as a representation of a person, rather than a *thing*, disturbs me. The long tradition of privileging Ahab erupts in her text once more, erasing the humanity of Pip – a double injustice to an already wrongfully under-studied character.

might be trying to communicate through what they say or what they do. One must be willing to accept that the message might not be what is expected. The challenge is, in fact, listening against expectation.

Chapter 4: The Impelling Laughter of Henry Clay Lewis’s Curious Widow and Pierre Janet's Irène

Henry Clay Lewis (1825-1850) was a medical doctor, trained at the Louisville Medical Institute in Kentucky. He maintained practices in Mississippi and Louisiana until he died – very young – but before his death Lewis composed over forty short stories with his medical practice serving for his literary inspiration. His stories, written in the tradition of Southwestern humor, were collected in 1851 into a book titled *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor*. They abound with botched house calls, slapstick interactions with corpses, and comically painful cures. Edwin T. Arnold places Lewis’s writings “within a tradition of grotesque medical comedy in which the body is dehumanized, objectified, often reduced to parts,” and writes that much of the stories’ humor arises from the writer’s willingness to toy with contemporary socio-cultural taboos in addition to taboos of bodily sanctity.[1]

In such dehumanizing, violently masculine writing as Lewis's – narratives that combine the paternalistic authority of medicine with the machismo of the frontier – one does not expect to discover a subversively anti-misogynist plot. However, I argue that Henry Clay Lewis's story of “impelling” laughter in “The Curious Widow” contains precisely that. Lewis, like Melville, carefully deconstructs (one might even say, dissects) contemporary notions of marginalized laughter in order to bring his characters and his readers to a point of revelation regarding the wrongful tendency to misinterpret the experiences of others.

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[1] Edwin T. Arnold, “Introduction” to *Odd Leaves in the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), page xx. Another example of Lewis crossing cultural taboos is in “Stealing a Baby.” His narrator not only steals a dead infant from the arms of its dead mother in order to take it home for dissection. He steals a dead African American infant, and accidentally drops the baby from his coats – in a manner of farcical birthing – in front of his horrified fiancée and her racist father.

Lewis brought to his writing the intimate knowledge of white male professional attitudes toward women to his storytelling, specifically that of an antebellum medic. As Dana D. Nelson argues, medical materials from the nineteenth century evince a culture in which "the pervasiveness and significance of female incommensurability makes the gynecological study a comprehensive and even heroic inquiry for the medical student."[2] That is, nineteenth-century writing about medicine represents women as inexplicable "by nature"; a male doctor could prove his brilliance (and assert his dominance) by illuminating the weaknesses and disorders of the female body while simultaneously bolstering the ideological superiority of men. Nelson delineates how medical interpretations of women's bodies helped to manage "anxieties generated with the middle classes' move toward professionalization – the promises of upward mobility, in other words, combined with men's desires for the (differentiating) status and the (equalizing) guarantees of whiteness."[3] Lewis's narrator, Madison Tensas, possesses these anxieties in abundance, as he is a young doctor looking to prove himself. Tensas's insecurities serve as catalysts for humor in the stories because his projections of comprehensive understanding upon his patients generally turn out to be comically and hubristically incorrect.

The humor of Lewis's story "The Curious Widow" functions in just this manner, with Tensas anxiously misdiagnosing a woman's laughter. As discussed earlier, the commercialization of laughter on the early antebellum marketplace had aligned its meanings with political potency when it erupted from a white male body. By purchasing comic texts or attending risible performances, antebellum Anglo men could shore up

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2 Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 138.

3 Ibid., 137.

viability as “good citizens” by cultivating a nationalistic sense of humor and by laughing themselves into altruistically useful good health. Women, on the other hand, were not allowed the same “voice,” and therefore could be perceived as threatening if they laughed like men. Within the system of American politics, women's bodies and their utterances were less viable in the public sphere. Female laughter – like menstruation, pregnancy, and illness – was used by medics to map weakness and disability upon women's bodies officially and authoritatively. With insider knowledge of this system within medicine, Henry Clay Lewis creates a joke about white male anxiety and the mysteries of female laughter in “The Curious Widow.” To better understand how Lewis's story confronts and condemns conventional understandings of women and women's laughter, let us examine some of these conventions more closely.

The Mysteries of Women's Laughter

Sitting down to his diary, a young Harvard graduate named Levi Lincoln Newton wrote with affection about time spent with a young woman who might have been a sweetheart:

> Nov. 13, 1839: I spent the evening playing backgammon with Sarah Anne and had the good luck to beat her. But we always get into a great frolic when we play and care but little about the game, the principal object being to laugh. For this Miss T-- is famous, she is always laughing or at least always when it is becoming and possesses one of the best tempers ever met with. That she was never angry I cannot say but that I have never seen her so and cannot believe she can be.[4]

In the process of praising Miss T (Sarah Anne Treadwell), Levi implicitly explains to himself that she is worthy of his attentions, as she “possesses one of the best tempers ever met with,” and that is, in fact, a laughing temperament. Through Levi’s rosy glasses,

[4] Levi Lincoln Newton, personal diaries, diary 4 (November 13, 1839), American Antiquarian Society.

Miss Treadwell is "always laughing or at least always when it is becoming." Nancy Walker, when seeking answers to the question of why the nineteenth century produced more sentimental than humorist women writers, notes that at the time "the witty woman was not attractive, not feminine; she was considered too strong, too threatening, too 'masculine'."[5] Does this diary of a young New England man, a private record of feelings and perceptions, confirm that men of Levi's time differentiate between a woman who is a wit and a woman who has a laughing temperament? Perhaps – but Levi does not specify who jokes. While it is tempting to imagine that Levi prefers a woman who laughs at his jokes but does not make her own, thus forcing poor Miss Treadwell into a subjugated and collusive position, the language of Levi's diary allows room for Sarah Anne to assert her own sense of humor, to participate equally in this "great frolic." They are playing games together, agreeing that winning and losing is not the goal, but rather that "the principle object [is to] laugh."

Would Sarah Anne have agreed that laughing was the "principle object" of their time together, or was she merely playing by the rules of a different game which mandated her controlled participation in "frolic" in order to be attractive? Certainly antebellum women such as Sarah Anne Treadwell were proscribed and disenfranchised, and yet to press an interpretation of subjugation upon this playful scene, so briefly recorded in a young man's diary, is to imagine a woman as a powerless victim in what might actually be a dynamic situation. After all, one may infer from the diary entry that Levi himself does a good deal of laughing – perhaps provoked by Sarah Anne's wit and humor. I would like to suggest, after looking at this short diary entry, that there are at least two sets

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[5] Linda Morris, ed.,"Wit, Sentimentality, and the Image of Women" in *American Women's Humor Essays* (New York: Garden Publishers, 1994), 81.

of expectations that a modern reader must examine before she can begin to imagine the context of such situations.

First, there is the obstacle of scholarly hindsight, which tends to look back to previous centuries with a pitying eye for victimization and oppression, and overlook the ways in which people defy and subvert such treatment. As Frances Smith Foster points out in the introduction to her anthology *Love and Marriage in Early African America*, people find a way to do anything which they are formally forbidden to do – hence Foster is able to make a collection which should not, theoretically, exist.[6] With less pity and more contextualization, modern readers must evaluate the degree to which nineteenth-century interpretations of situations offer insights into expectations or realities. That is, although texts discuss whether or not a woman "ought" to laugh, they do not prove that such prescriptions for behavior were followed. If we read credulously a report that all hegemonic expectations in all situations were fulfilled, we will surely be led to some rather boring misunderstandings. Indeed, the very existence of discussion of the propriety of women's laughter suggests that it was powerfully there. For example, in discussing Miss Treadwell's laughter, it is possible that Levi elides a discussion of her wit (which might very well be there, against his hopes), instead inserting praise for her temperament (which should be there, in line with his hopes). After all, our diarist leaps associatively to comment that he has never seen her angry, hinting that her laughter is always affable and presumably collusive with the expectations of her male companions.

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[6] Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Love & Marriage in Early African America*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2008), xv. Foster writes: "More important, how could I forget that just because something is illegal, doesn't mean it isn't done. […] I'm learning to think of laws as evidence that something was being done so often and by so many that it threatened or irritated others who decided 'there ought to be a law against that.'" Foster goes on to comment about the desire to change other people's behavior – a desire that may be loudly and prolifically expressed – but actually does little good.

She does not laugh in ridicule – according to Levi – but why *does* she laugh? Could she, even as a disenfranchised woman, be asserting her good health and hearty citizenship in a manner similar to her male companion? Levi’s qualification hints at a history of expectations regarding women’s laughter which he leaves unelaborated, and neatly forgets the possibility of difference or misinterpretation. In the world of his diary, Levi may complacently avoid expounding upon when it is or is not becoming for a woman to laugh. Culturally-literate and securely-entrenched in the upper-middle class social circle of Worcester, Massachusetts, the young man intuits and then perpetuates ideals regarding the propriety of laughter by women as it occurs in context. To even partially rehabilitate this context takes some work, an open mind, and a sense of duty to imagine even subjugated persons as having some degree of agency.

So, under what circumstances were the expectations regarding “becoming” and “unbecoming” laughter different for men than for women, and how did those expectations affect their realities? Chapter one, “Selling Laughter,” traced how burgeoning commercialism of antebellum entertainment could at time use the sale of laughter to imagine the “American public” in broader terms than were conventional, at times including women, children, and non-white citizens, but that white men were imagined as the ideal consumers. Typical healthy laughter was conceived as something pursued and purchased by ideal citizens engaged in being better citizens, and therefore something most appropriate to male, financially-solvent, white citizens. Other laughters would be – almost by default – atypical, strange, and irrational. For this reason, marginal members of society were relegated to the position of being the object of the joke. Flipping through joke books, magazines, and almanacs, one finds joke after joke like the

one below, about women, particularly women who are old maids, blue stockings, or widows:[7]


Lowell, fortunately the hardness of his sconce prevented any injury to him
seif. The bell of the fac-
tory had just rung, and
the Belle's of the factory
were coming into the yard
by scores, after having
recovered from the con-
sternation of finding a
man they hastened to raise
our hero, and having re-
moved the machinery that
encompassed him, they
immediately got to logger-
heads as to the proper dis-
position of the lucky waif
Providence had so kindly
sent them. Eliza Lyons
proposed cutting him up
and distributing our hero
by peacemeals, but that
was most indignantly re-
fused by Eunice Perkins,
she'd have a whole man
or she would'nt have any,
that she would'nt, Han-
nah Rogers offered to play
a game of chequers for
him, but as they all knew
she could jump three men
at once, none would play
with her, it was finally
settled by Jemima Tucker
who insisted there was no
fun like a greased pole,
therefore she proposed
placing their prize on top
of a thirty foot pòst
and each one shov
their agility, and th
one that reached th
top should bear of
the He thing as he
own, the fun of thi
took with the whol
party, in a few mo
ments the Major wa
elevated, and the pol
slushed, the scramble
commenced, and away
went Betty,Sally,Mol-
ly, Polly, Jenny, Liz-
zy, such a getting up
poles never was seen
in Lowell before, af-
ter the vain attempt
of some hundred dam-
sels the prize was
gained oy a six foot
old maid from Bidde-
ford, whose early
practice in Maine
woods in search of
spruce pitch enabled
her to win the poor
Major with ease. His
after adventures will
be detailed in the new
series of caricatures,
published by Strong,
96 Nassau-street New
York.

In this story, an eligible bachelor stumbles upon a community in which the women drastically outnumber the men. Without consulting him – indeed, treating him like an object rather than a person – the single women of the town gather to decide his marital fate fairly and democratically. They determine that whomever of the women can

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7 *Wyman's Comic Almanac for the Times, 1856* (New York: T. W. Strong, 98 Nassau St., 1855), unpaginated. Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University. This cartoon appears also in *Elton's Comic All-my-nack for 1845* (New York: R. H. Elton, 1844).

get to him atop a greased pole can have him. The risibility of the story runs both ways; one laughs at both the reduction of a man to a prize to be won (the inverse of romantic portrayals of women) and also at women being willing to participate in competition as ridiculous and “unladylike” as the climbing of a greased pole.[8] Similar to this cartoon, comic production of the antebellum era tends to position women as objects of laughter, but women were additionally imagined to be politically and socially unacceptable laughers. Those who laughed outside of the commercialized and politicized world of rights laughed in a suspect – and indeed, sexually unattractive or even deviant – manner. Any hilarity coming from a female body might therefore be viewed as inappropriate or “inexplicable,” except within very particular contained forms, such as the amiable laughter hinted at in Levi’s diary. The laughter of marginal persons would most often be internal to the comedy, participating willingly in the atmosphere of good humor which encouraged the comfort and enjoyment of normative readers and audiences.

Although it is unreasonable to assume that women of the nineteenth century were entirely unable to express ridicule, aggression, resentment, attraction, or any number of potent political commentaries through laughter, I would like to consider the more difficult question of whether their laughter was fully or partially understood, and consider the mechanisms through which it was willfully misunderstood by their contemporary auditors. What were the risks that a laugh might be seen not as a woman’s response to

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[8] Other jokes mock widows' sexual frustration (such as a cartoon in which a burglar threatens a widow with rape if she screams, at which point she screams even more loudly) and widow's and old maid's pretensions to attractiveness. *Elton’s 1844* contains a cartoon of a young dandy wooing an elderly, toothless, buxom widow saying: “Oh, my charming, angelic widow! How can you be so cruel to your devoted admirer? ‘Tis true, there is a slight difference in our ages, (*aside*, and in our purses too,) but with hearts that love, such considerations become frivolous!” Similar jokes are rampant. Like Madison Tensas in “The Curious Widow,” the act of ridiculing or behaving cruelly to an elderly or widowed woman seemed self-evidently justified to a large audience. The anxiety over an “uncontrolled” woman seemed to overshadow any pity for a woman's loss of a loved one, or her potential loneliness.

something risible, but as evidence of her inherent sexual lasciviousness? Looking back to an engraving on the cover of Elton's publication – and knowing that he was also a publisher of pornography – one might ask whether the woman's grin could just as easily be interpreted as a come-hither look?[9] Or, could it be viewed as the grimace of hysteria? Frequently, women’s hilarity is treated as a conundrum when it is acknowledged in nineteenth-century texts. Even when female laughter is heard as beautiful instead of mad, it is represented as mystifying. While maintaining an overtly paternalist sentiment regarding how ladies’ laughter is beneficial to male bodies and also entertaining to their masculine psyches, the florid passage below ripples with a romanticized confession that the implied male author could not possibly understand women’s laughter:

> A woman has no natural grace more bewitching than a sweet laugh. It is like the sound of flutes on water. It leaps from her heart in a clear, sparkling trill; and the heart that bears it feels as if bathed in the exhilarating springs. Have you ever pursued an unseen fugitive through the trees, led on by her fairy laugh, now here, now there, now lost, now found? We have. And we are pursuing the wandering voice to this day. Sometimes it comes to us in the midst of care or sorrow, or irksome business; and then we turn away and listen, and hear it ringing through the room like a silver bell, with power to scare away the evil spirit of the mind.[10]

Fugitive, elusive, bewitching – these adjectives suggest that a degree of the supernatural renders a woman’s laugh into the intrinsically benevolent and sexually alluring force which the author wants it to be. By insisting upon a supernatural element, the author refuses to attempt to understand intellectually a woman’s laugh as anything other than a “bewitching” invitation to pursue (and presumably attain) her.

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[9] See page 66 of this dissertation for the engraving I am referencing.

[10] "A Woman's Laugh," *The Cincinnati Gazette* (Cincinnati, Ohio) 18 August 1853. Thank you to Stacey Robertson of Baylor University for finding and sending this article to me.

When not transformed into dancing fairy hilarity, women’s laughter was also picked up by medical doctors of the era, and classified as a medical mystery under the category of hysteria. Henry Clay Lewis wrote, surprisingly perhaps, against the diagnosis of hysteria and shock as that diagnosis was used to elide the possibility that real risibility was behind women’s “hysterics.” This elision is an Ahab-like refusal to listen which reflects much broader refusals to listen, but Lewis ultimately does not accept the traditional medical view of women's laughter being inexplicable. Rather, the literary components of Lewis's narrative suggest broader implications of oppression without obscene universalizing. “The Curious Widow” precociously and subversively represents the social production of a widow's predicament, and then criticizes the cultural annihilation of the evidence of suffering among unhusbanded women, by allowing a widow's laughter to ring out clearly and meaningfully.

“The Curious Widow”

Henry Clay Lewis is unique in his literary representations of laughter’s instabilities and the political consequences of how one understands or misunderstands it during the era. Edwin Arnold, in his introduction to Lewis’s only book *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor*, immediately addresses the challenge of reading Lewis today: “Lewis resides down below or on the fringe, too shocking and unruly” for most critics to care to study.[11] One does find in *Odd Leaves* stories that shock and appall. They disturb modern readers with creative violence, as well as humor that is most often directed toward the socially-stigmatized groups of the era: women, immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans. Arnold explains to modern readers:

[11] Edwin Arnold, “Introduction,” xii.

> For, yes, while it was a different age with different sensibilities, and yes, while we are today in some ways more cautious and prudent in choosing our objects of laughter, can we truly maintain that the astonishing depiction of grotesque physical outrages, of assault and pain and mutilation and death, which runs like a hot wire through this genre, is somehow primarily amusing? [...] While we may indeed laugh, we must sometimes gasp at our laughter – and wonder anew at the range of emotions laughter can reveal.[12]

Arnold wants to produce reasons for reading an understudied author by engaging laughter’s slippery cultural relativism and acknowledging that this humor of “a different age” is racist, misogynist, and violent. What he ends up with is “wonder… at the range of emotions laughter can reveal.” In one story in particular, “The Curious Widow,” this “wonder” about laughter – with its varied meanings and intricate relationships with volatile elements of antebellum culture – is exactly what Lewis attempts to produce in his work. His writing is not only designed to elicit laughter, but to ask readers to reconsider what laughter can mean. The story culminates with laughter that eludes authoritative interpretation because of its refusal to express what the authoritative figure of the story desires.

Lewis’s nearly forgotten story “The Curious Widow” is not a typical, masculinist story from the frontier tradition. To the contrary, it works against the concealment and containment of the experiences of female victims by imbuing a suffering female figure with significant power through her laughing voice. A widow’s laughter, insisting upon unconventional interpretation, illuminates how early nineteenth century culture produced precedents for contemporary myths and blind-spots in hegemonic narratives. Revealing hidden and dismissed stories, his writing encourages readers to consider how and why a

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[12] Ibid.

marginalized person would laugh, and therein guides readers to reconsider, at an unusual juncture, both the conventions of risibility and of “real” suffering.

Deeming laughter inexplicable rather than unexplained does similar work to considering trauma as something unusual (that is, exceptionally rare), and is part of a culture factory that systematically and cyclically produces suffering and only then to deny its existence. Lewis’s story works against the idea of “inexplicable” laughter and uses humor in order to reveal cultural mechanisms that refuse the possibility of explanation, that keep such laughter unexplained. “Madness” and “insanity,” among other terms, are applied to explain behavior in the absence of society’s understanding. The label of “insanity” upon unexplained laughter functions as a sort of divining rod in locating the existence of told, but unheard, stories.

Diagnosis: “She’s Gone Demented!”

The authoritative figure, the narrator of Lewis’s stories, is Madison Tensas, a young and ill-fated physician whose adventures we follow through his youth, through his medical training, to his life as a doctor in rural Louisiana. Lewis renders Tensas’s narrative voice in such a way that medicine becomes the character’s perpetual lens for seeing the world, the ideological foundation beneath all of his behavior. He experiences and understands everything through the medical logic of symptoms, diseases, and cures. This logic appears in surprising places (such as an assessment of a lover’s lips), and yet Lewis is so agile and steady with its use in the doctor’s characterization, it can be easy to miss. At other times, Tensas’s obsessively medical approach to the world provides for a

comedy of ridicule when he goes too far or misdiagnoses; such is the case for a woman’s laughter in “The Curious Widow.”

The title of Lewis’s story leads readers to believe that the curiosity of a widow will drive the action of the story. A widow’s curiosity *is* the impetus of Tensas’s story, but it is the medical, interpretive curiosity of Tensas himself that is at the center of Lewis’s story. The gist of “The Curious Widow” is that Tensas, at this point a medical student, boards in the home of a widow who rifles through his possessions whenever he leaves the house. Tensas and fellow boarders – other medical students – resolve to scare her out of this intrusive habit by hiding a horrifying artifact in Tensas’s room for her to find. The comic turn of the story comes when Tensas’s “reading” of the widow’s response to their prank is dramatically incorrect. The construction of this practical-joke narrative utilizes ironies which highlight the elitism, misogyny, and racism of the narrator. The narrative also leads to a denouement which reveals both the extreme expressive power of laughter, as well as the importance of its potential illegibility to those who attempt to “read” laughter as a stable, predictable reaction to culturally-loaded objects.

Tensas considers the curiosity of the widow not as a personality flaw, but as an illness to be examined through a medical lens. In beginning to tell the story, Tensas explains:

> During the first course of lectures I became a boarder at the house of a widow lady… Occupying the same room that I did were two other students from the same section of the country as myself, and possessing pretty much the same tastes and peculiarities. One thing certain we agreed in, and that was a detestation of all curiosity-stricken

> women; for never were poor devils worse bothered by researches than we were.[13]

Ever leaning upon the elite and respectable language of his profession – its omnipresence throughout the text becomes comic – Tensas describes his landlady not as curious, but "curiosity-stricken," as if one could be infected by a need to pry in the same manner than one may be stricken by a cold. Tensas categorizes "curiosity" as a woman's illness, a gendered pathology. He also reveals in this passage that he and the other medical students enjoy a sort of camaraderie in their misogyny. The medical students decide to try to effect a cure because her invasions and inquiries into their possessions and activities are irksome to them – not, interestingly, because they fear being "stricken" themselves: "As the evil had to be endured for a while, at least we soon invented and arranged a plan for breaking her of her insatiable curiosity, and making her, what she was in other respects, a good landlady."[14] The irony, of course, is that these medical students themselves are intensely curious; curiosity drives their study into the interior of the human body, and curiosity also drives them into a frenzy as they await the results of their prank on the widow.

Lewis merges the convention of the elaborate prank of Southwestern storytelling with Tensas' medical perspective. The prank becomes the prescription. Tensas and his fellow medical students essentially prescribe shock treatment for the widow's "illness." The students are at the time of this story engaged in research into anatomical dissection – again, ironically, an extremely invasive and ethically-charged performance of curiosity into what lies beneath the human exterior, justified by the language of scientific progress

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[13] Henry Clay Lewis, "The Curious Widow" in *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 75.

[14] Ibid., 76.

and discovery. Interestingly, Tensas' anxiety about his own "researches" serves as the inspiration for how he imagines he will cure the widow:

> The subject that we were engaged upon was one of the most hideous specimens of humanity that ever horrified the sight. The wretch had saved his life from the hangman by dying the evening before the day of execution, and we, by some process or other, became the possessors of his body. Just emaciated sufficiently to remove the fatty tissue, and leave the muscles and blood-vessels finely developed, still he was so hideous that nothing but my devotion to anatomy, and the fineness of the subject, could reconcile me to the dissection; and even after working a week upon him, I never caught a glimpse of his countenance but what I had the nightmare in consequence. He was one of that peculiar class called Albinoes, or white negroes. […] It was with him, or rather his face, that we determined to cure our landlady of her prying propensities.[15]

His horror of this body, Tensas tells the reader, comes not from the intimacy that he must have with a figure of death, but from the particular characteristics of this face, on this corpse. The "subject," an Albino with deformed features including an exceptional hare-lip and teeth that somehow resemble tusks, frightens Tensas because he reads the face as one that openly expresses interior villainy.[16] The young doctor otherwise looks at living people as mere bodies; however, *this* body is potently provocative of dreadful meaning to him due to its racial classification. Notice that Tensas elides how the medical school attains the body – phrased "some process or other" – and delays discussion of the body's "peculiar class" until later in the passage.[17] The face disrupts his expectations of racial and physiognomical meaning, which disturbs him and causes him nightmares. The

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15 Ibid., 76-77.

16 Ibid., 76.

17 The rights/rites of dead non-whites, to the character of Tensas, are of little importance. However, Lewis calls attention to Tensas's callousness toward racialized dead bodies (and the lives that once inhabited them) in a number of stories. In "Stealing a Baby," Tensas again refuses to tell the story of how a black mother and child end up in a morgue, but a reader would recognize that the likelihood that their concurrent deaths were natural, in a slave state, is slim. The book even ends with Tensas brooding over the idea of the unburied bones of his black dwarf attacker: "His bones were left to bleach where they lay. I would not for the universe have looked again upon the place; and his mistress being dead, there were none to care for giving him the rites of sepulture" (203).

young doctor is clearly disturbed by the whiteness that “hides” the race of the body as much as by what he supposes to be the correspondence between the physical and moral deformity of the Albino. While claiming that he would prefer not to dissect the body, he cannot conceal his interest in the body, an interest which borders on the sublime. Tensas admits no relation between his anxiety in probing this corpse and the widow’s relatively innocuous, unabashed probing into the affairs of the living. Still, he does believe that his “cure” will work due to a belief that she will share his fear of the face and that it will affect her as it does him; that is, he believes a confrontation with this particular face makes one hesitant in pursuits of curiosity.

With this prescription in mind, the students surgically remove the face from the corpse and proceed to wrap it elaborately so that it may prove an enticingly secretive item to the widow. Tensas finds himself in possession of the face for one night, holding it until he will leave it for his landlady to find the next day. Its proximity possesses his distraught imagination. He passes a sleepless night “nervous and irritated,” nearly repentant of what he plans to do with it.[18] His dread of the face makes him reconsider with some degree of sympathy what he believes the face will do to her, but he thinks: “then – she is a widow! My heart at this last reflection, became immediately barred to the softening influences of forgiveness, and I determined in all hostility to *face* her.”[19] Tensas’s logic here resonates with antebellum misogynist conventions as much as his racist fear of the not-black, black face. The stereotype of widowhood – the social woman construed in Southwestern humor and elsewhere in antebellum literature as over-sexed,

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[18] Ibid., 78.
[19] Ibid.

over-powered, and hence ridiculous– provides Tensas with his justification for endeavoring to dose her so unkindly.

The rest of the story chronicles Tensas’s mental state as he anxiously, curiously, waits for the widow’s discovery of the face. He sits through his medical classes in a state of distraction, neglects duties, and hastens home to witness the outcome of the prank. However, Tensas and the other medical students do not witness the denouement that they expect. Unceasingly the man of medicine, Tensas watches the widow in her discovery of the face and details the responses he witnesses, as well as his interpretation of them as symptoms of his prank:

> Ay, but she was a firm-nerved woman. […] She did not faint – did not vent a scream – but gazed upon its awfulness in silence, as if her eyes were riveted to it for ever.
>
> We felt completely mortified to think that our well-laid scheme had failed – that we had failed to terrify her; when, to perfect our chagrin, she broke out into a low laugh.[20]

After an unwrapping which blatantly parallels the process of anatomical dissection, the landlady’s initial silence upon finding a disembodied face beneath the layers of material perplexes and disappoints the students. They had imagined an inevitable correspondence between fear and this face, and she does not express fear. Tensas consoles himself with the thought that his elite logic of cause and effect is undermined only by the unforeseeable fact that the widow is a “firm-nerved” anomaly. As she begins to laugh, though, the students take her low chuckling as evidence of the failure of their “cure,” the laugh of an unflappable character dismissing fear. However, her laughter quickly progresses into something that again piques Tensas’s medical imagination: hysterical laughter.

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[20] Ibid., 80.

> We strode into the room, determined to express in words what our deeds had evidently failed to convey; when, ere she had become fully aware of our presence, we noticed her laughter was becoming hysterical. We spoke to her – shook her by the shoulder – but still she laughed on, increasing in vehemence and intensity. It began to excite attention in the lower apartments, and even in the street; and soon loud knocks and wondering exclamations began to alarm us for the consequences of our participation. We strove to take the fearful object from her, but she clung to it with the tenacity of madness, or a young doctor to his first scientific opinion.[21]

Unresponsive, unshakable, unsocial – the widow's escalating laughter is to Tensas a socially inappropriate but medically explicable response which expresses the widow's reception of a shock so violent that it transcends screaming or fainting. He believes she is deranged and that the laughter "speaks" more aptly of the enormity of the shock. Tensas diagnoses the laughter as a symptom referring to a break in the woman's mind – madness or dementia – caused by confrontation with the horror of the face.

> 'She is gone demented!' we exclaimed; 'we had better be leaving' – when a rush up the steps and through the passage, cut off our retreat, and told us the daughters and crowd were coming; but still the old lady laughed on, fiercer, faster, shriller than before. In rushed the crowd – a full charge for the room, impelled by the ramrod of curiosity— [22]

Curiosity compels the widow to snoop, the doctor to dissect, and finally, the masses to listen. Passers-by recognize this laughter as something notably peculiar, for they elect to become spectators to the laughter. Rather than going on with their daily lives, they enter the boarding house, "impelled by the ramrod of curiosity" to know the object of her cacophonous hilarity. Finally, in the presence of this sizeable audience, she puts an end to the scene:

> […] – but ere they had time to discover the cause of the commotion, or make a demonstration, the widow ceased her laughter, and, putting on an expression of the most supreme contempt, coolly remarked: --

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 80.

> 'Excuse me, gentlemen, if I have caused you any inconvenience by my unusual conduct. I was just *smiling aloud* to think what fools these students made of themselves when they tried to scare me with a dead nigger's face, when I had slept with a drunken husband for twenty years!' The crowd mizzled; and we, too, I reckon, between that time and the next up-heaving of the sun.[23]

The widow knows that her laughter is "unusual conduct" for the situation in the eyes of her boarders. By using laughter in an "unusual" manner she manages to communicate her point. She permits the students to believe that the face, the face which is so emphatically meaningful of horror to them, is the object of her many reactions. She then dramatically utilizes this misunderstanding to prove that their assumptions about signification are wrong. With the crumbling of the idea that a dead albino face is inherently frightening, the notions of racist essentialism that engendered the students' fears are disrupted. Signification depends upon social agreement rather than the inherent meaning of an object – a face is not in and of itself horrible, just as no object is in and of itself inherently risible.

Impelled to Listen

What is under the skin, what is hidden in a boudoir, what is the cause of a body's possession by laughter – these are the enticing secrets that Lewis's characters (and the reader) wish to discover. Lewis pushes the widow's utterance to the center of curiosity at the end of the story for both the characters inside the story and for his readers, and once it is there, Lewis disabuses all of the idea that laughter is a naturally legible, universal symptom, with hidden but scientifically discernable significance. Rather, the widow's

[23] Ibid., 80-81 (emphasis original).

laughter becomes all the more expressive (less linguistically-prescribed) because she proves that she may control its significance.

The widow uses the strange turn of phrase “smiling aloud” rather than laughing because it emphasizes her use of her body as a voice, a purposeful social gesture of communication. It reveals her disdain not only for her boarders’ belief that “a dead nigger’s face” would scare her as it did them, but for their stereotype-driven misinterpretation of her behavior. She also reveals a story of practical, tangible terror – enduring twenty years of violent, sexual abuse from a figure that would have socially been responsible for her well-being. In having to explain the reason for her hilarity, she tells a terse hidden history of violence and terror. It is a private, bedroom history (her choice to say “slept with” rather than “lived with” emphasizes the awful intimacy of the situation) which need not include the words “rape” or “beating” for her audience to conclude that such things were probably part of her experience. With this knowledge of her past, a thoughtful reader may reinterpret the motives of her curiosity, and also begin to see that the students’ interpretations of her were dismissive, blind, and cruel all along. She is laughing, then, at a cultural structure that has wounded her and rendered her wounds invisible, as much as at the students’ ridiculous behavior. Her curiosity, if we think about it, now appears defensive rather than rude or pathological; by researching the lives of the men – the potential suitors of her daughters – who live under the same roof, she is doing preventative work within a social frame that leaves her few other options for protecting herself and her own. One’s previous negative perceptions of the widow mizzle, like the crowd at the end of the story, after the revelation of the meaning of her laughter.

The Testimony of Hilarity, Not Hysteria

The widow’s abrupt, controlled conclusion to her laughter discredits the meanings that the students and the crowd have projected upon it. Their interpretations depended upon an understanding of laughter as something beyond the female laugher’s control – laughter as a corporeal possession, a chaotic psychosomatic reaction to outside circumstances, like shivering in the cold. The crowd pours into the room to see *what is wrong* with her. We can see that Lewis expects his readers, like these characters, to view the widow’s laughter at its height as an outward expression of distress, just as Freud would come to view the laughter of hysterics later in the century. And yet Tensas reads her laughter at first as healthy but scornful. Not until it reaches a pitch in volume, intensity, and duration – that is, until it crosses the conventions of polite and salutary laughter – does it become of anxious concern to those who hear it.

What renders the widow’s laughter secretive and disturbing is that no other character is able to grasp the object of risibility. She playfully and knowingly draws her audience in through exactly the sort of curiosity that is supposedly *her* widowly illness or vice, she explains herself. The widow then explains what her laughter *should* mean to them. Her own interpretation of it as “smiling aloud” trumps the readings which the students, the spectators, and the reader might try to impose upon her response. The joke that Lewis sets us up to expect is one in which a stigmatized type, an old widowed white woman, is the object of laughter. In a classic twist of Southwestern humor, however, the narrator and the collusive reader become the object of ridicule. Still, what kind of joke is it, then, to realize that although the widow seems to get the last laugh in the story, her spectators were actually correct in supposing that her laughter *does indeed* locate its

object in terror? The widow’s laughter is not a marker of a mind overwhelmed by fear, but a mind that has usefully integrated it, so that the comparison of the fearfulness of a dead face to twenty years of abuse is comically incongruous. Interestingly, Lewis’s widow suggests the possibility of reason and wisdom after a confrontation with terror. The abuses of a drunken husband give her perspective as to what should actually be considered horrific. Her “smiling aloud” denotes not madness after terror, but *reason* after terror. Furthermore, she uses laughter *like a man*, asserting the panacean construction of laughter as a sign of mental health, in order to express once and for all that she is indeed of sound mind, and healthily aware of where danger may actually reside.

In the end, the joke of “The Curious Widow” is a joke about laughter, making seamless use of the many contradictory views and assumptions about laughter which permeated American antebellum culture. While the story conforms to the tradition of Southwestern humor frame narratives, turning the narrator’s joke in a surprising way away from the intended object and onto the elite narrator himself, Lewis’s tale is still more revolutionary. The widow appropriates laughter in order to make her claims to her rights – in order to refuse a joke of irresponsibility played upon her. She refuses to let her boarders be irresponsible toward her, to forget her humanity and her rights. Her laughter reminds everyone that a human being with a history is behind all that the culture has deemed “inexplicable.” There are glimpses of other stories hidden within “The Curious Widow,” which are problematic glimpses. The reader realizes that Tensas’s medically “objective” and authoritative narrative approach is full of elisions. As mentioned earlier, Tensas refuses to acknowledge the existence of a history behind how

the Albino man came to be a body on his dissection table. He does not question the man’s guilt, who strangely enough dies in jail the day before his scheduled hanging, nor does he question the “some process or other” that robs the body of funeral rites and offers him to medical student probing. Tensas colludes quietly with the invidious, racist behavior of the American justice system, to the point that he cannot imagine a socially-black body being anything other than the shell of a murderer. Futhermore, Tensas cannot see the horrific crime he himself is committing; the literal defacement of the body.

The set-up of this pun of “defacement” is evident in the story; humor is leading us to revelation, although the pun is well concealed by Tensas’s sincere belief that he has the right to do to this body what he will. Still, the widow’s active and vocal confrontation with the obfuscation of her story prods the reader to recognize the possibility of the other stories tucked away behind Tensas’s telling. It is not that these stories cannot be told, but rather, that it is tremendously difficult for them to be heard through the constructions and assumptions of Madison Tensas’s narration. The entropy of Lewis’s Southwestern humor, though, disrupts the complacency of projecting “natural” risibility upon objects or upon people. Projections themselves, in turn, are the ultimate subjects of ridicule. Henry Clay Lewis’s curious widow delivers her message with a laugh: Among fools, the *unexplained* is too readily considered *inexplicable*.

The Real Example of Inappropriate Irène

The story of Irène, emerging from reality, highlights just how simultaneously the difficulty of listening to laughter in a tradition which presumes that those who are disempowered do not have the reason nor the right to laugh – as well as the potent

linguistic capacity of laughter to rip through insidious social conventions. “Irène” is the pseudonym for a real woman whose laughter at her own mother’s funeral horrified her community and landed her in an insane asylum. Situated at turn-of-the-century France, the story of Irène is a culmination of nineteenth-century medical, psychological paradigms for what women’s laughter could mean to those who heard it. Like Pip's laughter from *Moby-Dick* and the landlady's from “The Curious Widow,” however, her real-life laughter demanded to be heard against expectation. In twentieth and twenty-first century trauma theory, hers is a story of mental health restored through the use of narrative therapy. She was a patient of the eminent psychologist Pierre Janet at Salpetiere. Twentieth century scholars Bessel Van der Hart and Onno Van der Kolk provide another frame by reevaluating Irène’s experience through trauma and cognitive theory. No one today would question that Irène was traumatized; her story is not only gripping and heart-wrenching, but her symptoms fit neatly within the definitions of psychic trauma.[24] The very definition of Irène's laughter as traumatic, however, itself creates a social problem in understanding. Her story, in the mouths of family, therapists, and trauma theorists over the course of a century is one of emphatic exceptionalness. The aspects of her story which others may share, such as poverty and abuse, are pushed to the background in order to focus on spectacular moments of her experience. Indeed the

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[24] See the definition of “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 1994): “The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) (Criterion A2). The characteristic symptoms resulting from the exposure to the extreme trauma include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event (Criterion B), persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (Criterion C), and persistent symptoms of increased arousal (Criterion D). The full symptom picture must be present for more than 1 month (Criterion E), and the disturbance must cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Criterion F).”

tendency to focus on the more dramatic facets of Irène's story does her, and the lessons of her story, a disservice.

An aunt brings Irène to Janet's asylum, believing that her niece's laughter evinces that she has gone mad. In order to formulate his ideas about traumatic memory and how to heal a person suffering from traumatic experience, her attending physician Pierre Janet would come back again and again to the case of this young woman who was psychologically unable to tell the story of the death of her mother or even remember its happening. Irène's story, as summarized by Van der Hart and Van der Kolk, is as follows:

> In the months preceding her mother's demise, Irène cared for her conscientiously. At the same time, Irène continued to work to provide for the family (her earnings were spent on her father's alcoholism and on food for her mother). She had hardly slept for sixty consecutive nights. Thus she was utterly exhausted when her mother finally died one night. Irène was unable to grasp the reality of this event; all through the night she tried to revive the corpse, trying to force it to speak, continuing to give it medications and cleaning its mouth. While this was going on, the corpse fell from the bed. Calling her father for help was of no use: he was completely drunk. She finally succeeded in putting the body straight and continued to talk to it. In the morning Irène left her house trying to get help from her aunt. However, she did not tell her that her mother was dead. Sensing something was amiss, the aunt went to the apartment, took charge of the situation, and made preparations for the funeral. Irène did not understand what was going on. Initially, she did not want to go to the funeral; during the funeral she laughed inappropriately. After a couple of weeks, her aunt brought her to Salpetriere.[25]

The central point of interest to the story to both Janet and contemporary trauma theorists is that after the ordeal, Irène could not remember that her mother had died, but in catching sight of a bed, she would reenact *in real time* her experience of her mother's

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[25] Bessel A. Van der Hart and Onno Van der Kolk, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 161.

final hours.[26] Nothing could shake her from the reality of the reenactment – including the performance of the labor of lifting her mother's body back into the bed – until it was complete. Afterwards, she would remember nothing. Janet coaxed the young woman into accepting a narrative version of her experience – a story that could be told in minutes rather than reenacted over hours and hours – and she was ultimately successfully freed from these grotesque and time-consuming scenes. Van der Hart and Van der Kolk theorize that Irène epitomizes the need to move away from memories storing the unrelatably complete reality of experience in order to live healthily. Language – in its falsifying and incompletely-representative brevity – is the most pragmatic path away from unsocial, traumatic memory toward social, normal memory.[27] Those who turn to Irène's story as a paradigm for the possibility of narrative therapy are doing excellent work; however, I think we can learn still more from Irène's *stories* and how their exceptional elements are linked to their less "exceptional" elements.

Twentieth-century therapist Laura S. Brown asks of her readers: "What does it mean if we admit that our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded?"[28] Brown discusses her confrontations, as a feminist therapist, with a twentieth century cultural problem of perception – namely, that American culture understood psychic trauma and its subsequent afflictions to be the product of a person having experienced an event "outside the range of human experience."[29] She focuses specifically on the dis-inclusion in the 1990s of rape and incest as experiences that could

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[26] Ibid., 160-163.
[27] Ibid., 175-179.
[28] Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective of Psychic Trauma" in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations*, 103.
[29] Ibid., 111. At the time that Brown published this article, the definition of trauma was changing to be more inclusive. See her "Epilogue" to the article.

result in a victim needing therapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The reason for disinclusion? Rape and incest *occur too frequently* to be considered "outside the range." Brown writes:

> "Human experience" as referred to in our diagnostic manuals, and as the subject for much of the important writing on trauma, often means "male human experience" or, at the least, an experience common to both women and men. The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other.[30]

Brown is working a tradition, solidified in the nineteenth century by the creation of "hysteria," which explains women's experiences as a function of internal weakness, of a proclivity toward malfunction. Brown contends that therapists (and Western culture in general) work to deny the application of the label "trauma" for these "other" experiences, even try to apply terms such as "propensity to victimization" to gay men, "sex-addicts" to rape victims, or "relationship-addicts" to battered women, in order to "maintain the myth of the willing victim of interpersonal violence."[31] The horrible but practical effect of this maintenance is that "we never need to question the social structures that perpetuate… victimization."[32] The myth is practical, because to question these social structures is to recognize the very frightening reality that unfair systems place some human beings at a greater risk of being pained, violated, and even destroyed. It makes us realize that community can fail us, that outside forces can determine our well-being or deem us superfluous. As Brown puts it: "When trauma is unusual, we can pretend safety."[33] For

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30 Ibid., 101.
31 Ibid., 105.
32 Ibid., 106.
33 Ibid., 108.

an entire culture that builds its meanings upon a consistent narrative of safety and functioning community, to admit otherwise is also traumatizing, and hence the cycle.

A rereading of the stories of Irene, with Brown’s concerns in mind, opens up the possibility of viewing what we call “trauma” – the intensely unrelatable suffering of an individual – differently. What if trauma is not about language in the way that contemporary theory tends to view it? What if trauma is not about unspeakability, but rather (on the other side of a dysfunctional Saussurean speech circuit) inaudibility? The problem does not rest in the victims’ inability to relate their experiences, but instead the culture creates situations in which the victims’ experience cannot be related as traumatic. The trauma itself is a product of inaudibility long-endured and suddenly realized in spite of collusive narratives murmuring its non-existence. The shock that tears an individual out of society is merely the shock of an individual realizing they already are out of society, and isn’t this shock bitterly comic?

What first fascinated me about the story of Irène in Van der Hart and Van der Kolk’s telling is that one of the first signs that told Irène’s community that she was suffering from something more severe than mere mourning was that she laughed “inappropriately” at her mother’s funeral. Irène’s laughter is maintained to be “inexplicable” within a normal, social framework. However, Irène’s laughter does function as an unexplained utterance that draws people toward her, to consider finally her experience. *Through illogical action, she attains logical gains.* Suddenly her behavior can be seen for what it is: a call for help among people who have already deemed her suffering to be endurable, and therefore dismissible. Irène’s aunt, Janet, and Van der Hart and Van der Kolk all see Irène’s “inappropriate” laughter as evidence of *special*

intellectual suffering – and isn't that significant? Laughter, perhaps, seems too obviously understandable in Irène's situation, and I wonder how that could be.

Once Janet begins interacting with and listening to her at his asylum, Irène is able to say: "I feel very sad. I feel abandoned."[34] Surely her feelings of abandonment began before her mother's death, where the traumatic event of her story is traditionally located. If Irène's mother had not died – or actually, if Irène had not laughed at the funeral, and then repeatedly performed the death in real time, would we have considered her life non-traumatic, merely regrettable? The mother's death functions as a recognizable, distinct (and therefore containable) moment, an artificial site which serves to minimize and conceal the reality that Irene's quotidian existence was dreadful. *Irene's trauma was not momentary*. The failures of her community create the vast majority of her stress in her story and provide the condition in which her mother's death can become an event that drives her to disconnect from reality. She works relentless hours with almost no sleep and no food, all of her money going to an abusive and drunken father. In some narrations of her story, she talks about how during the night of her mother's death, her father was "doing only horrible things" to her, and even vomiting on the corpse in the process.[35] Why do we pretend to imagine that this man only behaved abominably on the night of the mother's death? One cannot ignore the suggestion of sexual or physical abuse in her words. One must wonder where is her (nearby) aunt to help her during her sixty days, and also question why is she subject to the financial hardship of supporting her father's loathsome drunkenness. And crucially, one must ask what sort of ideas about community

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34 Van der Hart and Van der Kolk, "Intrusive Past," 162.
35 Ibid.

allow that no one even imagines that she needs help until she begins laughing at her mother’s funeral.

Irène does laugh; and she does finally receive help. The focus of Janet’s therapy was to encourage Irène to form a narrative that acknowledges and accepts her mother’s death, and by association, *the circumstances surrounding it*. It was not the death of her mother, but the death of her mother after sixty days of working with very little sleep, in the constant company of a drunken and abusive father, without the support of other people that should have been responsible to her, that in fact leads to her break-down. Familial and community support failed Irène tremendously during the very time in which she was performing (and is notably seemingly expected to perform) superhuman feats of support, care, and responsibility; why should she not laugh anti-socially within a cultural structure that claims her, demands of her, but does not see her? I believe that her laughter did communicate something to those around her, even as they deemed it “inappropriate.” It made those responsible to her do what needed to be done: notice her.

In therapy, during which she is helped to communicate her profoundly solitary experience in a social manner, the goal is to recommit *her* to social community to tell a story of exceptionalness. However, we should notice that Irène gets better, not only after learning to tell her story socially, but also after being acknowledged by her aunt, being removed from her apathetic and abusive environment, and being allowed to speak about the conditions in which she lived *as if they were* horrible rather than endurable. Her laughter, which I see as an utterance that bespeaks ridicule of the entire circumstance of the community’s attitude of irresponsibility toward her, is a real example of what Melville was doing with Pip. Her stories speak loudly of what society needed to hear

from her: that such suffering is both rare and not rare, and that whittling down stories of that sort of suffering to short narratives is best for the community but perhaps not the individual. Laughter in the “wrong” place, at the “wrong” time, ends up enabling a degree of revelation and even salvation (or at least reintegration) in the real case of Irène, and in the fictional cases of Pip and the curious widow.

Other Contemporary Literary Figures and Mad Laughter

Much as the spectacle of laughing gas exhibitions could pull a crowd, investments in the meaning of laughter drew curious antebellum Americans toward instances of enigmatic mirth. Mad, hysterical, uncontrollable, asocial, discontented laughter – falling outside of the panacea metaphor’s extensive radius – appears in antebellum literature as a marker of some exceptional revelation on the part of laughers other than Melville's bell-boy and Lewis’s widow. These forms of insane hilarity were sometimes used as didactic tools suggesting areas where reform would be necessary, drawing the attention of readers to a problem. Enjoying the benefit of a narrator’s omniscience or sympathetic justification, a reader would hit a passage describing the “mad” laughter of a wronged or victimized character and believe s/he understood the roots of that laughter differently – better – than other characters in the text. From this elevated understanding, the reader sees the problem in the terms of the text, and is positioned by the text to be able to extend that understanding to their actions in the real world. These didactic stories are tragedies which suggest that such tragedy could be avoided in reality, if readers would apply what knowledge they have gained about “mad” laughter.

For example, Hawthorne uses laughter in his unfinished romance “Ethan Brand” to mark the pain of paradox Ethan suffers under as a man who has committed the unpardonable sin of seeking the unpardonable sin. Ethan’s very humanity, his inherently human curiosity to know and understand, damns him. His eerie laughter, echoing in the dark valleys to the ears of innocent listeners, testifies both to his damnation and the absurdity of such damnation; it becomes Hawthorne’s commentary on theodicy. In the 1861 novella *Life in the Iron Works*, Rebecca Harding Davis uses a character’s mad laughter to reveal the injustice of class structures which oppress the poor. Hugh Wolfe, a poor laborer with deep artistic sensibility, has the revelation that he does not deserve to be poor, and yet the system in which he works offers no escape from hunger, want, and the hideousness of having to watch those he loves want and suffer as well. The epiphany drives him mad, and his madness is manifested in inappropriate, asocial laughter before it becomes action – robbery, murder, suicide. Such laughter is a mystery for the reader to solve; a puzzle which might teach a lesson about the necessity of social reform.

In these cases, the narratives are driven by the compelling, urging, undeniably audible nature of laughter in the absence of conventional risibility. However, while these characters do not laugh conventionally, they enjoy the privilege of being assumed to have a story. In part a function of narration, both Hawthorne and Davis, the stories ask readers to “hear” the suffering of closer-to-prototypical protagonists – Brand and Wolfe are white men troubled, and in the wake of Jacksonian democracy, they can be conceived of as analogous to tragic heroes. Their laughter occurs within a framework of empathetic whiteness and masculinity and is structurally elevated by generic signals of tragedy; the reader should know that laughter here is out-of-place but that scrutiny will yield

understanding. Even the most privileged of Americans realized that they were prone to forms of suffering that could sever their ability to function easily (or at all) in society, but the forms of suffering in an audible register to hegemonic society were normalized. The laughter of Brand and Wolfe impresses the reader with appropriately dramatic inappropriateness, with the aura of what could be paradoxically called conventionally exceptional distress. It was recognizable tragedy – the Shakespearean outcries of Lear or Titus – fitted to new Jacksonian democratic values from the European aristocratic standards. Narratives concerning Christian theodicy and issues of poverty *could be heard* – these are forms of distress recognized as distressing within antebellum conventions. The laughter in the stories, then, simply contributes to formal intrigue and sublimity. Normalized understandings of laughter bolster the potency of abnormal laughter, gripping the imaginations of those who hear/read it with curiosity regarding its cause.

Undeniably, though, some persons and some social issues were invisible and inaudible to mainstream antebellum culture. The antebellum American culture factory produced myths about who had rights and who did not, who could speak and who could not, and who could suffer and who could not. Although the comic industry colluded in a number of ways with cultural disenfranchisement and dehumanization, laughter from marginalized persons still suggested the subversive possibility of risibility hidden somewhere underneath dismissive hegemonic narratives. In the moment’s pause where a witness confronts laughter seemingly without cause, we find stories of human suffering that cannot be witnessed otherwise within the American culture factory. Texts like “The Curious Widow” and *Moby-Dick* are different from Hawthorne and Davis’s stories, for they utilize the generic turns of comedy in order to guide the reader into carefully

interpreting laughters that would otherwise be detested, dismissed, or ignored. Literary laughing-confrontations bring stories of long-endured but invisible suffering to the fore through what looks like moment-specific madness. These treatments of marginalized “crazy” laughter imagine a sub-community of the “laughing wounded” and highlight how the larger community shirks the responsibility of understanding the difficult truth that such suffering has happened to someone, and could happen to anyone. Understanding the stories that laughter can tell enables such realizations.

Conclusion

Telling Laughter has been concerned with exploring antebellum culture through its attitudes toward hilarity. The era's many representations and discussions of laughter, appearing in a range of print materials, exhibit laughter's capacity as a “telling” utterance to bear multiple contradictory meanings simultaneously. Ideas about laughter became slogans ("Laugh and Grow Fat!") in the expanding antebellum marketplace, mingled with growing medical ideologies about moods and health, collided with contemporary reform movements, and were used powerfully in the era's fiction to expose hidden, ignored, or unheard histories. Broad and various, discourses on hilarity became a particularly apt forum for antebellum Americans to air contested beliefs about human bodies and minds, and therefore also to question which American bodies and minds represented “true” citizens. Debates over who was or was not fit for democratic rights were overlaid upon discussions of the significance of the eruption of laughter from different kinds of bodies. Was the quaking of a white man's body a signal of natural good-humored benevolence, or of ignorant commonness? Did the trembling bodies of white women hint at a fragile tendency toward hysteria, or an intelligent ability to recognize the ridiculous? Were the shaking bodies of non-whites evidence of natural contentment within an oppressive system, or did it bespeak wronged humanity? One reading of laughter could humanize; another could damn. *Telling Laughter* has shown how hilarity's unstable expressiveness was utilized in connection to diversely motivated attempts across low and high culture to expand or restrict the rights of individuals within the early, uncertain years of American democracy.

With laughter as the unifying thread of the dissertation, this project enriches and complicates how we imagine interpretive readerships and audiences in the antebellum era. James Machor has called upon scholars of nineteenth-century American literature to “push out in new directions by engaging in practical criticism” which explores, among other things, “the textual construction of an audience as products of historically specific fields, where social conditions, ideologies, rhetorical practices, interpretive strategies, and cultural factors of race, class, and gender intersect.”[1] As in all historical scholarship, the work of such “practical” criticism is no small task, for the effort is geared towards understanding a population now gone, via materials now estranged from their era of production. *Telling Laughter*'s first two chapters foreground the search for context by gathering and comparing rhetorical maneuvers – visual and textual – on the topic of hilarity in order to show the historically-situated interactivity between commercial markets, reform movements, and the desires of their publics.[2] While striving to illuminate who might have consumed risible texts and performances and why they might have done so, I demonstrate that the act of purchasing laughter in the antebellum era was tinged with ideologies. Advertisements suggested that antebellum Americans should seek risible texts and performances out of the belief that their merriment could cure all ills, but also out of the desire to claim an ideal hearty *American* identity. On the other hand, a

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1 James Machor, “Readers/Texts/Contexts” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), xi.

2 In this way, my work blurs the boundaries between the “literary” subjects of reader-centered scholarship and the “cultural” subjects of scholarship on publics and publicness, such as that of Michal Warner (*Publics and Counterpublics*, 2002) whose writing, building upon Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1963), expounds upon relationships between publics, publicity, art, culture, and politics.

hesitancy regarding the pursuit of laughter's morality, as well as disagreement as to whether laughter helped or hindered the shaping of a democracy, appear both within these ads and from within reform materials. Though my efforts are certainly limited and imperfect, I believe the critical endeavor of imagining the responses and usages of varying readerships and audiences brings us closer to a historicized understanding of the era.

Scholars of the American nineteenth century have been sensitive to the contemporary *uses* of literature and materials since the field-revolutionizing work of scholars such as Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins in establishing the value and significance of literature labeled (once dismissively) as “women's,” “domestic,” or “sentimental” fiction.[3] These scholars have altered the shape of the canon by revealing how academic standards of literary merit were narrow, ill-conceived, and generally dismissive of the value of marginalized writers' work. Tompkins's influential *Sensational Designs* showed how enriching scholarship can be when it seeks to “understand what gave these novels [in this case sentimental novels] traction in their original setting.”[4] Many scholars have followed her example, with fruitful results.[5] However, even within this more nuanced

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[3] See Baym's *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) and Tompkin's *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[4] Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs*, xv.

[5] I am thinking of studies such as Susan K. Harris's *Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Shirley Samuels's *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The extensions of such scholarship are broad, ranging from reevaluating the canon to (more frequent in recent years) elaborating upon the debate of the values and purposes of the literature itself. Saidiya Hartman's work is an example of this tradition of reassessment, as she deploys Tompkins' methodology with cynicism. She imagines her readerships responding to the sentimental tradition (esp. in the case of sentimental abolitionism) not by valuing the texts' moral attempts to bring people to God, but by unconsciously bolstering the force of slavery

critical tradition the question of the “traction” factor of risible texts has received little examination, because the use-value of laughter is taken for granted as universal across time. That is, reader-centered and use-value theories of the nineteenth century have most often attended to responses to “serious” or “sad” texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Douglass's *Narrative* because research into these texts is presumed to yield more culturally-important insights.[6] *Telling Laughter* acknowledges and contests such presumptions, asking: Do we, as twenty-first century readers, not need more of an answer than “because it's funny” for why nineteenth-century readers would purchase and read a comic almanac, attend a minstrel show, or favor a humorous author? By calling attention to a history of viewing laughter as a panacea, asking what cultural effects the view of laughter as “medicine” had upon the era's readers and consumers, and delineating reasons that people had for approaching laughter with trepidation, my project adds to this work on nineteenth-century response by suggesting that humorous texts can bear this sort of critical attention as well.

In addition to fleshing out the details of the motivations of the era's readers and consumers, this project imagines editors, advertisers, writers, and performers as being

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through unethical empathy. She posits that “the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind, and oppress” – the exact opposite of what abolitionist texts overtly claimed to do (*Scenes of Subjection*, 5). However, Hartman is able to make this argument by carefully theorizing psychological responses of nineteenth-century readerships.

6 For my research, important exceptions have been Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* and Ellen Hickey Grayson's article “Social Order and Psychological Disorder,” as both authors seek to delineate antebellum audience responses to comic spectacles. Linda Morris's work does not take an audience or reader-centered approach, but it does emphasize the importance of humor in women's writing of the era. See her *Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-Century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Whitcher, and Marietta Holley* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1988) and *Women's Humor in the Age of Gentility: Frances Miriam Whitcher* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), as well as Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

equally embedded in their cultural-historical moment. Scholars including David S. Reynolds and Lawrence Levine call attention to the importance of remembering the historical simultaneity of an era's popular and elite materials, even while acknowledging the effect of the culture's differing attitudes toward different kinds of texts. I sought in this project to contribute to weakening the idea that certain forms of writing are more worthy of study, more telling, or more potentially enabling of personal revelation or social change than others, merely by virtue of their highbrow stature (as Levine has put it). For instance, *Telling Laughter* demonstrates that such materials as advertisements and children's tales are rich material for close reading and are just as likely to interrogate powerfully the surrounding culture as are currently canonized novels. I presume that all of the writers in this study, be it Ellms (the editor of the *American Comic Almanac*) or Melville, produced and offered their materials with an awareness of a variety of publics and a multitude of perspectives (popular, medical, reformist).

In a similar vein, I contend in this dissertation that we cannot assume that particular elements of literature are somehow more transcendent, more universal than others. I have focused my research on the representation of laughter precisely because it so often escapes contextualization in order to be discussed as parts of universal theories of human nature. When scholars look back at instances of risibility and laughing figures in nineteenth-century materials to argue that they conform to Freudian theories or Kantian theories, I argue that they are making the mistake of assuming that this writing about laughter is *not* reliant upon attitudes and understandings specific to that cultural moment. Such a mistake would be much less likely to occur in a discussion about, for

example, a writer's use of the term “democracy”; care would be taken to situate the use of such a loaded term. Laughter, too, is loaded. My dissertation shows that a reading of hilarity, without context, misses important moments even in texts that have received significant critical attention. I have shown that in *Moby-Dick*, when we think about the significances of laughter in Melville's time, Pip becomes much more than comic relief, or a dismissable “part” of Ahab as Sharon Cameron has argued.[7] Likewise, careful attention to laughter illuminates profound resistance to misogynist dismissal in Henry Clay Lewis's “The Curious Widow,” whereas otherwise it could be read as little more than a violent, disgusting joke. I selected these two texts for extensive analysis because of the relative centrality of laughter to their narratives; however, my more brief treatments within the dissertation of works like Thoreau's *Walden*, Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evince that culturally-historicized readings of laughing bodies can lend subtlety to our grasp of narration and character development.

In *Telling Laughter*, a special problem arises in reflecting upon antebellum attitudes toward laughter because people's ideas about the materials that potentially cause laughter were inextricably related to their beliefs about the differences between and similarities among antebellum bodies. Studies of the body in the nineteenth-century United States acknowledge that Americans were deeply invested in embodiment and its meanings due to the legal link between the body and democratic rights. Most scholars

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[7] I am in agreement with Cameron as she argues that “Ahab knows that in his attraction to Pip lies the danger of [his own madness’s] dissipation,” that his urge to help and love Pip is a hopeful urge, and that it would draw him back from the brink of tragedy just as it pulled Queequeg away from the brink of death (*Corporeal Self*, 20). However, although Cameron elegantly analyzes Pip's experiences in the novel, she ultimately reduces him to something always secondary to the primary Ahab. In Cameron's formulation, Pip is little more than the precise puzzle piece for Ahab’s holes; he brings grief to Ahab's rage, and his body for Ahab’s leg. In her discussion, Pip disappears into the centrality of Ahab.

have focused their research upon “constant” states of the body in relation to politics, examining the embodiment of race and gender, as well as interpretations of tattooed, disabled, or extraordinary bodies (obese, slender, exceptionally tall, or small).[8] Other scholarship has explored “temporary” states of the body, often leaning upon the influential works of Elaine Scarry and Susan Sontag, which brought critical attention to the way in which the momentary state of agony of a body demands the attention and thought of any who witnesses it.[9] I have shown that the body in hilarity, like the body in pain, also compels listeners to interpret, but that the contemporary uses and meanings of laughter necessarily mold these interpretations.

Through engagement with representations of laughter and laughing bodies in many arenas of print and performance culture, *Telling Laughter* envisions the antebellum era as full of ideological conflict, ambivalence, and experimentation over identity and democratic rights. I sought to have this project shed light upon the debate about laughter as a force of potential oppression as well as of potential liberation. The marketplace courted consumers from the margins and sometimes viewed itself as a benevolent force that could cure ailing American bodies (be they white, black, man, woman, young, or old), but we also know that much of the material it was hocking was unabashedly racist

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[8] See Carolyn Soriso's *Fleshing out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in Nineteeth-Century American Literature, 1833-1879* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Jennifer Putzi's *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006); and Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[9] The two works to which I'm referring are Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003). Other than pain, “temporary” somatic states that have received some attention include weeping, blushing, and intoxication.

and sexist. Print and performance culture privileged white male consumers' love and theft of blackness (as Eric Lott argues) but I argue that that same culture also imagined marginalized publics – including African-American consumers – as having similar desires; in this case, all desire to “laugh and grow fat.” In making such arguments, this dissertation proposes that opposition to what Priscilla Wald calls “official stories” of the American experience took place in texts and materials not usually admired for their literary merit or *avant garde* innovations.[10] *Telling Laughter* implicitly extends the possibility of resistance to other genres and modes of public address. While Wald focuses on major authors like Frederick Douglass and Gertrude Stein, highlighting the ways in which they were extremely sensitive to written language itself and its power to make unofficial stories heard, my project shows that confrontations with exclusive “official stories” can happen in everything from advertisements to Southwestern humor, just by having the “wrong” person laugh.

Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Legacies of Laughter

While *Telling Laughter* confines itself to the antebellum period, my hope is that it will be a useful background for considering postbellum, turn-of-the-century, and even more recent materials. In closing this project, I will therefore glance forward to the 1890s and early 1900s to the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and his troubled literary career. In the case of Dunbar, we can see that the continuation and evolution of some antebellum ideologies about laughter played out upon the writer's life in a most dramatic

[10] See Wald's *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

– and even tragic – way. Second only to the tragedy of his premature death is the tragedy of his agonized struggle for literary respectability. An examination of his struggle reveals that he was contending with a conundrum which grew out of the debates of who could laugh, and when, and how. As a politically-conscious author, Dunbar needed, as antebellum reformers had needed, to confront both the problem of immoral, socially-destructive laughter and the challenge of representing hilarity from the margins. He was also an informed admirer of many American comic forms, and a writer who ardently believed that humor was central to being human.[11] In all he did, he had to contend with both how he was viewed as a black author of risible literature, how his heterogeneous audiences laughed, and the many ways in which risibility might allow or disallow him to say what he wished to say. Addison Gayle, Jr. describes Dunbar's fundamental dilemma: "For white people, he was forced to be an entertainer; black people demanded a poet."[12] Must a black writer choose one or the other? Was there no possibility of entertaining black people, or of charming a white audience with serious, masterful verse? Dunbar consistently worked against the limitations of such bifurcated expectations, expectations which were rooted in antebellum racist attitudes toward hilarity. He refused to be the

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[11] See "Interview of Dunbar," *New York Commercial*, 1898, as reprinted in *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Herbert Woodward Martin and Ronald Primeau (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002), 205-207. In this interview, he makes the now infamous statement that "We must write like the white man," of which it is often forgotten that he qualifies that he does not mean through imitation, but that in the United States "our life is the same" (206). He views black and white experience as inextricable in the US, citing a history of cohabitation for over two hundred years. From this argument, he lays claim to all American literary tradition as his own to utilize, and cites Joel Chandler Harris and Ruth McEnery Stuart as two of his favorite authors. When asked about Thomas Nelson Paige, he bluntly expresses a dislike of his writing, saying that "His attitude is condescending, always" (207). The later part of this interview illuminates the careful process by which Dunbar combed through literary traditions in order to make informed decisions about how he would write.

[12] Addison Gayle, Jr., *Oak and Ivy: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 38.

“happy darkey” entertainer of white expectations, but he simultaneously repeatedly dared bringing that reading upon himself by writing humorously.

That Dunbar was deeply invested in speaking out against injustice and oppression is undeniable upon looking into his editorial writings. As I have discussed in “The Politics of Incongruity in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Fanatics*,” pieces such as his 1898 article “Recession Never” and his 1903 “Fourth of July” are evidence that Dunbar, as an African American public figure, was not afraid to use his pen to condemn lynchings, excoriate the behavior of white mobs, denounce acts of racial oppression, and ridicule the idea that the United States was a free or just nation.[13] Within these earnest essays Dunbar writes of the situation of African Americans at the turn of the century as “incongruous to the point of a ghastly humor.”[14] That Dunbar discusses irony, damnably laughable, in his surrounding world should prepare his readers for finding similar ironies in his poetic and fictional efforts. Nevertheless, it is only within recent decades that a movement to view Dunbar's most contested writings as containing ironic twists has truly taken hold.[15]

In particular, Dunbar's comic dialect poetry and his “white” novels, which place Anglo American characters at the center of their narratives, have been viewed by many as politically-vacuous, pandering writings. Shelley Fisher Fishkin has recently countered this view, arguing of *both* Dunbar and Mark Twain that their works were “signifying on those demeaning and misleading falsities with fiction and poetry of their own that

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13 See Jennifer A. Hughes, “The Politics of Incongruity in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Fanatics*,” *African American Review* 41, no. 2 (2007), 295-301.

14 Paul Laurence Dunbar, “Recession Never,” *Chicago Record*, December 18, 1898.

15 For example, see Addison Gayle, Jr.'s “Literature as Catharsis: The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar” in *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975). Gayle argues that Dunbar's dialect poetry and “white” novels prove that the author was trapped by the plantation tradition.

revisited the slave past for a different end – exposing the racism of the period in which they were writing and the lies of silent assertion behind which it hid.”[16] In a similar effort to redeem Dunbar's work, Gavin Jones has built a compelling argument around Dunbar's use of African American Vernacular English that shows that the author was “no unselfconscious, naive mocker of literary conventions; he was highly aware of the racial ramifications of any repetition of white cultural forms.”[17] These two scholars provide excellent reasons for reevaluating Dunbar's career and writings by rethinking his use of signifying and dialect, and do much for challenging the most damaging perceptions of Dunbar's art. Still, the bulk of their reevaluations take place in readings of his poetry and short stories, while his novels remain far from understood or recuperated.

For that reason I argue that it is valuable to realize that within his last novel *The Sport of the Gods* (1901), Dunbar makes tangible not only the challenges that he as a famed African American author faced in dealing with literary forms associated with white authors, but also his struggle to understand what it meant for him to be a black humorist, and a producer of laughter within both black and white readerships. It is important therefore that in *Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar delineates his vision of who may laugh at whom, and explores African American laughter from several angles. Additionally, he directly supplants the figure of the “happy darkey” and also of the uncontrollably

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[16] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Race and the Politics of Memory: Mark Twain and Paul Laurence Dunbar,” *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006), 285. Fishkin uses the term “signifying,” seeking to revisit Dunbar within Henry Lewis Gates, Jr.'s definition of the term which entails trickery, indirection, and purposeful negotiation between black and white linguistic worlds. See his classic study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[17] Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999), 191.

animalistic, “insolent negro” (as Frederick Douglass was imagined to be in the “Maddened Justice” story that opened this dissertation) with the sophisticated character of Sadness, whose strange smiles and laughs commingle with sorrow and never fail to lose connection with a horrifying past.

As both Jacqueline Stewart and Gavin Jones have pointed out, in this novel Dunbar is overtly critical of the consumption of dialect poetry and black-face minstrelsy by both white and black audiences. The novel is particularly critical of the kinds of merriment they arouse. As Stewart contends, Dunbar takes up the call of “the black press, the 'Old Settlers,' the middle class” who “bemoaned the embarrassing migrant period” in which black artists and black audiences *thoughtlessly* laughed at themselves within the paradigms of popular racist ridicule.[18] He condemns early American traditions of laughter – those that celebrated the power of laughter to heal bodies while ignoring the moral dilemma of using laughter as an insidious method of mocking marginalized bodies. Dunbar does this work by imagining Sadness's laughter to be a philosophical reaction to specifically African American experiences within the nation's history.

The Sport of the Gods tells the story of the Hamiltons, a ruptured black family that migrates North in an attempt to flee infamy and escape to the anonymity of the city.[19] A thriving but dangerous culture of entertainment – ragtime, minstrel shows, gambling, and drinking – awaits them within this new urban black community. Dunbar writes that when the individual joins the masses of the city, “the subtle, insidious wine of New York will

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[18] Jacqueline Stewart, “Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003), 664.

[19] The father of the Hamilton family is wrongfully accused by a white family of robbery. Both the white and the black communities shun them, driving them out of town.

begin to intoxicate him.”[20] The city itself is as dangerous as alcohol (also roundly critiqued in this novel) because of its abundance of self-destructive entertainment. The novel does not romanticize the rural plantation tradition in the process of criticizing city life; rather, Dunbar suggests that the city allows for larger numbers of people to make poor choices together. In the midst of this narrative of poor choices, Sadness slides in and out of view, a peripheral character whose comments upon entertainment, joking, and African American experience remind other characters of the realities that linger behind the pleasures of the city.

Dunbar emphasizes within his narrative the idea that forgetful laughter is degenerative, destructive, and even lethal. One of the first people that the Hamiltons meet upon arriving in New York is Mr. Thomas, a man who promises to introduce them to “Cooney Island” [sic], bring rag-time music to their home, and take them to “a good coon show in town.”[21] In joining Mr. Thomas in these popular, racist entertainments, the family begins a path toward self-destruction. Kitty, the young daughter, becomes a singer in a “coon show” and loses her innocence. Joe, the son, becomes involved with a rag-time performer, becomes an alcoholic, and eventually a murderer. Mrs. Hamilton loses her children, her hope, and eventually puts herself under the bigamous protection of an abusive man, believing herself forever separated from her husband. They all could be said to “forget themselves” in the mere excitements of the city. So, when Mr. Thomas introduces them to the world of popular entertainment in New York saying, “You'd die

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[20] Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods* (New York: New American Library, 1999), 47.
[21] Ibid., 53.

laughing,” the irony shines clear.[22] Indeed, structurally, Dunbar's narrative resembles “The Drunkard's Progress,” the famous antebellum temperance lithograph discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, in which the most carefree mirth of drink immediately precedes the drunkard's decent toward suicide.[23]

Dunbar's representation of the family's first foray among the masses at an entertainment captures a scenario of instant debasement through dissembling. At the blackface show, the Hamiltons are as easily tricked into forgetting the insult of grease-paint because “the garishness of the cheap New York theatre” appeared to them as “fine and glorious.”[24] Dunbar's narrator steps in to explain that the singing and dancing talents of the performers did, in fact, give “almost a semblance of dignity to the tawdry music and inane words,” but he stresses that this, too, is an illusion of the popular theater.[25] The newcomers in the city are dazzled by entertainment, and blinded to its dangers, laughing themselves into oblivion. Even the good Mrs. Hamilton “laughed and applauded with the rest, all the while trying to quiet something that was tugging at her way down in her heart.”[26] The scene masterfully shows both sides of popular entertainment to readers, bringing into relief exactly what the Hamiltons can and cannot see, and what they can only sense vaguely. None, however, are so blind as Joe, the young man of the family. Dunbar describes Joe's first encounter with a rag-time performance:

> There was a patter of applause, and a young negro came forward, and in a strident, music-hall voice, sung or rather recited with many gestures the ditty.

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22 Ibid.
23 See page 91 of this dissertation.
24 Ibid., 58.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 60.

> He couldn't have been much older than Joe, but already his face was hard with dissipation and foul knowledge. He gave the song with all the rank suggestiveness that could be put into it. Joe looked upon him as a hero.[27]

Joe sees fame and belonging in this performer's inducement of hilarity; he does not see the hardness or dissipation in the young man's face. Joe's persistent inability to see the cost of belonging to this crowd of entertainers – and the entertained – is what ultimately drives him mad, what makes him a murderer. Joe's pleasure, and his laughter, become perverted. Dunbar writes:

> The first sign of the demoralization of the provincial who comes to New York is his pride at his insensibility to certain impressions which used to influence him at home. First, he begins to scoff, and there is no truth in his views nor depth in his laugh.[28]

Dunbar imagines a core possibility within every individual to have a moral sensibility, though it is one which can be contaminated in the popular sphere through forgetful, meaningless laughter. The contamination shows itself through a form of merriment lacking “depth.” To look back again to the antebellum era, Dunbar's figuration of the problem of shallow or empty laughter recalls Douglass's argument that black audiences “having no objection against lively wit and humour” still should seek out performers who offer entertainments “as instructive as they are amusing.”[29]

What sort of redemptive “depth” may one attain in one's laughter? Dunbar offers an example of a different kind of laughter than what is found at “coon shows” and in rag-time audiences. Although Joe is never able to comprehend the advice, Sadness tries to instruct him in navigating the dangers of the city, including that of vacuous laughter.

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[27] Ibid., 70.
[28] Ibid., 50.
[29] See pages 95-96 of this dissertation.

Described paradoxically as “sadly gay,” Sadness is an idler, a self-proclaimed “lily of the field.”[30] With a style of joking that turns upon real, tragic histories, Sadness attempts to teach Joe to see what is laughable about his own condition and his own history, rather than using the laughter of “coon shows” and ragtime dancing as a distraction. He tries to give the young man perspective, through a bitterly comic lens, of injustice and inhumanity. When Joe is moping over his father's besmirched reputation as a robber, Sadness tells him: “Your case isn't half as bad as that of nine-tenths of the fellows that hang around here... Now, for instance, my father was hung.” Joe recoils in horror, but Sadness quips:

> Oh yes, but it was done with a very good rope and by the best citizens of Texas, so it seems that I really ought to be grateful to them for the distinction they conferred upon my family, but I am not. I am ungratefully sad. A man must be very high or very low to take the sensible view of life that keeps him from being sad. I must confess that I have aspired to the depths without ever being fully able to reach them.[31]

Sadness concludes his lecture on how to view the world through this tragicomic lens with “a peculiar laugh.” Sadness's wit mocks the tendencies of the white community to value its “best citizens,” in spite of violent, selfish behaviors among these select citizens. Joe should recognize that this form of Anglo American pride is what drove the Oakley family to treat the Hamilton family's troubles as mere collateral damage, even as both families careered to destruction. Sadness mocks, also, the idea that with such a history that there may be any fantasy around black gratitude toward the white community, that he would be anything other than “ungratefully sad” for such treatment. Joe does not understand

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30 Ibid., 82.
31 Ibid., 83.

Sadness's ironies, nor his meaningful reversal of humors. Sadness laughs at his painful history but mourns his current “entertaining” position among a crowd of idlers and dandies.[32] Sadness's enigmatic laughter within *Sport of the Gods* insists upon laughing at – and by so doing, calling attention to – cruelty and injustice.[33]

Indeed, Dunbar fought, as a humorist, against being implicated in the widespread national effort to forget not only the rifts created by war between the North and the South, but also to laugh away the atrocities directed toward African American citizens since Reconstruction. The two efforts went problematically hand in hand. As Michael Kammen notes of the post-bellum era, “the role of African-Americans in national memory remained nominal; and the dominant culture inclined to amnesia on the subject.”[34] The illustration on the cover of an 1882 compilation of humor is highly suggestive of precisely the role that humorists might play in the dominant culture's amnesia:[35]

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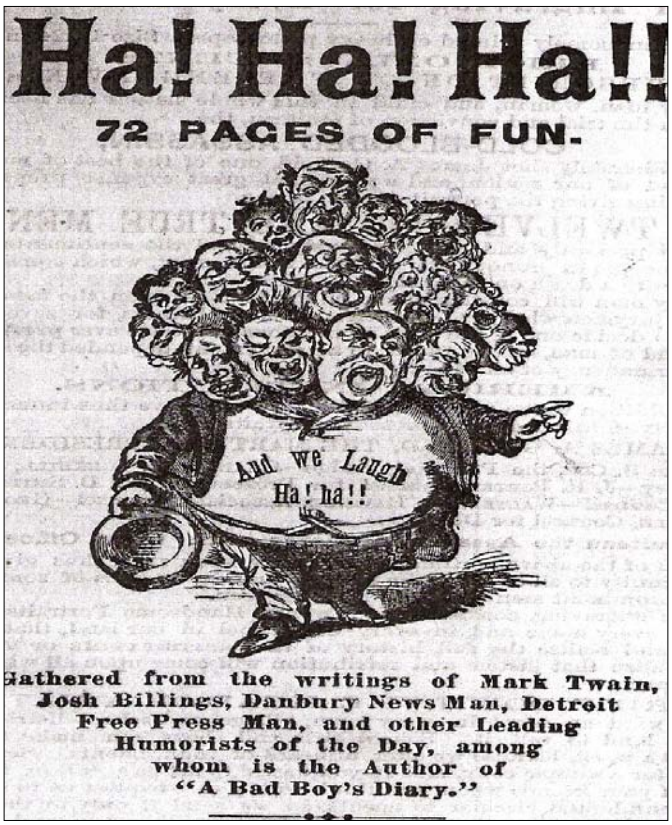
[32] In another scene, Sadness evinces his disdain for white consumption of black entertainment, and his universal disdain for black popular humor which enables such low-laughing mixed-race audiences. A white reporter comments, watching a rag-time dance, “I tell you, Sadness...dancing is the poetry of motion.” Sadness retorts, “Yes, and dancing in ragtime is the dialect poetry” (116).

[33] Dunbar records this philosophy elsewhere in the poem “Misapprehension,” about a white reader’s response to his serious poetry: “Out of my heart, one day, I wrote a song,/ With my heart’s blood imbued,/ Instinct with passion, tremulously strong,/ With grief subdued;/ Breathing a fortitude/ Pain-bought./ And one who claimed much love for what I wrought,/ Read and considered it,/ And spoke:/ “Ay, brother, – ‘tis well writ,/ But where’s the joke?”

[34] Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 87.

[35] J. S. Ogilvie's (publisher), *Ha! Ha! Ha!!* (No. 25 Rose Street, New York, 1882). I have discussed briefly, in the first chapter of this dissertation, how this title page recalls the popular comic publications of the antebellum era in its publication formatting. It emphasizes the exchange of money for helpful or salutary laughter – in this case, the benefit is gathering people into the national “we.”



The act of gathering the “Leading Humorists of the Day” within one binding provides an opportunity to imagine selling such a compilation to not only an eager population, but a unified population. The grotesque illustration is a fantasy of post-bellum national reconciliation, representing a multitude of individual heads joined in one body, and also joined in laughter. Upon that body to which “all” belong is inscribed the unifying directive: “And We Laugh Ha! Ha!!” This directive is, however, a decisively limited gesture of inclusion. The site of unification, the body, is clearly gendered male through its apparel. Significantly, among all of the heads with their variety of exaggerated features there is no evidence that the “we” includes women. Additionally, by this form of exclusion through omission, the cartoon positions whiteness as well as masculinity as the

“only” qualifications to join in the empowerment of a laughing “we.” This vision of merry reunion in the post-Civil War nation was a part of the cultural work that, as Fishkin puts it, allowed “white America to ignore the tragic betrayal of black Americans.”[36] After the war and after emancipation, the cartoon pushes back at the margins, and indulges in a fantasy of a “return” to antebellum privileged white male enjoyment.

In opposition to such fantasies, Dunbar's strange character’s cachinnation breaks through the collusive and dismissive silence of the era, but it also moves Sadness dangerously close to living within a form of nihilism. Sadness prevents others from viewing him as a “happy darkey,” but he also does little more than wander the city, loafing and philosophizing. Although he is capable of re-envisioning the world through his sense of humor, he only offers this to the occasional individual. He is otherwise profoundly inactive. Furthermore, Sadness leaves other characters, as well as readers, with a sense of discomfort because even while he offers a revolutionary form of laughter, he also seems irreverently distant from those whom he advises. That is, while properly directed laughter can prove an effective commentary against inhumanity, one might argue that potentially the only thing left to do after laughing would be *nothing.* Sadness’s transcendence of human problems closely resembles inhumanity itself. Sadness enters and retreats from Dunbar’s narrative as an ambiguous, complex figure, neither celebrated nor condemned within the novel.

That Dunbar hastened to publish *Sport of the Gods*, complete with Sadness's dark lessons, is evidence of Dunbar's courage to be – as Sadness was not – a man of both

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[36] Fishkin, “Race and the Politics of Memory,” 285.

laughter and action. Aware that his early poetry had garnered him wide, diverse readerships, and aware that they came to his works with diverse expectations, he dared to use his fame to speak to all of them at once, as *one*. In his work, Dunbar attempts to imagine a more diverse national "we" that can laugh – though perhaps bitterly – at a shared national history. His literary reputation has been under scrutiny for a century after his death because of his willingness to explore a history of "ghastly humor," his courage to publish novels subtly mocking white narratives, and his audacity to laugh at his world in spite of the likelihood that he would be misunderstood. Dunbar's literary career, with its dramatic ups and downs, reveals that his position as a laughter-inducing African American author could, depending upon who read his work, be viewed as anything from a "happy darkey" to "a credit to his race."[37] In *The Sport of the Gods*, he positions himself through his narrator and through the character of Sadness as an author who understands the dangers and rewards of writing risibly.

In the later nineteenth-century, as Dunbar's case highlights, hilarity's expressiveness remained unstable and contested in American culture, its many possible significances often revealing their relations to earlier antebellum significances. Indeed, even into the twentieth-century, interpretations of a body in hilarity often reflected attitudes toward that body's fitness as a citizen. One could argue that the 1905 publication of Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* shifted the question away from the body and toward the mind. In reality, however, American

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[37] See Lillian S. Robinson and Greg Robinson's article "Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Credit to His Race?," *African American Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 215-226. Robinson and Robinson delineate many of the ways that Dunbar's work was received, and *used*, by varying audiences and readerships.

conventions of marginalization were easily re-rationalized upon psychoanalytic views of the mind. *Jokes* served to bolster, with psychological authority, the idea that the laughter of both women and racialized others was outside of the normal. Freud's analyses presumed dysfunctionality in much of women's laughter, and were dismissive of the need to understand the laughter of racialized "others."[38] Women and African Americans could, when in the throes of hilarity, be viewed with doubts in mind of their psychological fitness for democratic responsibilities.

Nevertheless, "abnormal" laughter remained a forceful utterance that could challenge the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century's dominant culture. A half-century after Pip's laughter provoked the Pequod's crew to listen against expectation and a widow's uproarious behavior compelled a community to hear her history, Pierre Janet's Irene makes audible her cry for help through inappropriate laughter (Chapter 4) and Dunbar offers the tragicomic revelation of Sadness's "ghastly humor." Unusual incarnations of laughter have the power to expand a listener's (or reader's) understanding of another human being's experiences, or even one's own experiences, by challenging the shifting boundaries between the inexplicable and the unexplained.[39] It is at this juncture that laughter is truly telling, for those who would hear the tale.

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[38] Freud had published the tremendously influential *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. In 1905, he published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (the "Dora Case") and *Jokes*. As Peter Gay has noted, during these years psychoanalysis was "a rapidly emerging international movement," and one could see how American dominant culture would embrace at this time masculinist, Eurocentric theories ("Freud: A Brief Life," xvi).

[39] When I point to the possibility that an unusual incarnation of laughter might expand one's own understanding of oneself, I am thinking of Ralph Ellison's essay that looks back from the 1980s to an experience of uncontrollable laughter that he had in the 1930s. See "An Extravagance of Laughter" in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 145-197.

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