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Canned Laughter

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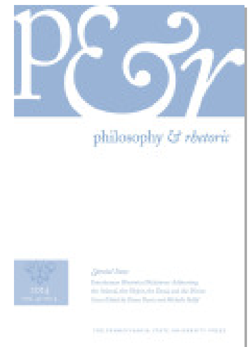

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Joshua Gunn

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the example of (canned) laughter continues to trouble the human/machine binary that so many have troubled, from Descartes to Zupančič. Sounding various objects of "recorded" laughter through psychoanalytic tweeters, deconstructive warps, and object-oriented woofers implicates ontology as so much noise for the projection of certainty. Derivatively speaking, I argue for the primacy of a rhetorical ethics.

KEYWORDS: affect, drive, laughter, object-oriented ontology, nose hair, extrahuman

They probably found the Whistling Coon down by the Hudson, busking among the ferry goers. For a small fee George W. Johnson could whistle the popular tunes of the 1890s with alacrity and an unnerving accuracy.[1] At that time New York was the seat of the entertainment industries, and gramophone peddlers were scrambling for those curious, cylindrical inscriptions that lured patrons to their coin-operated phonographs (Smith 2005, 28–29). Although it was unusual for a black man to be a recording artist at the time, Johnson's vocalic abilities were novel and minstrelsy was increasingly popular, as white Americans confronted their racial anxieties in popular entertainment.[2] The phonographers paid Johnson twenty cents for every two-minute song he recorded, which was a lucrative enterprise when one considers that *every recording made was a master*: only four or five cylinders could be inscribed at once, the horns of the recording machines arranged in front of Johnson's resonant mouth. Within a decade technological innovation would enable the simultaneous inscription of multiple copies,

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even copies of copies, such that, gradually, the master's voice—the master's recorded voice—became autonomous, needing that seat of inspiration, the diaphragm, *just the once* for innumerable ears. At first they wanted Johnson all day, every day, and then they did not want him at all. By 1905, Johnson's recording career was over.

The march of inscriptive technology that eventually hijacked Johnson's voice follows, like an unintended homology, Henri Bergson's formula for laughter: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (qtd. in Sypher 1956, 92). Singing the subject's subversion with Jacques Lacan, we might render laughter as *something lawful encrusted upon the living*.[3] The law here references language construed as a register of experience (the Symbolic), which for Lacan is "like an alien body that grafts itself onto the order of the body and of nature," as Philippe Van Haute reports (2002, 25). In my remarks here—and with more than a little help from my friends—I examine the way the mechanical or lawful comes to bear on that nominal domain of human spirit that Bergson dubbed the "life impulse" and that Sigmund Freud referenced as "the drive." Rhetoric figures in this examination in two senses borrowed from the ancients, both as a theory of suggestion or influence (that is, a rhetoric is a theory) and as the stuff of suggestion or influence, broadly construed.[4] Alternately cast, I wish to think aloud about the intertwined relationship between the lawful and the living—influence either way—without saying that the subject *is* language or *of* the body or that there is an outside to either. I recognize, too—and perhaps even "thus"—that everything that follows is derivative, perhaps Derrida-tive as a friend would quip, and hardly laconic.[5] Still, I want to have faith that something productive nevertheless works itself through, something akin to the unexpected snort of a seemingly controlled chortle.

At first blush the notion of laughter as the mechanical encrusted upon the "living" voice recalls that all-too-familiar dialectic between what Marx dubbed the relations and forces of production; as anyone tethered to a so-called smartphone would likely confess, that our livelihoods and relationships to each other and "nature" always seem beholden yet resistant to technological encrustations is a hopelessly familiar regularity. But then there are the mechanics of respiration too, some autonomic or reflexive, some purposefully labored (even forced), and the law that is figured between them as signification. I have *really* begun with reference to Johnson's recording career because his first, best-selling record was not fixated on his unusual

talent for whistling but rather, on his ability to laugh in tune (I would like to play you an audio file as an indented citation. Of course, I cannot do so here. So, I would invite the dear reader to humor me by playing the first file found at this URL address: http://archive.org/details/GeorgeWJohnson):

> As I was coming 'round the corner, I heard some people say,
> Here comes a dandy darky; here he comes this way.
> His heel is like a snowplow,
> And his mouth is like a trap,
> And when he open[s] it gently you will see a fearful gap.
> Then I laugh ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha,
> I couldn't stop my laughing ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha,
> Ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha,
> I couldn't stop my laughing ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. (2002)

Johnson's fearful gap purportedly helped to sell more than twenty-five thousand copies of "Laughing Song" by 1894; the record was among the most popular phonographic cylinders of that century. After Johnson's wildly successful single, "laughing records" would continue to sell briskly as a novelty for almost thirty years and was the first breakout genre of the record industry.

According to Jacob Smith, the "main purpose of these records seems to have been the incitation of the listener's infectious laughter" (2005, 28), to let loose a kind of sonic contagion that Bergson's timely theory of the comic helped to explain. At the crown of the golden age of the phonography, Bergson suggested that the infection of laughter was a kind of unknowing, physiological encounter with Immanuel Kant's famous antinomy of free will: referencing his laughter formula, he said, "The living being under discussion was a human being, a person. A mechanical arrangement, on the other hand, is a thing. What, therefore, incited laughter, was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing. . . . *We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of a thing*" (1956, 97). In *The Uncanny*, Freud would later elaborate a similar equation to explain the discomfort of the uncanny—a recognition of the strangeness in something familiar.

I mention Freud on the uncanny and Bergson on laughter together to underscore their common concern with *repetition.* Freud argues that an experience of the uncanny depends on "the constant recurrence of the same thing," often an "unintended repetition that transforms what would

otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny" (2003, 142, 144). Although Bergson figures repetition most explicitly as a situational element of comedy, Alenka Zupančič insists that the compulsion to repeat is at the core of his theory of laugher. As she helpfully describes it, for Bergson what ties infectious laughter with the uncanny is a simultaneous experience of the automatic and the spontaneous, the machinic and the elastic, or simply, the dead and the alive (2008, 111). Because Johnson's "Laughing Song" is a recording (and the precursor to what we know today as the "laugh track"), listening to it repeatedly, and particularly to the staccato "ha ha ha" of the refrain, can render it strange and, I gamble, help us to hear something like an "extrahuman" deaf spot—something mechanical, something uncanny, something dead.[6] Listening for the deaf spot is only possible though a sonic parallax, but I am hoping that our inevitable dis-affection courts a kind of startled humility or the kind of ethical disposition that many are calling for in the key of "attunement."[7]

Like sneezes and hiccups, laughter is situated somewhere on a continuum between vocalization (a physiological oomph) and speech (feeling + meaning, e.g. "tone"). Johnson's recorded laughter is obviously closer to speech—his ha-ha-ha's are (mostly) in tune and part of a carefully crafted spasm—but they recall the naked aggression and abandon of an "irrepressible laughter," which Diane Davis argues affronts "our humanist sensibilities" and desire for "control" because "we do not want to *crack up*" (2000, 3). The cultural rules for the permissibility of public vocal spasm or, simply, "uncontrolled speech," can unite and divide groups of people, sometimes deliberately but often in spite of ourselves.[8] As anyone who has "lost it" in public and been comforted (or worse, scorned) in the company of others knows, crying in pain or sobbing in grief are governed forms of speech—however spontaneous. That there are cultural rules and codes for vocalic spasm is indicative of our comportment as subjects of the "law" with which we reckon to make ourselves coherent and behave. And like its cousins—hiccups and sneezes and slips of the tongue—laughter can help denude us and *feel* the fissures of the subject. Davis argues that cracking up or losing it also exposes our addictions to language, if not our abject dependency on something "that is *not human* but that *brings the human into being*" at or on the scene of the Other (2000, 75).[9] Since advancing a "rhetoric of laughter" more than a decade ago, Davis has consistently argued for a posthuman reckoning that challenges any "solid and indivisible line between 'the human' and 'the animal'" or any easy distinction here between "authentic response" and "mere reaction" (2010, 165). We are laughing with Davis, who

has already argued what is argued here but with a slightly different, psychoanalytic way of getting about the punch line. (Please note: there is no "to" the punch line.) Homologously, there is no solid and indivisible line between the human and the machine, although we might say, as a *techne*, rhetoric has often been conceived as trying to force one.

We could also say that the kind of uncontrolled release that Davis describes as a grappling with—and letting go of—the humanist subject is also a coming to terms with the compulsion to repeat, or what Freud termed the repetition compulsion. What else is uncontrolled laughter but speech given over to compulsion, a seemingly mindless and mechanical cutting, a doubling over or folding forward that possesses us but that, nonetheless, gives us a sense of space or a distance that enables us to feel alive? Between the gasps, one grasps for her bearing(s). In this sense, rhetoricians are perhaps most familiar with repetition compulsion in the work of Uncle Burke, whose ruminations on form, first in *Counter-Statement* and later more obliquely in *Permanence and Change,* traced a nascent rhetoric of repetition that suggested a counterpoint to the centuries-old rhetoric of representation. We might propose that a rhetoric of repetition is what many of us are after when we are trying to figure (out) the body, the dance of the so-called affective turn, or even a corpus of public memory sounded out by old recordings. Rhetorically speaking, the emergent, contrapuntal conception of repetition is probably better located in the work of Susan Langer, but for good or ill, rhetorical scholars have received it through Kenneth Burke's more casual dissemination.[10]

In his essay "The Psychology of Audience," Burke defines form as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of an auditor, and the adequate satisfaction of that appetite" (1968, 31). Burke's theory of form was, incidentally, inspired to some extent by his stint as a music critic (Hawhee 2009, 22–29, 72). (In this respect we can think of Johnson's "Laughing Song" as a kind of double whammy of appetite inducement!) Burke's musical understanding of form depends on bodily excitation through repetition; feelings of *pleasure* or "satisfaction" are central. As useful as his theory of form has been, however, Burke did not examine form's compulsions all the way, for we can certainly talk about forms—especially habits—that are *painful*.[11] Enter (again) the Mac Daddy of psychoanalysis.

Although Freud admitted that repetition is a source of pleasure, he eventually came to the conclusion that the compulsion to repeat is driven by something "beyond" pleasure, a drive "to restore an earlier state of things"—a drive toward equilibrium or, simply, death (1961, 42–43). After seeing

clients who compulsively returned to his couch complaining of pain or reporting on their continued destructive behaviors, Freud came to the conclusion pleasure might be a mechanism of defense for a deeper, common structure that was reducible to neither physiology nor cultural conditioning. Even when a patient was able to deliver or translate a trauma into narrative, sometimes her symptoms persisted. Freud concluded that there must be a limit to interpretation—to representation. He also concluded that there is no total satisfaction in the compulsion to repeat (something Burke seems to suggest is possible, at least with art). There is no total satisfaction in repetition compulsion because it is a kind of structural frustration in itself; repetition compulsion is the continual restatement of a kind of limit condition. Enter (again) the dragon.

Like Burke, Lacan's understanding of the bodily dimensions of symbolic inducement depend on *repetition*; however, extending Freud's observations about the death drive, he adds the motor of *jouissance* (frequently translated as "enjoyment"). Whereas Burke is stuck on pleasure, Lacan thinks of repetition through *jouissance,* which is not pleasure but something beyond it, a kind of unnerving fascination that, as Bruce Fink puts it, compels us to get off, "however clean or dirty" (1997, 9). "Enjoyment organizes affect," explains Christian Lundberg, "representing a subject's 'useless' repetition of its habits of subjectivity and the subject's ritual organization of its affective investments and the means of organizing these practices" (2012, 113). Understanding *jouissance* in this way implicates it as an agent, and hence it is not a "characteristic of a subject" but rather is the underwriter of "subjectivication through discourse," serving as a kind of "material substrate within which the performance of subjectivity is situated" (2012, 113).

Elaborating Freud's later thinking about the drives, Lacan argues that the compulsion to repeat "is based on the return of *jouissance*" and, consequently, is in some sense opposed to *pleasure* (2007, 46). Often recognized by many of us as compulsions, the drives push toward an explosion of the pleasure principle and are consequently on a "path toward death" (2007, 18). This initially seems like a bummer because, fully realized, *jouissance* portends something like a short-circuited drive hurling toward destruction.[12] Fortunately, however, Lacan argues that we exchange—because of an unbearable *intensity* and by necessity—our unbridled enjoyment for the signifier, courting something lawful layered upon the driven.[13] Unlike Burke's notion of form, then, a Lacanian rendering describes the "pleasure" derived from repetition as an index of cultural functioning—that culture *is* functioning. In this respect, we can think about laughter as driving toward an

unendurable ecstasy but stopping short at the place of pleasure (or at least the relief of cessation); *we know that we can stop, that we can catch our breath and reflect on our spasms, that we can, in effect, rinse after we repeat.* In this way, Johnson's "Laughing Song" is a sufferable illustration of the experience of *jouissance* as well as an instance of its containment beyond its inscription in wax: "Then I laugh ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha/I couldn't stop my laughing ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha," sings Johnson, at once gesturing toward an unbridled *jouissance* (he cannot stop himself, he is losing it) and inviting the auditor to enjoy in laughter, too, but also stopping short of the shriek that comes from just beyond the limits of language. Johnson's "ha"s are clearly articulated and grafted onto or into a repetitive melody; or, alternately stated, the "ha"s render noise into song.[14] For the auditor of his time, perhaps the starkest limits are fantasies of racism that would resign Johnson's song to a "novelty" produced by a "primitive" less in control of his affects than the listener (he is a "coon," after all).[15]

I realize that this discussion is a little abstract and I recognize, like the bridge or chorus of a popular song, there is relief in the presumed concrete of the departure or repeat. We are not dead yet, or at least not totally, so a refrain: so far I have noted the similarities of Bergson and Freud on laugher and the uncanny concern a tension between the mechanical and the organic or "live," the often mistaken distinction between the machine and the human. Both concern repetition, with which rhetoricians are most familiar through the work of Burke on form. I cautioned that Burke stays on the controllable, pleasurable side of repetition and does not push it where Freud dares us to go, into its uncanny dimension. Lacan provides us with a useful term for this endlessly fascinating but nevertheless discomforting dimension, *jouissance.*

When I have shared the reflections repeated in this article to folks arranged in a room and attuned to my mouth, at this point in my remarks I would reach into my jacket pocket and produce a small, two-inch by four-inch red box, marketed as a novelty that can play "16 hilarious sound effects."[16] When mashed, the second button produces six seconds of a group of people laughing through the box's tiny and tinny speaker. Taking care not to press the wrong button—my fear is accidentally mashing the "fart" one—I press the "laughter" button four times. As I do this, I make goofy faces, and on each successive de-pressing, audiences typically giggle more with every repetition. I then explain that the recording is the contemporary legacy of Johnson's laughter, sounding from a handheld gizmo that

enables me to reproduce canned laughter, repeatedly and almost indefinitely (that is, until the batteries die). Burke would have us focus exclusively on the *novelty* of repetition as the source of satisfaction, while Lacan would underscore the literal repetition of the laughter, the seemingly identical iteration of the sound of the recording, as crucial as a ground or scene of enjoyment. Even though every time I mash this button (I would mash it again, here, a fifth time)—even though every time I mash this button an identical sound seems to come from its speaker, *I cannot mash the button in the same way*, nor can listeners hear each iteration with the same meaning. It is that *difference in repetition of the same*, experienced by individual auditors, with which we are concerned when discussing the drives; for it is in that impossible experience of sameness, that gap between an iteration and an identity between which we move back and forth, that we locate the weird ruptures of enjoyment.

Of course, as is often the case when one plays with gadgets, my mashing-up laughter is classically "regressive," recalling infantile fantasies of omnipotence, and perhaps even annoying to the auditor.[17] Following Lacan, Zupančič argues that this childish or annoying quality of repetition, of being driven in public, is why comedy is often assumed to have "no class." Lacan's examples of repetition compulsion are telling. One is a version of what we would describe today as "peekaboo." Another is a child who demands that the same story be read to her over and over at bedtime. The association of the excessiveness of human affectivity betokened by laughter with childishness also begins to sound out the gradual neglect of the rhetorical canon of delivery by rhetoricians over the past century.

From a posthuman vantage, I think that repetition compulsion is at the crossroads—or, better, overpass—of what we have resigned to delivery and memory (which is to say, forgetting, the condition of what is to be said at all). I say "overpass" in part because there has been some sort of strange pact to repress the body (e.g., elocution in name and field), and by extension, speech and orality, from rhetorical thinking across the twentieth century (oral interpretation and elocution are for girls and unmanly men, dontcha know?)—a pact many have been working hard to undo (and we understand by now that contractarian thinking as such always excludes some body).[18] I say "overpass" also because the repetition compulsion and the drives it betokens are lodged in the in-between, neither wholly in delivery nor wholly in its mnemic traces—notably, references to the body and language, respectively—but rather only discerned in the imagined movement over or across from one and then back under.

It is on a related overpass that the sound engineer Charles Douglass motors in from the past, riding his own pact-making machine, the Laff Box. Douglass's invention improved on the splicing technique of the "laugh track" used in sitcoms in the 1950s:

> A former radio man and World War II veteran who helped develop radar for the Navy, Mr. Douglass was a technical director for other live shows and soon heard of the laugh-loop technique. An entrepreneurial sort, he immediately saw the value of such a contraption and promptly invented what he called the "Laff Box," which before long became the industry standard. Mr. Douglass understood that prerecorded laughter did more than just "sweeten" the material; it also allowed the technicians to better control the quality of the recording. Taping dialogue, sound effects and audience reactions all on one soundstage was tricky back in the 1950s, regardless of how good the laughs were. (Judge 2003, D8)

Douglass made a career out of his invention, which originally was a large box with keys like a typewriter that are "played" like an organ. To hire him, however, television professionals were required to keep the process secret, which imbued canned laughter with an aura of mystery. Jacob Smith explains that

> despite flurries of interest in the popular press, the apparatus and production techniques behind the laugh track were kept an industry secret and are notable by their absence. . . . Coupled with this aura of secrecy, the laugh track, although introduced to a public familiar with the idea of recorded voices, seems to have been considered eerie and uncanny from the very beginning of its existence. This was the case even with TV technicians: "Fellow technicians strolled over to look at the mechanical laughter, shuddered, and said they were glad they weren't operating it." (2005, 40–41)

Smith suggests the industry's secret was fueled, in part, by the ghoulish recognition that the canned laughter, used to inspire a television experience with a feeling of presence, featured the voices of people who were long since dead.

There is much to say about the controversy of canned laughter in television—and Jacob Smith has already said much of it—but to say this

in the space allotted, I should cut the cheese (whoops, I did just mash the wrong butt[on]): whence the *drive* to capture laughter, this strange vocalization borne aloft by repetition? Whence the aggression? And why was Johnson's novelty record permissible and the Laff Box a dirty secret? There are many answers, some more obviously racist, others less so in light of the practical politics of television production. For example, some argued that the Laff Box was necessary when television shifted to the prerecording era to help maintain the illusion of liveness after the studio audience was retired. Canned laughter was believed to be the signature of an authentically human presence, however machinic: the show may be contrived and derived, but laughing means that *enjoyment is happening*. Another answer: shortly after Douglass's death in 2003, Slavoj Žižek (2003) remixed some earlier remarks (again) in a widely read column that suggested canned laughter was a labor-saving technology, as much for TV producers as for the spectator; the Laff Box laughed for us after a hard day's work, so that we did not have to. Agreeing to an extent with Žižek, Henry Krips has argued the interpassivity of canned laugher thus participates in the ideological work of cynicism (1999, 153–70).

Maybe. I am not so sure cynicism labors in this way *today*. Still, Krips points out that canned laughter courts a contradiction between "knowing" (it's fake) and "doing" (I enjoy the show anyway) that is "characteristic of a phenomenon that Freud calls the drive," again, pushed by *jouissance* but moderated by the law into pleasure. Insofar as canned laughter, like my portable sound machine and Johnson's "Laughing Song," are inscriptions or codes on this side of language, their secret is a contrivance of public memory—but that is not necessarily bad or avoidable. We know that the people whose voices continue to report from Douglass's embalming machine are dead, which is sort of creepy when you find yourself laughing with them, but those dead folks can still inspire us to crack up. Johnson's belly laugh in the face of an ugly racism can catalyze our enjoyment too, momentarily beyond a conditioned fearfulness; these recordings of mirth can set off a kind of compulsion that bleeds beyond the signifier toward the space of the in-between, however impermanent. What a startling rush, this laughing with/as the dead! Here we might sense something like outbreaks of happiness or joy—never far from dread or the scene of a conditioned fear of monstrosity—with(in) the machine. The condition of joy is alloyed.

I worry that the delight of repetition that Burke would locate in the pleasures of novelty deflects our attention from the fears that Bergson's

uncanny formula for laughter traces: cultural fantasies about succumbing to or vanquishing the horrible *Thing*, the monster-machine.[19] The idea that one can *capture* laughter in theory or with a gadget is a kind of inhibition or cultural intervention into the bodily, both an aggression (a trap of inscription, set like a ghostbuster) and a mechanism for the body's perceived release. For rhetoricians who labor in communication studies and for whom "public speaking" dominates the so-called basic course, the startling in-between of laughter's rupture also tracks what flies under the rather broad category of "speech anxiety." Many who teach undergraduates will recognize that such anxiety has traveled to other spaces of encounter in the present generation of students, as some of them would rather interact with "friends" on Facebook or Tumblr or through texting or would rather archive their reactions to world events on YouTube than risk an autonomy sundered in interpersonal encounter. However illusory—the uncanniness of canned laughter gives the lie to presence—the interpersonal risk is the surprise of rupture, of chance, in an otherwise perceived mechanical regularity. In this sense, canned laughter is demonstrative of what Derrida described as the structure of the archive, which represents the "accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place" that is nevertheless *driven* by a "fever" that forever seeks to undo a clamoring for control (1996, 11–12). One cannot do without control, but one cannot do without the agencies of enjoyment either. The trick, I guess, is to discern harm coming or going in either direction and then to try and stop it (which is not, and which never could be, "easy").

(Somewhere in the distance, like a dog barking, a needle scratches across a record).[20] I realize that the foregoing is oblique, so let me come (back) to the body in an abrupt and different way, with an anecdote: at the end of my undergraduate career at an overly expensive private university, John Searle visited the department of philosophy and delivered a talk in which he asserted the "mind/body problem" is (or will be, it was not clear) easily solved in reference to the brain. I cannot recall his particular argument that day (which I'm remembering was rather elegant) because as he paced back and forth in front of the small classroom, I became amused by his nose. Although he was cleanly shaven and a much sharper dresser than many of the philosophers I had met, his nose hairs jutted violently out of his nostrils in unruly tufts. Stifling my childish impulse to giggle, I wondered how anyone could claim to have resolved or have predicted the resolution of a centuries-old conundrum with such an oversight in grooming.

My reaction to Searle's grooming was rooted in a kind of infantile aggression toward a perceived arrogance—whether the arrogance was actual I cannot say—and I certainly find any certitude in discerning a boundary between the Symbolic and, say, the Real of the body problematic. I should assert, too, that I share similar misgivings with those who argue that Freud's distinction between the "instincts" and the "drives" somehow brackets the biological body. As Adrian Johnston has pointed out, "no matter how sympathetic to social constructivism one wishes Freud to be," it is impossible to ignore Freud's repeated statements that "biological terminology" is indispensable (2005, 160). Similarly, a common reading of Lacan asserts that "the relation between language and the body is characterized by an essential exteriority," meaning that once a subject "enters" or is "hooked" into language (the law) any "access to the immediacy of the 'stream of experience' is denied the subject once and for all" (Van Haute 2002, 25–26). Lacan's rejection of biological reductionism—inclusive of an insistence that affect is organized by the signifier—does not mean, however, that one can or should jettison the "biological" in favor of "culturalism," only that "there has never been any other thought than symbolic thought" (Lacan 2006b, 608), a view that lends itself to an examination of the mathematical character of the Symbolic or science, as Lundberg suggests.[21] Relatedly, although "the drives might be set in motion by somatic sources," Johnston argues, "they are necessarily routed through external matrices of mediation," including the tantalizing or teasing *objet (petit) a* (2005, 201–2).

The preceding paragraph may appear occultish to many. As most of those who muck around in the Land o' Lacan are quick to confess, however, there is no easy way to discuss or advance his notion of the drives and repetition compulsion without unraveling a conceptual sweater that stretches across a fat corpus, given that the famed Borromean knot of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, the *objet a,* the drives (all of which are partial thereby insuring an inhibition of their morbid aims), and so on are interrelated. Insofar as this is not a book, *metacarpus*: perhaps the example of canned laughter can get us to *feel* the upending toward which Lacan or Derrida or whoever in the posthuman club gestures (whoops, mashed the wrong one again), to *sense* the uncanny or the uneasy interrelation and mutual implication of the lawful and the living, or to *detect* that deaf spot that both excites and creeps us out the more we attend and attune to symbolic repetitions. The compulsion to laugh, even one catalyzed by the recorded voice of a person long dead, urges us beyond the sediments of settled histories despite aggressions that would take us too far in the direction

of destruction.[22] In short, laughter—it is *all* canned, by the way—is not only an object lesson for understanding the drives but also a mark of the automaton as a prior/primal scene, an *ob*-scene that is too frequently and fearfully forced off-screen.[23]

Perhaps a reckoning with the in-between made conspicuous by canned laughter urges us beyond the hazy confines of the human to take up "the object" as such, paradoxically realizing our humanness as poised on or emergent from the extrahuman: here I reference a language machine, of course, but also a reckoning with this deaf spot or void to which I react that I think invites us to renounce the kind of mastery that Searle's nose hair seems to betray. Such is the promise of psychoanalytic perspectives, which do not guarantee better grooming but rather acknowledge the impossibility of mastery, not to mention having a sense of humor about it too: the humanist subject of self-possessed agency is "subverted" by an adjective, not a definite noun (you know, the *unconscious*).[24] Therefore: nose plume, ear fan, unibrow.

In rhetorical studies, the abandonment of mastery explains a more recent and similar attraction to "speculative realism" and, more specifically, an "object-oriented ontology" (or OOO), as Levi R. Bryant has advanced (2011, 18). Whether elaborated as a philosophy, perspective, or an "onticology" (2011, 20), this tack(-on) appears to converge over a refusal to "treat objects as [the] constructions of humans" (2011, 18), disavowing deconstruction, phenomenology, and related approaches as trapped in a transcendentalism "that seeps from the rot of Kant" (Bogost 2012, 4). As canned laughter serves to illustrate—it keeps on giving, ha ha ha—objects object, most certainly to the anthropomorphic centeredness of a subject who claims to know them. Bryant avers that "no object such as the subject or culture is the ground of all others" (2011, 19).[25]

Still, there are aversions. One may be tempted to think that those who advocate an OOO have common cause with, say, Theodor W. Adorno, whose insightful critique of the subject/object distinction decades ago advanced a posthuman disposition in favor of "the preponderance" and "priority" of the object, retiring a tired humanist subject who lords over our buzzing and blooming world (yet not, incidentally, by raising the object "on the throne from which the subject was just removed" [Molt 2002, 116–17]).[26] But not so, or at least, not necessarily in *this* objective "democracy," presumably untethered to the will to knowledge/power. The OOO gang rewheel toward an ontological primacy in a sophisticated attempt to outmaneuver the "hegemony of epistemology" (Bryant 2011, 19); the humanities are

described as hopelessly mired in questions concerning access to the in-itself. As one of its more strident evangelicals, video game theorist and designer Ian Bogost insists the emergent brands of a more robust, vitalist realism break with critical theory, deconstruction, phenomenology, process philosophy, animal studies, actor network theory, and a host of posthuman bodies because of their failure to abandon the human, for the human can "tell us" nothing "of the inner worlds of Erlenmeyer flasks or rubber-tired Métro rolling stock" (2012, 10).

Such an admittedly uncharitable characterization of Bogost's proselytizing amplifies a tonal tendency among the Ooooohs: in the swift denunciation of "posthuman approaches" for failing to leave the human behind—not to mention the dismissal of centuries of philosophical thinking or any of its close conceptual cousins in the theoretical humanities—Bogost's rhetoric appears resolutely phallogocentric, goaded by the same drive toward mastery that OOO purports to critique ("I see what you stroke there," memes Adorno from beyond the grave). For this reason I think one can easily counter Timothy Morton's claim that "one of the best reasons to admire OOO is its stunning rhetoric" (2011, 167–68). The rhetoric may be stunning but is hardly admirable insofar as a river flows northward in Africa.[27] Alternately expressed by Bergson in 1910, "whatever image [of consciousness] we fall back upon, we do not prove and we shall never prove by any reasoning that the psychic fact is fatally determined by the molecular movement. For in a movement we may find the reason of another movement, but not the reason of a conscious state" (qtd. in Cole 2013, 113). In a cranky critique of OOO, Andrew Cole suggests that Bergson, as one of the founding thinkers of a "glossy and emergent countermovement" in the contemporary humanities, refused, even "in his most mystical moments," to equate subjective "consciousness with the vitalities and intensities" of an objective world on the grounds of a fundamental irreducibility. "You cannot write your way any closer to the object, circle the wagons of indirection and allusion around you as you may," snips Cole (113—14). Lacan stutters in again, wagging a finger: "There has never been any other thought than symbolic thought" (2006b, 608).

One need not be as dismissive as Bogost nor as cynical as Cole to orient toward the object for a productive pedagogy. Here I laugh with my friends James J. Brown Jr. and Nathaniel A. Rivers, who advance an image of teaching writing as "rhetorical carpentry," under the aegis of what Scot Barnett (2013) terms an "object-oriented rhetoric" (OOR).[28] Rather than righteously intoning how others are improperly orienteering in Objectland

or sizing up thrill seekers for the ride, Brown and Rivers patiently "read past" a habit of philosophical ground clearing in order to speculate how an attention to the object, human and extrahuman, generates classroom charity. In other words, what is notably missing in the emergent OOR project is the pretense to mastery that declamations about Being seem to connote.[29] In its place is *an ethics* of "attunement" that recommends understanding the rhetorical (and more pointedly, composition and invention) as a field of objects or a "complex ecology of humans and nonhumans" (Brown and Rivers 2013, 29). Fetching insights from Graham Harman and drawing on Jim Corder's landmark essay "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," Brown and Rivers stress that the "speculative aspect" of rhetoric unexpectedly figures audiences as objects:

> This argument, of course, might strike readers as, at best, counterintuitive or, at worst, supremely monstrous. *Are you suggesting that the ethical way to address subaltern others is to treat them as objects? Isn't this what got us into trouble in the first place?* Yes and no. The value of objectifying the other very much depends on the idea of an object one is working with. (2013, 30)

Following Harman, Brown and Rivers would figure students and their presumed audiences as "forces to be reckoned with" in-themselves, "withdrawn" in the sense of being distinct particularities that "cannot be fully translated or paraphrased," not to be regarded or to regard objects as "means to an end like paper or oil" but as one agent among many, some human and many not (2013, 29—30). Something like regard or respect emerges, but not on the basis of a presumed autonomy—quite the opposite. In this way, we might characterize the stuff of rhetoric as an inscriptive process that recognizes and refigures the Other as object, grounded in invention and tethered to an understanding of ethos that, as Judy Holiday has argued, is fundamentally and irrevocably ethical (2009). For such a reading of OOR, *eunoia* or "goodwill," a foundational receptivity or relationality recognized or cultivated by a rhetor for readers or hearers, becomes the primary scene of an object-oriented rhetoric.

Still, I would stop short of laughing all the way with those who advocate an object orientation for rhetorical studies, if only because the ontologists' tones toward mastery will murmur. Something seems out of tune. Certitudes about "the object" surprise me, productively to be sure, but also alarmingly, as if deconstruction is or was not a thing (in both senses), or

as if psychoanalysis has not been working through object relations for a century.[30] Instead, I had rather end here as I tried to begin, in the middle, with the curious object of Johnson's "Laughing Song," to which I listen—inasmuch as I must to attend—and toward which I sense there was an obligation prior to my understanding of an obligation (that is, that *I* am or was listening to *someone* at all).

"To speak is first of all to speak to others," argues Lacan, which implicates speech in a relational social structure that precedes self-awareness, a kind of forced choice or pact that Derrida once dislocated in the iterability of an "arche-originary *yes*" (Lacan 1997, 36; Derrida 1988a). Whether we focus on the crying mouth or the open ear, as Lacan or Derrida could be said to encourage respectively, whether we focus on the drives or repetition, it is difficult to refuse the study of rhetoric a homologous origin, to deny the idea that expressivity—speech, writing—constitutes the truth of the relation, a "value as a *tessera*," even in midst or the mists of deceit (Lacan 2006a, 209). As an object, uncontrollable laughter, whether recorded or in a moment, seems to capture this value, although not certainly and not precisely. Whether it is a question of ontology or epistemology is not so easy to say, for attending more closely to the grain of Johnson's laughter, letting ourselves get carried away by the laughter of a machine, I wager, teaches us to hear what Diane Davis describes as "the noise, the excess that gets sacrificed for the clarity of the One" (2000, 113). Laughter and the noise it harbors or that carries it is human and extrahuman at the same time, which is why I *feel* rhetoric affords a primacy to ethics.

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NOTES

1. There is little scholarship on Johnson, and much of what is known about his biography is conjecture. See Salem n.d.

2. It was P. T. Barnum, of course, who popularized racial spectacle many decades earlier. See Reiss 2001.

3. For the fishing expedition, see Lacan 2006c.

4. The meaning of the word "rhetoric" is by no means settled, and it is admittedly slippery, but I mean to extend the traditional understanding of rhetoric defined as a "way of seeing" and as symbolic expressivity in the ambit of suggestion (and more consciously, influence or persuasion), as a craft to the kind of discourse—or set of discursive

conditions—that make *unconscious* influence possible. Such a viewpoint has affinities with what Diane Davis has termed "rhetoricity," which she defines as "an affect*ability* or persuade*ability*," leaning toward another Jacques (2010, 2).

5. In other words, another Jacques haunts; see Derrida 1988c, 1–23, and 1988a, 118–33. My gratitude goes to Kendall Joy Gerdes for the pun and feedback on this essay.

6. Of course, listening for the extrahuman in something presumably all too human like laughter courts a familiar metaphysical, phonocentric pickle: the voice and meaning are inextricably wed at the crossroads of presence, and the deals that have been made there—by Edmund Husserl and Ferdinand de Saussure especially—are doosies. As John Mowitt points out, for decades "to engage the voice, perhaps even to pronounce it, was understood to consign one to an ethnocentrism" as well as other bedeviling yucks. And yet the critique of phonocentrism "foreclosed . . . precisely the matter of sound" in a way that many scholars laboring under the aegis of "sound studies" wish to open back up (2011, 23–24). The price of jettisoning (assumptions of) presence is to give up the voice, "precisely" that which "holds bodies and language together," argues Mladen Dolar (2006, 60).

7. See Davis 2005, Heard 2013, and Rickert 2013.

8. For a fuller elaboration of the public character of uncontrolled speech, see Gunn 2010.

9. Through a playful examination of laughter as an object, Davis was the first rhetorical scholar to advance a theory of losing one's shit *as* a rhetoric—or as she puts it much more elegantly, as a discernment of the "momentary lines of flight from the tyranny of meaning" that enables us to embrace—or rather, let loose—the affirmative laughter of forgetting (2000, 67).

10. See Langer 1953 and Lyon 1995.

11. For an example, see Davis 2010, 18–36. For detailed analyses of Burke's theory of form, see Gregg 1978 and Heath 1979.

12. For a lucid description of the possibilities and political potentialities made possible by the death drive, see Biesecker 2011.

13. See Johnston 2005, 236–37.

14. For a similar argument about music, see Attali 1985.

15. I'm thinking here of Fanon's analysis of the black man as a "phobogenic object" (1967, 141–209). I do not presume the listener identifies as white here; however, many historians suggest that was a presumption about the market for such records at the time.

16. I have repeated these reflections, many times. In preparation for a short, oral presentation of these musings at a national conference, I sent the respondent an earlier version of this article. A week before the presentation, I sent a truncated, oral version to the respondent, reasoning that he would appreciate knowing what would be cut. He responded, "Thanks. And, of course, I read your longer version today. It seems that this has become an exercise in repetition in more ways than one. . . . Perhaps you should send . . . another, smaller version every day, until we reach that fatal conjunction of the deaf-spot

and the vanishing point. Who knows what could happen then?" Laughter, I think. And eventually an endnote.

17. See Adorno 1994, 73–74.

18. I'm thinking of Cixous 1976, Pateman 1988, Mills 1997, and Derrida 1988b. The mark of the pact among some U.S. rhetoricians is visible, for instance, in the elimination of "speech" from the professional association formerly known as the Speech Communication Association in 1997. For exemplary undoings, see Hawhee 2005 and Hawhee 2012. See Baskerville 1953 for an example of associating femininity elocution. Baskerville refers to the connotations of what he taught at the university under the aegis of "speech," "with its inevitable connotations of simpering adolescents 'speaking pieces,' affected females rapturously declaiming 'The Little Brown House Under the Apple Tree,' and grown men with orotund voices intoning 'The Bells' or thundering the 'Call to Arms'" (68).

19. See Kearney 2002.

20. The sound of a needle scratching a record, for those who know it, is unnerving. I reference it to mark an abrupt transition but also and more importantly to honor my friend the late James Arnt Aune who challenged me some years ago to work the literary cliché of a dog barking in the distance into an academic essay. The barking dog is (for) you.

21. Mapping this project for rhetoric is Lundberg's endeavor in his *Lacan in Public* (2012).

22. Fuck! The productive promise of compulsion pushes us out; all our laughter is canned, and yet still there is a momentary mirth even in that recognition. Metonymically: all too often we regard the challenges of poststructural theory as monstrous, see poststructural theory as something engaged in fear and trembling, a machine fueled by the dread of countless graduate students and the apprehensions of the grand masters of an exclusive fraternity intoning quasi-transcendental liturgies, sadly forgoing and forgetting the laughter of working through and the humor of scholarly enterprise.

23. I'm inspired/exhausted by Catherine Liu's reading of de Man on reading. Following an "itinerary of reading already drawn up by Slavoj Žižek and Kaja Silverman," she reports, one can easily read the film *Blade Runner* across Descartes's *Meditations*: "The film's protagonist is named Deckard, an obvious Anglicization of Descartes." Liu suggests the film "allegorizes the ambivalence of technological innovation" that we have a tendency to make into geniuses or monstrosities (2000, 37).

24. I'm not necessarily urging readers to adopt a psychoanalytic perspective for thinking the extrahuman vis-à-vis the human any more than I would recommend deconstruction—as if these do not, in the end, recommend me. I mean to suggest that psychoanalytic thinkers have been wrestling with this special issue's object for more than a century, and there is a ready vocabulary . . . oh, who am I kidding? I am also suggesting that a number of recent, contemporary trends in the humanities have procured some new wine bottles, about which more below. Or above. In hipster nasality: "where-evah!"

25. This is one of the reasons Bryant breaks with Lacan, who commits—notably *in the name of rhetoric*—the "hegemonic fallacy," when "one type of entity is treated as the ground or *explanans* of all other entities," e.g., the signifier (2011, 131).

26. See also Adorno 2002.

27. Who is there to admire? he said quippily.

28. See also Barnett 2010.

29. For other work in, or gesturing toward, this area, see Edbauer 2005, Hawk 2007, Reid 2012a and 2012b, and Rickert 2013.

30. Thankfully, as a former Lacanian analyst, Bryant is not so dismissive; see, for example, 2011, 135–92.

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