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Laughing Off White Supremacy, or: The Politics of Laughter in African American Modernism

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Laughing Off White Supremacy, or:
The Politics of Laughter in African American Modernism

By

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ABSTRACT

"Laughing Off White Supremacy, or: The Politics of Laughter in African American Modernism" delineates a history of African American laughter directed at white supremacy, white supremacist discourses, and white supremacist beliefs in the U.S. in the early 20th century. I show that African American laughter was the foundation for vibrant debates about the strategic direction of black cultural and political movements during this period, including the Harlem Renaissance. I also show that the tradition of laughing at white supremacy developed in contrast to what I identify as the socially codified practice of "laughing it off" thus demonstrating that the practice of laughing at white supremacy was an ironic reaction to a dominant, bourgeois form of laughter in the early 20th century. Finally, I demonstrate that the variety of ways that black authors used laughter reorients longstanding debates about modern laughter and modernist form.

The variety of laughs that take white supremacy as their object and the set of cultural and political strategies that this laughter represents are what I collectively refer to as *laughing off white supremacy*. The phrase "laughing off" in no way signifies a lack of serious consideration of the threat of white supremacist violence or white supremacist thought. The variety of laughing reactions that I identify are attempts to animate the spectacle of racial violence by representing it as an aesthetic object open to a variety of aesthetic responses, each bearing their own history, ethics, and theory of or orientation toward political action. The deadly serious nature of white supremacy represented through the aesthetic experience of laughter prompts a deepening of attention to the political problems that are represented, the ethical stakes of laughing responses to violence, and a commitment to collective political action expressed through laughter.

“Laughing Off White Supremacy” deepens our understanding of the history of African American comedy and its relationship to political change in the period of American modernism. It also corrects the misconception that modern laughter evinced a retreat from collective political engagements. By showing how the laughter of individuals becomes a source of genuine feeling that is oriented toward collective action, I demonstrate how theories of affect can draw on historical and formalist methods to contextualize the development of feelings and discussions about the nature of changes to aesthetic experience. Laughing off white supremacy shows how for black authors, modern laughter did not represent a retreat from political engagement, but the renewal of a longer struggle for freedom.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father who taught me everything I know about laughter, and who I think of always.

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Laugh That Off: African American Laughter, Modernist Aesthetics, and the Cultural Politics of the Harlem Renaissance

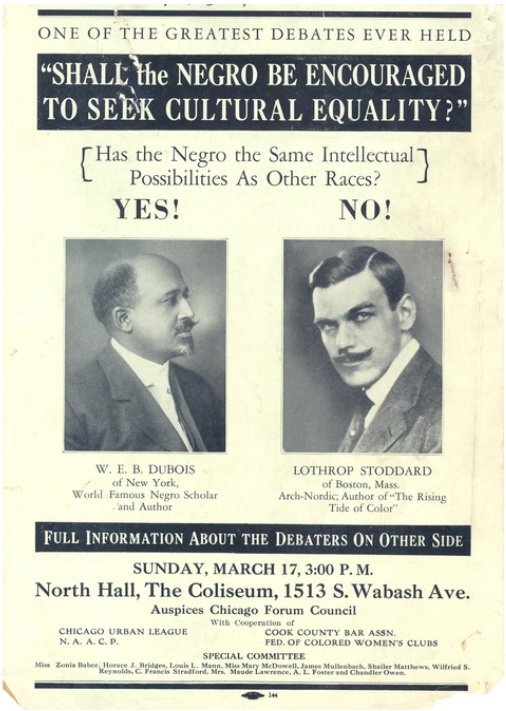


Figure 1.1

St. Patrick's day 1929 is a special day in the history of modern laughter. Billed as "one of the greatest debates ever held," a largely-forgotten exchange between W.E.B. Du Bois and Lothrop Stoddard should be known to history as the day that Du Bois laughed white supremacy off the stage. A throng of mostly black witnesses packed the north hall of The Coliseum in Chicago's South Loop to see Du Bois face off against Stoddard, one of the US's most prominent, racist public voices. The debate was hosted by the Chicago Forum Council and the topic was, "Has the Negro the Same Intellectual Possibilities As Other Races," a eugenics-laden premise that renewed the main theme that the public paid to see, namely the question of "Shall the Negro Be Encouraged To

Seek Cultural Equality?" Du Bois argued the affirmative case; Stoddard, who like Du Bois was Harvard man and had achieved wide fame for his 1920 book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (recall how Tom Buchanan reads "The Rise of Colored Empires" by a writer named "Goddard" in *The Great Gatsby*) argued the negative.

At the height of both the eugenics movement and the New Negro Movement in the US, the debate was a clash of intellectual worlds, and given the potential of Du Bois losing to this spokesman of white supremacy, its gravity was not lost on anyone. The critical moment in the debate arrived during a prolonged exchange over the question of segregation, and when it was Stoddard's turn to speak, the crowd held their breath, bracing themselves for a racist volley. He did not, however, turn to invective though as everyone expected; instead he outlined the putatively "rational" case for the separate but equal doctrine, a solution to what he demonstrated in his supposed "scientific" analysis about the coming racial conflict. In a transcript of the debate, Stoddard laid the rhetorical foundation for his theory of segregation, but midway through he is interrupted by a burst of laughter from the crowd that is so notably salient that it is recorded in the text:

> The more enlightened men of southern white America . . . are doing their best to see that separation shall not mean discrimination; that if the Negroes have separate schools, they shall be good schools; that if they have separate train accommodations, they shall have good accommodations. [laughter][1]

Stoddard's rhetoric betrays the lie at the core of the separate but equal myth, that the "enlightened men of southern white America...are doing their best to see that separation

shall not mean discrimination." But for a packed audience, the majority of whom were black Chicagoans, the argument that southern whites were making sure "separation shall not mean discrimination" was patently absurd. The inclusion of their reaction in the transcript registers the power of this collective utterance, and it makes the audience a third participant in the debate whose laughter disrupts Stoddard's chain of mystifying logic and undermines the scientific rationale of the separate but equal doctrine. "5,000 Cheer W.E.B. Du Bois, Laugh at Lothrop Stoddard, " an article in *The Afro American* proclaimed before going on to describe Stoddard's stunned reaction to his audience: "When the laughter had subsided, Mr. Stoddard, in a manner of mixed humility and courage, claimed that he could not see the joke. This brought more gales of laughter."[2] After another moment had passed, Du Bois explained the laugh to the dumbfounded Stoddard: he never experienced separate but unequal but, as Du Bois said, "we have."

Laughter in the Du Bois/Stoddard debate responds to white supremacist rationality with black experience, rendering the rational coherence of the argument absurd. The debate centers laughter as an embodied response by African Americans to the logic of the color line and the purported science behind it, mocking the notion of separate but equal public spheres that underlied the separate but equal doctrine. Far from equality, segregation was a tool to render the bodies and the complaints of African Americans invisible, and the record of the laugh is a reassertion of the body and the complaint back into the space of a shared public sphere and into the historical record of the text. Importantly, this laughter was not simply spontaneous, it was intentional, cultivated by Du Bois as he goaded his opponent to humorously slip up. There was a comic thread in the setup for the meeting with a punchline that had been building since

the first time the two men met for a radio debate in 1927. Likewise, the laugh was not confined to the auditorium on St. Patrick's Day, but was circulated across the country by black newspapers to black readerships in headlines like the one in the *Afro American* and the headline in the *Chicago Defender* that read: "Du Bois Shatters Stoddard's Cultural Theories in Debate: Thousands Jam Hall to Hear Du Bois Debate, Cheered as He Proves Race Equality." Du Bois and the black press spread the story of the laugh at the Chicago Forum Council far and wide, translating the laugh into both the shared public sphere and into the counterpublic sphere of the black press. By harnessing laughter as a deliberate part of Du Bois' strategy, the debate and the discourse surrounding it make clear that laughter was not simply a defensive mechanism whose intent had plausible deniability or a form of intragroup communication, but rather a weapon that gifted political strategists like Du Bois used to combat white supremacy.

Laughing Off White Supremacy

This dissertation addresses the history of African American laughter directed at white supremacy and white supremacist beliefs in the early 20th century. In doing so, I move within and outside the genre of comedy and the comic frame to expand the importance of laughter for African American cultural expression and cultural politics. The starting point for this inquiry is the enduring wisdom of Langston Hughes and his association of laughter with the blues and jazz aesthetics. Hughes' definition of the blues as laughing to keep from crying ascribes aesthetic value to African American laughter for its ability to stave off the hurt of racial inequality or to convert this pain into pleasure.[3] This now commonplace understanding of the blues is stubbornly persistent in

characterizing African American laughter in this period, but it is perhaps best thought of as one laugh among many. Hughes' description of the laughter of jazz as "the tom-tom of revolt against whiteness in a white world of subway trains, and work, work, work[…]pain swallowed with a smile" is more apt for its figuration of laughter's revolt against whiteness and its rejection of the bourgeois fantasy of modernity.[4] This presages the midcentury evolution of jazz laughter that Ralph Ellison articulates as a "cacophony of minor thirds and flatted-fifth voiced fortissimo by braying gut-bucket brasses."[5] By examining the genre-crossing works and forms of expression by a variety of African American writers from this period–including Hughes–I take the duality of these formulations as a starting point for expanding on the possibilities that Hughes identified for laughter in his formulation of the blues and jazz. Du Bois' debate with Lothrop Stoddard thus serves as an improvisational counterpoint to laughing to keep from crying: gone is the sentimental structure of blues laughter and its melancholy politics of survival, replaced by a laughter that laughs self-consciously in the face of its white oppressors and points the way towards a future based on racial justice and equality.

By taking African American laughter seriously, I chart a new trajectory for the birth of modern American laughter. In a *New Yorker* article from 2018, writer Ian Frazier suggests the importance of the laugh in the Du Bois/Stoddard debate, writing "were there a History of Modern Laughing, the word '[laughter],' in the debate transcript, would be its opening exhibit."[6] I agree and have taken Frazier's suggestion to heart by placing Du Bois' laugh at the center of a history of modern laughter, which extends back to the advent of Du Bois' magazine *The Crisis* in 1910 and bends forward in time to the late

1930s and the start of the Second World War. To begin with Du Bois's laugh in the Stoddard debate is to the stage for an examination of laughter itself, the importance of different valences of laughter in the history of the anti-lynching movement, and the progressive push for racial justice in the United States.

Yet Frazier grossly underestimates the prevalence of this kind of laughter in the early twentieth century, when he claims that: "[i]n 1929, white supremacists were not often the subjects of jokes. Look through anthologies of humor pieces from the period, and you will not find parodies of nuts like him...although you will find dialect pieces making fun of blacks." Quite the contrary. While the burst of laughter at Lothrop Stoddard has been forgotten, laughing at white supremacy was hardly a novel response to racial injustice. Though it may not have appeared often in the context of humor anthologies, laughing responses to racism and debates about racialized laughter were a fixture of African American periodicals and literature beginning decades before the Du Bois/Stoddard debate. Laughing at white supremacist ideology made its way into all different forms of black cultural production, from poetry to satire to realist novels to jazz. This dissertation establishes a genealogy for laughter that takes white supremacy as its object across different media in the early 20th century.

To do so, I examine the proliferation of laughter in early African American modernist periodicals from 1910-1920, focusing on the first 10 years of *The Crisis*. Debates around the meaning and the political implications of laughter in this early period of American modernism set the stage for Du Bois' victory over Stoddard in 1929, and for debates about the cultural politics of laughing about white supremacy in the 1920s and 1930s. As a project to investigate the origins of laughing off white supremacy

in the black press and public discourse, I also aim to contribute to recent scholarship on black periodicals and the development of the black public sphere.[7] Black periodicals and anthologies—including *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The New Negro*, and more—show a growing intellectual and political interest in questioning the inherited cultural and political assumptions of laughing at blackness while interjecting laughter into vigorous debates about race and directing laughter at the central tenants of white supremacist ideology.

The variety of laughs that take white supremacy as their object and the set of cultural and political strategies that this laughter represents are what I refer to collectively as *laughing off white supremacy*. Taken from a retort that Langston Hughes used against white supremacists during the trial of the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930's, the phrase "laughing off" in no way signifies a lack of serious consideration of the threat of white supremacist thought or white supremacist violence. In fact, the examples of laughing off white supremacy that I uncover often take material threats of racial violence as their object, some even urging African Americans to laugh at the moribund images of lynched or lifeless black bodies. Such grotesque laughter is reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin called "a laughter that does not laugh," to which he ascribed the potential for regeneration.[8] It also contrasts with the refusal of laughter that might be expected in such circumstances, which Michael Billig calls "unlaughter."[9] This is neither humor for the faint of heart, nor is it humor in almost any sense of the word. This is why I turn to laughter rather than humor or comedy as an embodied response and a conduit for different affective reactions to racial violence. These laughs operate across and between different philosophies that attempt to explain why people laugh, and for this

reason I reference these theories only when it is helpful or historically relevant. Taken together, the variety of laughing reactions that I discuss are attempts to animate the spectacle of racial violence by representing it as an aesthetic object open to a variety of aesthetic responses, each bearing their own history, ethics, and theory of or orientation toward political action. The deadly serious nature of both the objects and the aesthetic responses to those objects infuses the term laughing off white supremacy with the opposite of the careless laughter the phrase might imply, prompting instead a deepening of attention to the political problems that these objects represent, the ethical stakes of laughing responses, and different commitments to collective political action.

By focusing on the object of laughter, this study seeks to understand the ways that laughter was used as a conduit for different emotional responses to white supremacy and how its forms circulated between individuals and groups through different, politically-charged discursive encounters. This approach contrasts with several recent philosophical approaches to understanding laughter and its properties on its own terms. One study, Anca Parvulescu's *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010), for example, makes an important methodological intervention that articulates the value of laughter as distrinct from comedy and other genres. Examining laughter itself, she argues, is a crucial way to locate the development of new forms of subjectivity. Yet Parvulescu considers the laughing subject in terms of an impersonal laughter which takes no object and therefore often leaps intentionally outside of history.[10] Building off Parvulescu's insight about laughter as a privileged site for tracking new forms of subjectivity, I locate new forms of black subjectivity by historicizing new forms of laughter as they arise in response to white supremacist discourses.

My approach to historicizing affect contrasts with Parvulescu and other approaches that solely privilege impersonal affects as sites of collective experience. Beyond *Notes on a Passion*, Frances McDonald's 2022 monograph *Posthumorism: The Modernist Affect of Laughter* similarly identifies impersonal, post-human laughter as the quintessentially modern laugh, thereby extending a theory of affects without object *or* subjects, which she investigates for their philosophical values and political potentials.[11] The excitement about affects without subjects or objects, however, falls victim to recent criticism that affect theory valorizes the emotional reflex and, in doing so, fails to recognize emotions as complex social and cognitive phenomena. Ruth Leys criticizes these theories of affect by citing studies of laughter performed by cognitive scientists, arguing some scientists are overly enthusiastic about laughter as a reflex without an object. For Leys, these studies of laughter reify emotions as paradoxically naturally occurring in bodies and also mechanical responses to stimuli.[12] In the case of laughter, one of the defining characteristics that critics like Parvulescu and McDonald set out to explain is laughter's eruptive quality and how its apparent spontaneity creates philosophical or political values. The effort to characterize laughter as a free-floating or autonomous affect free from the constraints of mechanical reproduction ironically consigns laughter to a mechanical response in the body isolated from its social and cognitive context. It also doesn't consider that the burst of laughter might not be inherent but inherited. As Paul Beatty says in his introduction to *Hokum*, "Not being ticklish, I see laughter as a learned response and not a reflexive one. However, it's far easier for me to recall learning when not to laugh than learning when to laugh."[13] The process of learning to laugh or not to laugh at certain objects reveals how individual

pleasure is organized and policed according to dominant social codes, making the struggle over laughter simultaneously a struggle for free subjective expression and the terrain on which struggles for political autonomy are often fought.

My project departs from previous attempts to theorize laughter as a free-floating affect for philosophical reasons but also for immanent methodological reasons. Considering affects independently from objects or subjects might make sense for a purely formal investigation, but it poses numerous problems for my attempt at understanding the development of particular strands of laughter and their relationship to social change. Besides this philosophical point, the process of reading laughter in the archive—for me anyway—necessitated attention to the ways that laughter was discursively constructed and socially codified across a variety of textual and paratextual materials. One of the most striking aspects of this archive is the countless attempts by critics and writers to theorize laughter from within the period, then proceeding to use these theoretical accounts to make larger arguments about the practical state of black consciousness and culture. To account for this, I analyze the discursive formations of certain laughs, historicizing them according to both the history of racial violence in the US and other bourgeois forms of laughter. This allows me to contextualize them according to their standpoint toward white supremacy and other forces of modernity, putting laughter in conversations about modernist form. Ultimately, this method leads me to a very different theory of affect, which aligns with other formalist critics like Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, whose work has expanded the horizon for considering the interpersonal dimensions of affect through looking at affects entanglements and analyzing the tension between affect, intentionality, and spontaneity in different forms

and genres.[14] Laughter's entanglements with white supremacy demonstrate the extent to which laughter was used as a mechanism to bind black subjects to racist practices, ideologies, and laws while also positing new forms of African American subjectivity that imagined authentic emotional expressions of joy and freedom through black laughter.[15]

There is perhaps no clearer example of the social codification of laughter than the laughter of the minstrel show, and no clearer reason why I must begin my first chapter with Du Bois and his critique of the insidious continuum of minstrel laughter in modern comedy, which degraded African Americans while falsely representing minstrel laughter as joy. In his study of blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott argues that the minstrel show was a project which attempted to "tame the 'black' threat through laughter or ridicule."[16] The problem of the socially codified laughter of minstrelsy bears on all accounts of African American comedy and laughter and it presents a problem for impersonal theories of affect: how can one examine an affect like laughter independent from its immediate context when in some ways it is always already the representation of the false? Glenda Carpio's book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) and Danielle Fuentes Morgan's *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century* (2020) are important recent contributions to this debate.[17] Both books approach this question through the lens of genre, focusing on how humor and satire respectively circulate through different works and how these genres offered possibilities for social and political critiques and understanding new forms of black experience. Building on this work, I begin my work with laughter as the starting point for understanding how black authors attempted to combat the prevailing

racist codes of laughter and how this laughter was used to mediate encounters with racism.

The focus on laughter instead of a particular genre (say, comedy or satire, say) allows me to approach similar problems to Carpio and Morgan but from a different perspective. As a form that circulates through printed texts and through social spheres, laughter moves between pages and conversations, film and radio, picking up resonances as it goes. As I will make clear, laughter as a physical reaction also has an indeterminate meaning, making it a blank slate for many different types of cultural inscriptions. Laughter also circulates between and through different genres, unevenly traversing comedy, tragedy, satire, and other genres and accruing meaning. By taking a formalist approach to laughter, I track these meanings that develop through different genres, texts, and discursive spheres, using generic developments to tell the story in some cases but retaining a focus on laughter itself and the objects that it responds to. In my engagement with different forms of imaginative literature (poems, narratives, novels, songs) and with different media technologies (books, periodicals, films, advertisements) I trace the ways that laughter develops in relation to the evolution of particular characters, and through character how laughter mediates between the personal and the social.[18]

By starting with character, my archival practice also aims at recovering real laughter from a kind of "reduced laughter," the term that Bakhtin uses to describe the translation of laughter as a real world affect to an image of laughter as a formal component of a text.[19] For Tyrus Miller, this textual laughter "gives rise to modes of irony, parody, and satire in which the literal, denotative sense of a text is convulsed by a

disruptive negation or deformation of sense."[20] Miller follows Bakhtin in using reduced laughter as a baseline for modern literature and he delineates late modern literature based on its eruptive laughter, which he argues shows where modernist forms can no longer contain the contradictions that writers were experiencing. Laughter is certainly a site for ironically expressing suppressed feelings and exposing the contradictions that African Americans faced. But the concept of reduced laughter was also a historical claim that writers in the 20's and 30's used to make arguments about the greater presence of laughter in epochs before modernity.[21] The yearning for more laughter and the threat of modern times to laughter is an idea that both Bakhtin and Miller participate in. By contrast, I show how plentiful laughter existed in African American communities and how this laughter was both used by activists and how laughter became the terrain on which struggles for liberation were fought. Where Miller argues for laughter's eruptive capacity, my work focuses on the work of binding that laughter performs, and how writers and thinkers engaged strategically with this binding in order to refocus vital cultural and political conversations. Thus, my project considers the way authors used the reduced laughter of the text to demonstrate the ways that real laughter binds or attempts to unbind subjects from their entanglements with problematic objects and ideologies. By laughing off white supremacy, I show how the laughter of individuals becomes a source of genuine feeling that orients itself toward collective political action.

A Menagerie of Modern Laughter

What I call *laughing off white supremacy* takes shape in response to a wider, primarily white cultural phenomenon: the socially codified practice of "laughing it off."

This renders laughing off white supremacy at least partially an ironic reaction to this bourgeois form of laughter that was racially coded as white.[22] The phrase “laugh it off” circulated as a popular slogan in early twentieth century literature and culture, and it signified the desire, or at times the imperative, to laugh at situations of even tragic adversity. In doing so, the slogan represented a discursive command to adjust to new circumstances and difficult emotional experiences in order to continue being a productive member of society. Laughing it off was both an expression and an idea, a colloquialism found in print, radio, and the burgeoning movie industry, and an ideology that demanded that the subject adapt to changing social and economic conditions. If a problem comes along: Laugh It Off! Manuals like *Mental Health* (1935), which emerged from the mental hygiene movement, exemplified how laughing it off was considered a faculty for enhancing the self’s plasticity in moments of conflict, which was an especially useful skill to make labor more productive. Perhaps best known as the creator of the Wonder Woman comics, William Moulton Marston wrote about laughing it off and how laughter could help restore an individual’s perspective, even in the most dire situations. In *Try Living* (1937), Marston recounts the story of Brenda Upland, a woman on the verge of jumping out of her hotel window after the tragic revelation of her fiancé’s infidelity. When the “house detective” of the hotel arrives to lure her off the ledge, he laughs when he sees that she is about to jump wearing only her underwear. The detective’s laughter makes the suicidal woman laugh, causing her to realize the absurdity of her position, and she decides not to jump. Marston uses this anecdote to argue that laughing it off is an essential mental health practice.

More than a method of adjustment, laughing it off was sometimes represented as an end in and of itself, a way to achieve one's dreams. Consider, for example, the tagline to 1939's Universal Studios picture *Laugh It Off*: "they danced their way out of debt and into romance!" The film, a "quickie musical" running just over an hour in length, shows how laughing it off could solve legal, financial, and romantic problems, leading to a happily ever after ending. The plot centers on a group of former actresses seeking to retire in peace, but when their retirement home gets repossessed by the bank because the estate they've entrusted their retirement savings to has failed to pay, they must take action. With nothing but their wits, their whiteness, and their dancing (another tagline reads: "cold logic was no match for hot-cha!"), the women travel to New York to make things right. Reminiscent of what Stanley Cavell calls the "comedy of remarriage," *Laugh It Off* is about regaining former glory and finding love again, making it a Great Depression fairy tale that centers laughter as the miracle cure for all of life's maladies, no matter how convoluted or strange.[23] The widely discussed and adopted practice of laughing it off gave laughter a ubiquitous social value, and coupled with minstrel laughter, laughing it off formed the backdrop that African American writers drew on in shaping their own counter programs for laughter. In chapter 3, I show how several writers, including Langston Hughes and George Schuyler, used the concept of laughing it off to resist white supremacy by developing an increasingly militant form of laughter directed at black suffering, which they envisioned as a galvanizing agent against white supremacist thugs and as a form of ethical reflection and political action.

By considering the formal aspects of laughter and the variety of ways that black authors used laughter in relation to white supremacist ideology, laughing off white

supremacy reorients longstanding debates about modern laughter and modernist form. The stakes of this intervention are to update the ways we think about modern laughter itself and the ways we think about whose laughter is included or excluded from the story of American modernism. Thus, while the work of the New Modernist Studies captures the attempt to assimilate the human to the machine, it's no surprise that the struggle between the human subject and the objectifying forces of modernity lies at the core of many theories of modern laughter. For reason I will make clear, however, this story is uncannily white. The prevailing narrative about modernist laughter represents laughter as a mechanism for social repair, which as the period goes on becomes exhausted as laughter loses its ability to repair social energies or bind politics to literary form.

The origin of this narrative is likely Henri Bergson's famous essay "Laughter," published in 1900. In the essay, Bergson describes laughter as a social gesture used to preserve social norms and repair the *élan vital* which is threatened by mechanical reproduction. Bergson's requirement for comic laugher to undergo a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" ascribes a mechanical element to the comic impulse, which supposedly makes laughter devoid of feeling.[24] Bergson's laughter is about enforcing norms of behavior on others in order to resist the objectifying forces of modernity. In an oft-overlooked passage from the text, however, this enforcement is also explicitly racialized. At one point, Bergson takes a stab at theorizing racialized laughter, attempting to describe why the sight of a black person is inherently funny:

> Why does one laugh at a negro? […] I rather fancy the correct answer was suggested to me one day in the street by an ordinary cabby, who applied the expression "unwashed" to the negro fare he was driving. Unwashed! Does not

> this mean that a black face, in our imagination, is one daubed over with ink or soot? […] Although the black or red colour is indeed inherent in the skin, we look upon it as artificially laid on, because it surprises us.[25]

In this remarkable passage, Bergson associates laughter at blackness with laughter at blackface, and in doing so he associates black faces with the forces of modernity itself. In the cabby's account, laughter at blackness mistakes blackness for a parody of itself (with the expectation of a whiteface underneath the black one), which re-objectifies the black subject and makes them an accomplice with the structural forces that threaten to objectify the (white) human. Given its figuration of blackness as contra the *élan vital*, it's no wonder that theories of modern laughter that follow Bergson have omitted black laughter, nor is it a mistake that in a narrative of the waning of vital forces of whites, black subjects are a problem. One only needs to look at the accounts of lynchings in *The Crisis* or accounts of the bloody summer of 1919 to see the ways that white worker struggles were racialized and directed at black workers instead of the white ruling class.

Bergson's theory of laughter aligns with the story of expression made famous by the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson. In his analysis of modernist aesthetics, Jameson argued that modern experience transformed under the pressures of rationalization and new technologies of industrial and media production, which in turn caused an inward turn of modern expression. In Jameson's framework for thinking about modernity and affect, modern feeling is transformed into a "monadlike container, within which things felt are then expressed by projection outward."[26] This theory is repeated by Tyrus Miller's narrative about the relationship between modern laughter, form, and the periodization of late modernism. Miller argues that late modernist writers evince an

affective, inward turn inwards through their "self-reflexive" laughter, which coincides with a withdrawal from collective political engagements in the 1930s. This turn inwards is represented by the figure of the isolated satirist, epitomized by Wyndham Lewis. Miller argues that Lewis locates a form of self-reflexive laughter, a "stiffening" of subjectivity against danger, one which marks "that minimal 'spatial' difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature: a difference that preserves the subject, however diminished, in situations of adversity."[27]

If one were to believe these versions of events, the story of modernist laughter ought to end in the 1930's with laughing subjects on the cusp of non-being, merely chuckling at their own automatism and subsumption by the logic of capitalist rationalization. Yet, the story of a dwindling subject and an exhausted engine of modernist form, as others have pointed out, may be more specific to white modernist writers than Jameson or Miller might care to acknowledge. As Michael North famously argues in *The Dialect of Modernism*, racial masquerade was a method for white modernists to fight the exhaustion of form and try to capitalize on the vital energies that the quest for a new African American subjectivity produced.[28] On the other hand, as James Smethurst has argued, the birth of the 14th amendment and the transformation of working conditions for African Americans workers created the conditions for African Americans to make themselves new.[29]

In his special issue of *Modernist Cultures* (2006), Justice Nieland begins his "Editor's Introduction: Modernism's Laughter" by addressing the problem of inward emotion and diversity in modern laughter:

> To be sure, modernity yields fantasies of monastic inwardness—and the strong kinds of affect and centered kinds of subjects that accompany it—but it also fuels a more delirious, public traffic in those "free-floating and impersonal" affects that, for Jameson, constitute the euphoric terrain of the postmodern.[30]

Nieland's special issue aligned modern laughter with "vernacular modernism," Miriam Hansen's effort to conceive of modernism as a "whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon the processes of modernization and the experience of modernity," and in doing so attempted to push past Miller's narrative of modern laughter and open the terrain for a more diverse set of modern laughs.[31] However, Nieland's focus on impersonal affects is a relatively narrow alternative to Jameson's formulation of inwardness, and it's narrow definition of "form" leads to a search for black laughter in white literature like *Torrents of Spring* (1926), Ernest Hemmingway's parody of Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925). Instead of looking for African American laughter in white form, Modernist critics need to consider the ways that black writers intentionally used emotions like laughter to intentionally mediate between the individual and the social and to do so in ways that organize collective action.

My dissertation tells a different story of modern laughter. Following Miller's powerful formulation and Nieland's intervention, this dissertation essentially sets out to introduce early 20th century African American literature to the narrative about modernist laughter. Although there have been some recent developments, the prevailing story of modern laughter is still largely white, a phenomenon that unfortunately echoes the lack of recognition of black writers and artists in the broader narrative of American

Modernism.[32] It is high time that we worked to incorporate New Negro forms into the continually unfolding story of modernist form. This is in line with the argument that Michael Bibby makes about the past and current state of modernist studies in his article "The Disinterested and the Fine: New Negro Renaissance Poetry and the Racial Formation of Modernist Studies."[33] There is also a rich history of scholarship on African American comedy and satire that revises Miller's formulation. Laughter was and continues to be a vital force for African Americans to contest the existing social order and articulate new social forms. As American modernism unfolded, laughter grew from a pedagogical tool for teaching new modes of resisting psychic oppression into a way for African Americans to negotiate new forms of individual and collective subjectivity. The story of early twentieth century African American laughter thus inverts the prevailing story of modern laughter as a waning of energy and attempt to repair the *élan vital*. Through the lens of African American culture, laughter moved from a moment of exhaustion to a renaissance of laughter that followed the Harlem Renaissance and continued into the 1930's. Not surprisingly, the inclusion of African American literature turns the conventional story of modern laughter—and therefore the movement from high modernism to late modernism—on its head.

Two Laughs of the Harlem Renaissance

By rethinking modern laughter according to African American literature my dissertation also fills a gap in current scholarship on the literary and cultural history of black comedy by expanding on the ways that black writers, intellectuals, and entertainers attempted to make the leap from minstrelsy to blackface comedy to the

self-conscious and politically-motivated genre of black comedy that we recognize today. In his influential study of black comedy *On the Real Side: The History of African American Comedy*, Mel Watkins shows how black comics in the early twentieth century faced dilemmas over whether to break the color line while perpetuating harmful blackface stereotypes or modernize their acts and face the possibility that their performances would have no audience and thus put themselves out of work.[34] While there is a large body of scholarship on African American satire and volumes written about the Harlem Renaissance, little has been written about the effort to modernize laughter itself, especially in the context of debates about black publics.[35]

Watkins' observation about the two paths for comedy led critics and performers to explore two kinds of modern laughs. The first, often referred to as the "objective" form, sought to modernize the laughter of the blackface minstrelsy by ironically infusing laughter with tragic emotions; the second, referred to as the "subjective" form, departed from the blackface minstrel tradition and represented black subjects laughing of their own free will and volition at the freedom of their expression. Both of these forms of laughter challenged the central assumption of the dominant form of "laughing it off," which held either that laughter was an embodied sign of pleasure or that laughter was the process by which pain could be converted into pleasure. Instead, these two laughs attempted to infuse laughter with other emotions, and in the case of the subjective laugh, critics envisioned a laughter divorced from the comic setup and integrated into everyday life. By expanding beyond the comic routine and exploring how laughter could be the conduit for different emotions, black intellectuals and cultural producers found new ways to laugh at old jokes. In doing so, many artists endeavored to lead black and

white audiences to new forms of subjectivity through laughter, laying the groundwork for the comedy of Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and other black comedy greats.

The most famous early twentieth century black comedian who attempted to modernize blackface minstrel laughter was Bert Williams. Williams, who in his spare time read Nietzsche and Mark Twain, played minstrel characters for Ziegfeld Follies and later the Shubert Brothers, and was the most famous black comedian of his generation before his death in 1922. In contrast to the Bergsonian laugh as a "momentary anesthesia of the heart," Williams used his blackface performances to turn racist laughter inside-out and teach white and black audiences to laugh with deep emotions at what he considered to be universal truths. In the remarkable passage that begins his 1918 article in *American Magazine* called "The Comic Side of Trouble," Williams takes the Bergsonian formula and imbues it with something we might call humanity:

> One of the funniest sights in the world is a man whose hat has been knocked in or ruined by being blown off–provided, of course, it be the other fellow's hat! All the jokes in the world are based on a few elemental ideas, and this is one of them. The sight of other people in trouble is nearly always funny. This is human nature. If you will observe your own conduct whenever you see a friend falling down on the street, you will find that nine times out of ten your first impulse is to laugh and your second is to run and help him get up. To be polite you will dust off his clothes and ask him if he has hurt himself. But when it is all over you cannot resist telling him how funny he looked when he was falling. *The man with the real*

sense of humor is the man who can put himself in the spectator's place and laugh at his own misfortunes. [emphasis added][36]

The oft-quoted line from this article is the final line, which beautifully describes the pleasure of seeing others in trouble while also instilling the interaction of the falling man and the spectator with a shared sense of humanity.[37] That the spectator's first response is to help and the second to laugh creates for Williams the possibility of a laughter that moves in the other direction from an expected laugh at caricature to the prick of pain at seeing the hurt of the blackface performer in trouble, humanizing the minstrel performer and by extension that black man in trouble. This creates the possibility of identification between the audience and the performer and is the central tenet of the "objective" form of laughter.

However, the key to Williams' ability to move between comic and tragic registers (and what enables this identification between audience and performer) is William's philosophy of comic performance, which elevated realistic representation above caricature and is nearly always overlooked. Williams believed that the comedian can represent objective or universal truths by delving deeply into the study and representation of individual subjective experience, and through this process create a universal representation that imparts a sense of empathy for the other. As he later describes his development as a comedian, he chronicles the endless search for the joke and the attention to life that it requires:

> It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed. For I do not believe there is any such thing as innate humor. It has to be developed by hard work and study, just as every other human quality. I

> have studied it all my life unconsciously during my floundering years, and consciously as soon as I began to get next to myself. It is a study that I shall never get to the end of, and a work that never stops, except when I am asleep. There are no union hours to it and no let-up. It is only by being constantly on the lookout for fresh material, funny incidents, funny speeches, funny traits in human nature that a comedian can hope to keep step with his public. (Williams, 34)

Williams painted himself as a lifelong student of comedy and a careful observer of everyday people, and he believed the work of studying humor was how one acquired a sense of humor. Like Bergson, Williams' theory of comedy centers on the connection between pain and laughter, which he argued must be located in an individual in order for the audience to properly contemplate the joke. Yet by moving from caricature to realism in his performances, Williams believed that he could temporarily put his audiences in the position of the hurt performer, creating space for momentary reflection within their laughter.[38] For Williams, the reflective process involved in comedy had to be routed through the performance of his characters so that the audience could identify with the character's plight and laugh at it. By laughing at the misfortune of others but identifying with it, the audience was not just laughing at the performer but also laughing at themselves.

For the most part, Williams avoided talking about race in "The Comic Side of Trouble," probably due to the predominantly white readership of *American Magazine*. He describes laughter at his performances of black characters as a way to impart knowledge about individuals of other races because of segregated social spheres, and mentions race in the context of his material and its place in furthering his theory of

comic form. But by the end of the essay, Williams turns to explicitly discuss race and connects blackness with the ability to turn his racial identity to his advantage.

> People sometimes ask me if I would not give anything to be white. I answer, in the words of the song, most emphatically 'No.' How do I know what I might be if I were a white man? I might be a sand-hog, burrowing away and losing my health for eight dollars a day. I might be a street-car conductor at twelve or fifteen dollars a week. There is a white man less fortunate and less well-equipped than I am. In truth, I have never been able to discover that there was anything disgraceful in being a colored man. But I have often found it inconvenient—in America. (Williams, 34)

By humorously pointing out the profitability of racial representations and the demand for blackface comedy from audiences, Williams undermines the question about the superiority of whiteness and inverts the logic of racial passing. Indeed, for Williams whiteness had no appeal because the profitability of performing blackness was so great. Yet while there may not have been anything disgraceful for Williams about being black, his response to critics can hardly be viewed as an expression of racial pride. Ultimately, Williams' theory of comedy distances him as an individual performer from a shared racial identity, which as other critics have pointed out is not surprising given his status as an immigrant to the US.[39] Just as for Williams the sense of humor is not innate, blackness does not come with a set of prescribed traits or social roles, but it is something that can be performed and sometimes used to one's advantage.

The "The Comic Side of Trouble" is a treatise on humor and a biographical account of one of the most famous black comic performers in America. However, in the

center of the article is a commentary from the editor on the sense of humor, which mask's Williams' comic practice of identification between the audience and performer. The insert, which appears as a mask with a black inner border and a white outer border as if to float above the article, ironically characterizes the "*little* misfortunes" of racism that Williams' comedy represents as the trouble of others. The editorial insert makes an argument for laughter as a social lubricant and a personality trait that can help a person get ahead. As the editors write:

> Now can you laugh at your own troubles—really laugh at them? Can you enjoy an honest-to-God chuckle over them—both when you are alone, and when you are in the company of others? If so, you are that rare bird known as a person with a real sense of humor. Such persons are usually popular. People like to be with them. They know how to provide laughs for others. They have what is called magnetism.[40]

Williams' nuanced interrogation of racial prejudice and his theory of identification through objective laughter is neatly recuperated by the editors into a simple theory of laughter as a lubricant for conflict and a tool for social climbing–in a phrase, "laughing it off." In this form, laughter doesn't have any insight for the masses, it makes you "magnetic" and is a key for social advancement. The editor's note is ultimately a white mask that covers up the trouble with objective laughter that Williams brings to light through his theory that laughter can create community across the gap between performer and spectator, between white and black audiences.

By infusing laughter with tragic emotions and conceiving of laughter as a way to impart deep, universal truths about humanity, Williams' theory of blackface minstrel

comic performance aligns with Friedrich Nietzsche's writings on laughter and morality. Perhaps the first modern writer to theorize the relationship between laughter and tragedy, Nietzsche offered an account of laughter in which the laugher confronts adverse conditions and then goes on a quest to relieve the pain of this problem with a laughter that represents "joyful wisdom." This vision differs from the popular idea of laughing it off because it is explicitly not about adapting to adversity, but about rebutting the corrective laughter of the masses with an individual laugh, which he argues is capable of imparting the larger truth about the dynamic between individuals and society and reconfiguring prevailing moral beliefs.[41] Beginning in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche stages a Bergsonian contest where he pits the laughter of the masses against the individual. Towards the beginning of the "novel," the narrator, Zarathustra, is laughed at by the townspeople, and though he is humiliated by their laughter, he realizes its power and covets it. "There they stand," he said to his heart; "there they laugh. They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears."[42]

Where Bergson's account figures the laughter of the masses as a corrective, Nietzsche views laughter as an obstacle for his narrator to realize his individuality, which can only be overcome by finding another laugh. Instead of adjusting, he goes on a quest for this individual laughter to use against the masses, which he explains in the section "On the Tarantulas":

> You who make souls whirl, you preachers of equality. To me you are tarantulas, and secretly vengeful. But I shall bring your secrets to light; therefore I laugh in your faces with my laughter of the heights.[43]

Zarathustra's "laughter of the heights" is a new kind of laughter, an individual response to the comic laughter of the masses. This is a laughter at the pettiness of laughter as a norm-enforcing gesture and its reduction to a reflexive and base social impulse. The laughter of the heights exposes what for Nietzsche is the hidden truth: that the laughter of the masses seeks retribution for the free thought of the individual. Nietzsche conceives of Zarathustra's laughter in contrast to the laughter of the multitudes, and it represents both the higher knowledge of the individual and the process by which they discover these heights.

The laughter in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a precursor to a more totalizing laugh that Nietzsche argues can express the "whole truth" of humanity, which is the laughter that arises from tragedy. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche enunciates laughter in relationship to tragedy, developing an individual laughter of "joyful wisdom." Nietzsche's laughter imagines the laughter at tragedy corresponding to a higher consciousness of the species, which he implies could lead to action. In *The Gay Science*, he writes:

> To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *from the whole truth*—for that, not even the best have enough sense of truth, and the most gifted have had far too little genius![44]

Laughter "from the whole truth" is at once an overcoming of tragedy, with its focus on the hero or the individual, and an opening back onto the multitudes with the recognition that "the species is everything, an individual is always nothing." Nietzsche's laughter arrives at the laughter of the "whole truth" by what Pete Gunter calls "overcoming of seriousness by the spirit of seriousness itself."[45] Nietzsche's laughter does not laugh off morality; instead, it takes the moral question so seriously that it becomes absurd.[46]

Nietzsche's laughter is thus not beyond morality; it simply has not found the ground for a new morality in anything that yet exists.[47] Thus, the feeling of "joyful wisdom" that accompanies Nietzsche's laughter is not static, but forward looking, towards a speculative, new ground for extra-moral philosophy. Where Nietzsche left off, Williams developed a poetics for his laughter that centered the relationship that the performer could cultivate with their audience in order to develop empathy, giving laughter at tragedy grounding in a set of political and ethical questions about the audiences' relationship with the other.

Indeed, the critic Jessie Redmon Fauset praised Williams for his ability to represent the pitiful and the funny at the same time, which could bring people together around ideas of shared humanity and look forward to a future where all were free and African Americans could express their joy freely. In "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," (1922), a eulogy after Williams' death, Faucet theorized the relationship between laughter and tragedy that she finds in Williams' performances, making the case for representing tragedy through laughter because of black audiences' ability to identify tragedy in comedic performances of stock characters. Fauset opens her essay by providing a brief analysis of the reception of tragedy by black audiences to illustrate her point. In *Emperor Jones*, she describes how the performance of Brutus Jones by Charles Gilpin (1920) irritated black theatergoers because they read Jones' death as an affront to African Americans through a racial lens instead of seeing his death as the inevitable end of a tragic character type. Describing this as a problem of racialized reception, Fauset writes, "our great fault is our inability to distinguish between a horizontal or class and a vertical or racial section of life."[48] Laughter for black audiences

at the comic form of the minstrel show, at least the minstrel show of Bert Williams, made racial commentary easier to discern because there was no conflict in his performance between the character's type and the character's race. Williams "symbolized" the "racial type," and so his performance was immediately understood by black audiences as a necessary mask to make white audiences laugh.

Fauset's essay argues that an objective laughter at stereotypes in the style of Bert Williams' blackface act was superior to what she refers to as a more spontaneous, subjective art in the form of either tragedy or comedy because of its universal message and it's ability to reach a broader black audience:

> By a strange and amazing contradiction this *Comedian* symbolized that deep, ineluctable strain of melancholy, which no Negro in mixed civilization ever lacks. He was supposed to make the world laugh and so he did, but not by the welling over of his own spontaneous joy, but by the humorously objective presentation of his personal woes and sorrows. (Ibid)

As Fauset herself makes clear here, Williams' objective laughter was not simply a continuation of 19th century tradition of the Old Negro, but leveraged laughter as a cover for the melancholy emotion and subjective perspective that his performances elicited. This performance criticized the flatness of stock race characters while using the generic inheritance of these characters to make the performance legible. Thus Williams' unique style of performance was both an aid to his symbolic function by giving individuality to his caricatures, and the symbolism of his characters made this performance and its transmission of melancholy and sentimental affect possible through laughter.

By the mid-1920's, the objective laughter of Williams' performances were going out of style and a new group of critics were promoting subjective laughter to go along with other formal reinventions happening during the Harlem Renaissance. Critics like Fauset, Alain Locke, and William Stanley Braithwaite used the history of comedy and other representations showcasing black characters or performers to draw distinctions between the figure of the New Negro and the Old Negro, arguing against representations that glorified stock characters, white mimicry, or other types of minstrel performances. These critics contrasted their work with Williams' comedy and its historical genealogy as a way to define a new representations that were connected to new forms of black subjectivity and the freedom of black expression. In the opening of "The New Negro," Alain Locke takes aim at the history of representations of African Americans and their stereotypical quality, making the case for a more realistic and authentic representation of black life, which he used to construct the figure of the New Negro. The "Old Negro" that Locke describes in his essay is "more of a myth than a man" and "a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction."[49] Within the paradigm of the Old Negro, Locke describes the part that African Americans played in perpetuating racist myths by representing black life with Sambo and other minstrel characters: "The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence" (Ibid). By contrast, Locke's New Negro is "the thinking Negro," and to represent this figure properly, he argues that writers need to "scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts" (Locke, 5). In his move away from stereotypes, Irvin Hunt observed that Locke's argument is constructed around the move from one

stereotype to another, from the “Old Negro” to the “New Negro.”[50] This leads Hunt to locate a contradiction in the urgency of rhetorically banishing stereotypes only to usher in a new stereotype that can lay claim to realism in name and name only. Locke’s own rhetoric acknowledges the part that black laughter played in the development of the South—“a leaven of humor, sentiment, imagination and tropic nonchalance has gone into the making of the South from a humble, unacknowledged source”—but he ultimately rejects it in favor of the more spontaneous approach (Locke, 15).

If Locke’s essay was a bid to invent a new stereotype to orient the New Negro Movement by criticizing the technique of using stereotypes, William Stanley Braithwaite’s “The Negro in American Literature” attempted to set the ground rules for a new African American literary tradition by criticizing the aesthetic protocols of sentimental and humorous fictions which, in his view, had failed to establish a tradition of African American literature. Echoing the critiques that Locke leveled in his manifesto, Braithwaite criticized the lack of “sustained or serious” representations of black life: “ante-bellum literature imposed the distortions of moralistic controversy and made the Negro a wax-figure of the market place: post-bellum literature retaliated wit the condescending reactions of sentiment and caricature, and made the Negro a *genre* stereotype.”[51] Both metaphors of solidity—the Negro as “wax-figure” and as “*genre* stereotype” create a tension between static representations and the desire for movement, which Braithwaite associates with realism and a politics of self-determination. For Braithwaite, the politics of sentimentalism were a politics that elicited a sympathetic identification from the reader but created an image of African Americans as helpless children. He reserves his greatest barbs for the politics of humor, writing:

“The ‘Uncle’ and ‘Mammy’ traditions…can never stand as the great fiction of their theme and subject. Moreover, these type pictures have degenerated into reactionary social fetishes, and from that descended into libelous artistic caricature of the Negro; which has hampered art quite as much as it has embarrassed the Negro” (Braithwaite, 32). Worse than the condescending representation of sentimentalism, the humor of caricature rendered African Americans fetishistic objects without interiority, contributing to the rise of primitivist literature and art. In an effort to center the figure of the New Negro, Braithwaite’s indictment of “Old Negro” further shifted the focus away from the nuanced techniques that Burt Williams and other African American blackface performers developed and envisioned laughter more aligned with realism than sentimentalism.

The major statement on laughter in the Harlem Renaissance was Jesse Redmon Fauset’s essay “The Gift of Laughter.” Less than three years after publishing her article on Williams in *The Crisis*, Fauset revised her argument about objective laughter in “The Symbolism of Bert Williams,” arguing that laughter was the only representational possibility for African American entertainers. Like “The Comic Side of Trouble,” she argued that laughter mediated between comic and tragic registers through the particulars of an actor’s style and performance, but the force of her argument was to codify a new kind of subjective laughter that was realistic and connected to the struggle for African American self-determination and political autonomy. Fauset’s essay, which is a tour-de-force of the history of black laughter, positions Williams at the center of an African American comic tradition that used laughter as a method for evading white censorship, creating the pathos of tragedy through a blackface comic disguise. She

begins the essay by lamenting that black actors have been confined to the "'funny man' of America," and ironically wonders "if this picture of the black American as a living comic supplement has not been painted in order to camouflage the real feeling and knowledge of his white compatriot."[52] The idea of a "Gift of Laughter" was ironic because the role of comic performer was imposed on African Americans. In this ironic line of argument, Fauset famously writes: "no genuinely thinking person, no real astute observer, looking at the Negro in modern American life, could find his condition even now a first aid to laughter" (Fauset, 162). In Fauset's argument, the only way to shift this politically fraught terrain is to rid laughter of its tragic association and to shift the terms of laughter from its function as an objective representation to a subjective, spontaneous representation.

Fauset's project in "The Gift of Laughter" was thus to purify the categories of comedy and tragedy in order to restore the "subjective quality" to comic performances. Fauset locates the pain that Williams' comedy produced for black audiences in the comic's ability to expose the repression of black expression, showing that despite immense talent, black performers were forced to make themselves the object of laughter for white and black audiences alike. By contrast, she argues for a subjective laughter that would enable black laughter to be an agent, not a forced product, of comedy:

> What hurt most in the spectacle of the Bert Williams' funny man and his forerunners was the fact that the laughter which he created must be objective…But the new 'funny man' is essentially funny himself. He is joy and

mischief and rich, homely native humor personified. He radiates good feeling and happiness; it is with him now a state of being purely subjective. (Fauset, 165)

Fauset's vision of "the new funny man," is the New Negro Comedian, freely expressing the joy and happiness that he embodies, producing a laughter purified of tragedy. The New Negro laughs with joy at the joyful expression of their subjectivity. In its attempt to represent laughter as a sincere expression, Fauset's "new funny man" becomes the subject, not the object of laughter. Fauset's 1925 essay manifests a laughter purified of tragedy. The "new funny man" doesn't laugh off his tragic circumstances, he is funny, and his laughter rises from within, not from his encounters with society.

In the hands of Fauset, Braithwaite, and Locke, New Negro laughter evolved past ironic laughter at hardships and tragedies, and became the feeling of freedom associated with free artistic and political expression itself. New Negroes didn't just look at the world differently, they *acted* differently, and their motivations for laughter changed, signaling their evolution as cultured and political subjects. Thus New Negro critics made this incisive change by theorizing different types of black laughter belonging to Old Negros and New Negros, which they called laughter of the "objective" and "subjective" type respectively. The subjective laugh became a key political idea in New Negro thought because it was associated with freedom of expression and a break from traditional forms of black performance, opening the door to what was seen as more subjective forms or genres of art, like tragic performances. Objective laughter emerged from laughter at stereotypes, and for New Negro writers, it was indelibly tied to the shameful tradition of blackface comedy and the cast of characters that appeared on the minstrel stage. Subjective laughter, which New Negro writers advocated for, pitched

laughter as a spontaneous response to black comedic expression, which restored agency to African American characters. But as the discursive production of subjective laughter shows, that spontaneity may have been more imagined than real. These two competing forms of laughter that were codified during the Harlem Renaissance for two of the rough poles for the styles and techniques of “laughing off white supremacy” which I explore. Whether objective laughter or subjective laughter, blues laughter or jazz laughter, the expression of grief or grievance, these two laughs ultimately set the stage for the traditions of comedy that black comics continue to draw on to laugh off white supremacy in the 21st century.

Laughter in Three Chapters

To give laughter a future, black writers and activists had to confront the harmful stereotypes that were a fixture of the minstrel stage and identify, expose, and rhetorically dismantle racist images of black laughter for their audiences. While earlier critics have chronicled the ways that 19th century writers and performers discovered anti-slavery possibilities within the minstrel show, few of these writers confronted the horror of the minstrel show directly. In the early years of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois made identifying harmful laughter one of his major themes. In a series of articles and op eds that ran in *The Crisis* between its inception in 1910 and 1920, Du Bois identified minstrelsy as a tool that white supremacists used to oppress African Americans. In chapter 1, I chronicle this underexamined aspect of it’s anti-lynching campaign and show how Du Bois embraced the bitterness he knew he would be accused of for his critique of racist laughter, reconfiguring it as a strategic response to racist

representations. By claiming bitterness, Du Bois participated in the ancient tradition of mobilizing bitter feelings to make strategic political gains and presaged the humorless approach of civil rights and black power movement leaders of the 1960s and 70s. Du Bois' work taught African Americans to identify the culture war that was being fought against them by racist laughter, and in response he created a complex new form of ironic laughter that laughed bitterly at racist invectives or he simply refused to laugh and taught his readers to do the same. Finally, I locate a sincere form of laughter in Du Bois' editorial work and in the pages of *The Crisis* that paves the way for the subjective laughter of later critics like Fauset and emphasizes the need for realist representations of black laughter and black joy. Indeed, Du Bois situated sincere laughter as one of the central goals of African American cultural workers, and he shows how for a brief moment at the end of World War I, laughter became a symbol of racial equality before being subsumed by the events of the bloody summer of 1919.

The focus on realism in the subjective laughter of the Harlem Renaissance wasn't solely about representing joy and black expression, it was also used as a way to critique intra-racial dynamics, particularly as they related to the popular and scandalous phenomenon of racial passing. As Nella Larsen's famous character Irene Redfield pointed out, there is something funny about passing, and in my second chapter I explore the uncanny dynamics of racial passing and the ticklish feelings that passing caused for both the person who is passing and for their black accomplices. I focus on a narrow case study of Larsen's novel *Passing* and explore what Du Bois called the "ticklish subject" by interpreting laughter in scenes of passing through the lens of physical tickling and the complicated emotions of pleasure and pain that accompany it. I

show that laughter was an aid to those who endeavored to pass for white, but that ticklish laughter also reveals the tension between personal autonomy and racial solidarity at the heart of the passing phenomenon which was also present in the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance. The model of physical tickling provides a heuristic for interpreting Irene and Clare's encounters, and proves to be a reliable method of deducing political tensions and tracking them across the novel. Ticklish laughter shows the growing tensions that the passing subject causes their black accomplice, which finally results in a serious confrontation where the Irene must choose between the death of the passing subject or being confronted with her own self-made abjection and symbolic death. In my reading of passing's ticklish laughter, I find the possibility of passing's success—both performatively and politically—rooted in acts of interracial solidarity. However, ticklish laughter also shows the limits of solidarity, and by doing so Larsen's novel offers a metacommentary on debates about objective versus subjective laughter, dramatizing the failure of subjective laughter to replace objective laughter because of the bind Larsen points to between racial uplift politics and white supremacist ideology.

The association of African American laughter and death reached its climax in the 1930's when a new militant form of laughter emerged that mocked the symbolic power of lynching and boldly asserted grievances against white supremacy. Like Du Bois' laugh in the Stoddard debate, this was a confrontational laugh that was meant to catch white supremacists off-guard, but unlike the Stoddard debate, these laughs were explicitly figured as an aid to collective action against white supremacists and at times as a method of reflecting on the ethics of such actions. In this chapter, I show the

modern genealogy of this form of laughter, which I trace from the writings of George Schuyler and other black satirists of the 1920's to their adoption in the 1930's by Schuyler and Langston Hughes. Beginning with Hughes, I show how the political conflicts of the 1930's sharpened the contradictions that writers felt, but how laughter became an important affective response for writers and activists to assert their collective defiance to white supremacist violence and to chart a path toward future reconciliation. This form of laughter began in black periodicals like *The Messenger* and *The Pittsburgh Courier* before making its way into socialist periodicals like *The Daily Worker* and later crystallizing in the work of Jacob Burck and Oliver Harrington in their cartoon collections. By examining cartoons and the ways that writers like Hughes wrote about cartoons, I show that activists prepared their audiences to angrily laugh at horrific images and to use these reactions to constitute new forms of embodied resistance. Later, I turn to investigate how the satirical works of George Schuyler deploy this laugh to reveal the violent spirit lurking behind the quest for vengeance for racial violence. While using the aggressive laughter at white supremacy to different ends, I argue that both writers revise the convention of objective laughter inherited from Bert Williams in order to laugh at black suffering and by doing so turn it back on the white laughers and in the process give themselves the political or epistemological advantage.

Taken together, my intent is for these chapters make an intervention into our understanding of African American laughter and comedy by expanding the variety of objects that constitute the laughable and the variety of strategies for laughter. By reading the work of Du Bois, Larsen, Hughes, Schuyler, and a host of other black writers in their historical context, I also aim to turn the conventional thinking about

laughter as a value or an embodied response with an inherent significance on its head. As the product of highly manufactured receptions, the works of these writers show that *anything* can be laughable if you make it new and organize your publics, and that these laughs can coordinate bodies across space and time. If this isn't a modern vision of laughter, well, I don't know what is. As we continue to confront the threat of white supremacy in 2022, perhaps we can take some lessons from these pioneers of black comedy as we envision a laughter that laughs back at white supremacy and instead carves out a future for black joy in a vast and still-tragic present.

On Blackness, Bitterness, and Joy: W.E.B. Du Bois' Laughter in *The Crisis*

> "Why should they not laugh at death for a country which honors them dying and kicks and buffets them living? God laughed. It was a Joke."[53]

Introduction: Claiming Bitterness

From the earliest days of his editorship of *The Crisis*, W.E.B Du Bois espoused the importance of a sincere tone in reporting on the oppression and murder of African Americans. When *The Crisis* began publishing in 1910, many newspapers and other "serious" magazines in the US were following in the footsteps of European satires by integrating humorous and satirical content with "serious" journalistic content.[54] The influence of these others periodicals was complicated by a factor that Du Bois' European counterparts didn't face: how could *The Crisis* ethically navigate the complex history of American humor, race, and performance while still reporting the distinctly unfunny facts of about anti-black racism in the U.S. and abroad? The use of humor in the cultural assault on African Americans has been well documented, and it came in different forms, including print humor targeting African Americans, the rise of minstrel performances on the vaudeville stage, visual representations of blackface, humorous songs, and many other examples.[55] But in 1910, black writers were just beginning to take inventory of the toll that racist humor had taken on black consciousness, and Du Bois' work represents an essential and underappreciated part of this history. In a series of articles and op eds in *The Crisis*, Du Bois revealed how minstrel representations and other harmful stereotypes trivialized the involvement of whites in perpetuating racism

and instead emphasized the dangers of black men and women in order to justify acts of racial violence like lynching.

In response to these factors, Du Bois declared early in 1912 that *The Crisis* would not be a humorous magazine, and it would not only embrace but cultivate the bitter feeling that the refusal to laugh might create. This aligned *The Crisis'* approach to humor with its approach to other forms of textual and visual activism, which sought to accurately represent the spectacular horror of lynching while using these representations to motivate its readers to take action. But to represent the truth of lynching risked replicating or re-presenting the spectacle of lynching to African Americans–a narrative reminder of the monstrosity of racial difference used to maintain racial hierarchy and to demonstrate the symbolic and literal punishment of racial difference under U.S. law.[56] Recent writings have captured the ways that African Americans used visual activism to rework the narrative of racial terror in newspaper representations of lynching by, in one example, creating counter-narratives about lynching victims who were castigated as rapists and dehumanized in the white press.[57] These writings utilized new combinations of image and text to re-contextualize images of lynching and thereby "document atrocity, evoke[sic] emotion that fueled activism, and advocate for a strong response from the federal government."[58] Du Bois extended these strategies of editorial and narrative activism by criticizing humorous representations of African Americans and reconfiguring images of laughter to represent the grotesque fun of white supremacists who terrorized African Americans with the threat of lynching.

During his tenure as editor of *The Crisis*, the magazine used numerous techniques to contextualize and recontextualize racist laughter, including reportage,

editorials, political cartoons, image/text collages and folk stories collected from readers. Repurposing laughter served a twofold purpose: to undermine the claims to "justice" of the lynchers, and to identify the white terrorists who were the source of racial humor, revealing its true role in degrading African Americans. To counter the laughing terrorists, Du Bois identified and rejected racist laughter and created a new kind of laughter infused with bitterness. For Du Bois, bitterness was not simply about resentment but was a rich emotional counterpart to laughter that had its own history. Du Bois's engagement with laughter provides a theory of how laughter as an embodied reaction to political violence could be connected or infused with bitter emotions and lead to political action. In his earlier writings, including writing in *The Crisis* and in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois associates a bitter response to racist laughter with education and the knowledge of racial black oppression. This intervention was a crucial if forgotten precursor to midcentury theoretical accounts of ironic laughter at white supremacy including Ralph Ellison's famous description of his protagonist in *Invisible Man* as having "blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition."[59] Before Ellison described laughter as both a prison and an opportunity to experiment with different kinds individuality in, Du Bois used laughter to identify the prison of grotesque minstrel stereotypes and envisioned a new bitter laughter that could warn African Americans of the dangers of laughing at themselves.

The idea of blending laughter with bitterness was strategic; Du Bois wanted to teach his readers to respond bitterly to the ridiculing laughter of whites to develop a humorless form of racial consciousness. As I explore later in this chapter, Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* shows that he viewed laughter and the comic disposition as inherent

to the experience of double consciousness. As such, bitter laughter was part of an emergent politics of anti-racism and self-determination.[60] Du Bois was not the first to laugh at lynching, as Glenda Carpio and others have shown. As she argues in her book *Laughing Fit to Kill*, "African American oral culture is rich in tales that use humor to represent the violence of slavery."[61] However, he took the folk laughter that emerged from below and brought it to the surface, framing its bitter character and its cynical view of whites, thereby making it a central aesthetic formulation for the politics of self-determination. Given his invective against laughter in favor of bitterness, this approach served to proverbially use laughter as a tool against the masters who had fashioned it to oppress African Americans.

Despite Du Bois' stance against humor, he did not exclusively publish grotesque images of mutilated bodies or white men and women laughing evilly at black death. As "A Record of the Darker Races," much of what was printed in *The Crisis* was about humor and the possibilities for a kind of African American laughter that was not subject to the bitter constraints of having to duel with racists. Laughter for Du Bois was both a rhetorical tool to contest representations of lynching and a representation of the fruits of those struggles, forming a cornerstone for a constructive, positive vision of black self-determination. The rhetorical packaging of laughter and joy represents a desire for a certain kind of laughter that expresses joy in no uncertain terms–untainted by pain and suffering–as a beacon for Du Bois' readers to follow. Promoting sincere laughter was part of the broader cultural strategy of creating black literature and art that began before *The Crisis* and extended to the Harlem Renaissance. Yet beyond this strategy, Du Bois' use of laughter was a way of reclaiming happy emotions that had been stolen from

African Americans in their false uses as representations that furthered white supremacist ideology. Insofar as laughter signaled a future unhindered by racism and violence, laughter was used to represent that actual freedom.

"The Gall of Bitterness"

In a 1912 editorial titled "The Gall of Bitterness," Du Bois outlined what he saw as the toxic history of laughter and racial oppression in the U.S.. Preemptively claiming the label of bitterness, Du Bois' editorial lays out his rationale for opting to represent "the grim awfulness of the bare truth" over "the lighter touch, the insinuation and the passing reference" of laughter, and in doing so, this under-examined screed is a manifesto for the kind pragmatic propaganda that Du Bois would perfect during his tenure as editor of *The Crisis*.[62] By representing what he deemed the be "the truth" of racism in the U.S. and lynching in particular, Du Bois knew that his work would likely be labelled "bitter" or "cynical" by his critics and his audience. He responded by arguing that racial violence could not be represented except through the bitter approach because the feeling of bitterness conveys facts accurately and without distortion. He presents his disclaimer thus:

> It may be acknowledged at the out-set that *The Crisis* does not try to be funny. Not that we object to fun: our office is a cheerful place, with bits of sunshine and eager young lives and high joyful purpose. But our stock in trade is not jokes. We are in earnest. This is a news-paper. It tries to tell the Truth. It will not consciously exaggerate in any way, but its whole reason for being is the

> revelation of the facts of racial antagonism now in the world, and these facts are not humorous.[63]

Du Bois uses the vocabulary of comedy (e.g. fun, jokes, humor, joy) to describe the contrast between more conventional and polite approaches to representing race relations and his own, more earnest or frank approach, which had the gall to be bitter. In his analysis, comedy was used to minimize the problem, and Du Bois wanted to push the response to a crisis to match "The Crisis" that African Americans experienced, especially in the South.

The title of the editorial "The Gall of Bitterness" describes the boldness of bitterness while directly invoking a verse from the Biblical book of "Acts" pertaining to the misrecognition of material wealth for salvation. This allusion connects the tone that Du Bois wanted to impart to his readers with the bitter feelings of white supremacists who laughed at African Americans. Perhaps better known for containing the proverbial phrase "the bond of iniquity," "the gall of bitterness" is a phrase uttered by Peter while chastising the newly converted Simon for trying to purchase the power to spread the holy spirit from him through the laying of hands. Peter urges the sinning Simon to repent and seek forgiveness, emphasizing the understanding of God who knows "that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."[64] The allusion to the gall of bitterness is about the twin sins of greed and materiality, and perhaps it initially seems to read as an accusation, either against Du Bois's audience who would be critical of *The Crisis'* tone or against the white supremacists who inspired such bitterness. But Du Bois uses this phrase ironically to reconfigure bitterness, rejecting good humor, jokes, and fun in favor of the earnest sincerity and representations of the truth familiar to the

conventions of Realism. Indeed, Du Bois interprets white oppressors as unknowingly being in the "gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity," but the phrase also describes the magazine itself, a fact that becomes clear when Du Bois asks forgiveness of his readers: "we trust that the Gall of Bitterness will not spoil the pages of THE CRISIS or make its readers shudder at ill-timed frankness" (153). By comparing his strategy to the devious materialism of Simon, Du Bois urged his readers to throw off their ecclesiastical conservatism or their penchant for sentimentalism and embrace the bitter tone that the magazine was imparting to them. Bitterness was material, and while it could be mistaken for a sin, it was a necessity to represent African American suffering mimetically instead of laughing it away. As I show later, bitterness and "Gall" have another material side that Du Bois obliquely references, connecting bitterness to the body and through the body to the humors.

Openly claiming the affective possibilities of bitterness helped secure the mantle of seriousness for *The Crisis* and it also helped Du Bois navigate claims of sensationalism from his readers and potential darts from his foes that sought to undermine his credibility. Avoiding absolutes, Du Bois' editorial does not condemn humor; in fact he goes out of his way to emphasize his own sense of fun, establishing his ethos and claiming good humor as separate from the "Truth" of racism but an important and integral part of black life. Weighing the pros and cons of both humorous and a serious tone, Du Bois argues that the truth shouldn't be represented with laughter because the appearance of exaggeration must be avoided in documenting the atrocities committed against African Americans. Vowing to represent racial antagonism without humor was also a way for Du Bois to strike back at his political adversaries–white

supremacists who used laughter to oppress blacks, and white centrists who were concerned that an emerging black consciousness would spoil their fun. Bitterness was also a kind of quantitative strategy for representing the scale of the problem facing African Americans in the South. In opting for "the grim awfulness of the truth," Du Bois asks "could a neat joke or a light allusion make this nation realize what 2,500 murders such as these look like?" But perhaps more importantly, separating humor from representations of racial antagonism revealed the complicity of laughter and white supremacist politics.

"The Gall of Bitterness" made a genealogical argument, situating the bitter tone of *The Crisis* within a larger history of African American laughter and humor in order to show readers the white supremacist ideology that underwrote the carefree laughter of whites against blacks. The first part of this this narrative described the birth of the blackface minstrel, who represented the Sambo type, a stereotype of the happy slave who preferred to serve whites than to be free; the second part described abolition, days of civil war which did away with carefree laughter and revealed the horrors of slavery. Within this larger trajectory, Du Bois' argument about the "campaign of Joy and Laughter to degrade black folk" as a revival of the blackface minstrel shows the conjunction of laughter and white supremacy.[65] The ubiquity of laughter and joy at racist performances was a continuation of the historical problem: by always representing African Americans as the butt of the joke, white supremacist ideology rendered it impossible to accurately represent the oppression of blacks, and through these representations to spur action. As Du Bois writes, "this country has had its appetite for facts on the Negro problem spoiled by sweets," framing a bitter tone as necessary for

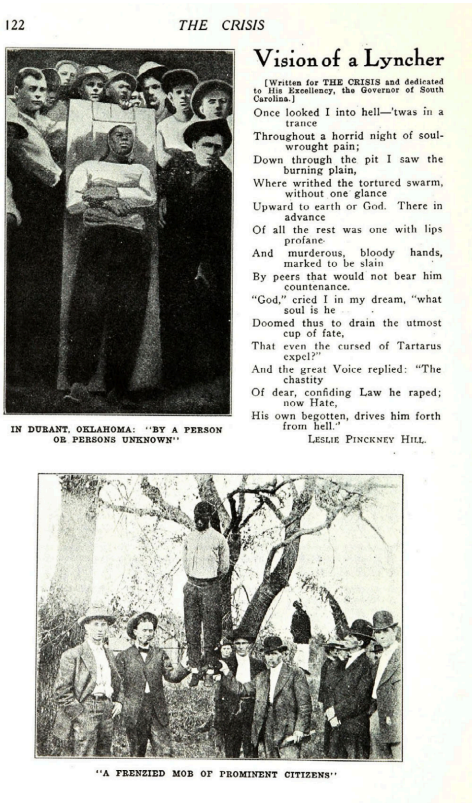
overcoming the defamation of African Americans, while pushing to go back to the "sober" days of the Civil War when the horrors of slavery were clear.

The genealogical argument about the use of laughter to degrade African Americans clarified Du Bois' pragmatic aesthetic position: that the documentary image was superior to laughter in imparting the experience of racial terror, and bitterness a better motivation than joy because of the historical alignment of laughter with white supremacist ideology. "The Gall of Bitterness" articulates a position on the relationship between representation, truth, and political action vis-a-vis laughter. Du Bois believed that the bitter approach surpassed laughter in motivating action by more accurately representing truth, but the way he framed this argument sometimes turned the bitter tone around on his reader. For example:

> God for-bid that mere considerations of pleas-antry and sweetness should ever make us withhold insistence, in sea-son and out, upon that which a Southern white correspondent of ours calls "the barbarous treatment ac-corded an unfortunate people by the strong and arrogant Caucasian. [Sic][66]

The connection between polite rhetoric about racial violence and inaction is framed with a sarcastic and bitter tone and uses the quote by a white Southerner and contributor to *The Crisis* to testify to the reality of black experience. The defensive message was directed to conservative readers of *The Crisis*, emphasizing the need to represent the truth, which appeared in black and white experience alike. Indeed, Du Bois believed that representing truth qualified as an action in itself rather than a mere prelude to action, but that it required accurate representation to translate into action commensurate with experience. He describes the effect of truth in the concluding lines of "The Gall of

Bitterness": "when Truth shall have come into her own, through the medium of education, the color line will be swept into oblivion of a dark and disgraceful past." This approach to the representation of racism and the search for truth, which Nancy Ladd Muller aptly characterizes as "Du Boisian pragmatism," combines the bitter representation of negativity up to and including horrific scenes of racial terror and death with a philosophical optimism that representing such scenes accurately would result in the manifestation of political change and the progression of history towards racial equality.[67] Claiming bitterness was a way to contextualize the problem of lynching for his readers and it also served to verify the truth value of the images and the stories that Du Bois put forward under a motivating principle: without laughter, the problem of the color line would be impossible to ignore.



122 THE CRISIS

IN DURANT, OKLAHOMA: "BY A PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN"

Vision of a Lyncher

[Written for THE CRISIS and dedicated to His Excellency, the Governor of South Carolina.]

Once looked I into hell—'twas in a trance
Throughout a horrid night of soul-wrought pain;
Down through the pit I saw the burning plain,
Where writhed the tortured swarm, without one glance
Upward to earth or God. There in advance
Of all the rest was one with lips profane
And murderous, bloody hands, marked to be slain
By peers that would not bear him countenance.
"God," cried I in my dream, "what soul is he
Doomed thus to drain the utmost cup of fate,
That even the cursed of Tartarus expel?"
And the great Voice replied: "The chastity
Of dear, confiding Law he raped; now Hate,
His own begotten, drives him forth from hell."

LESLIE PINCKNEY HILL

"A FRENZIED MOB OF PROMINENT CITIZENS"

Figure 2.1

"The Gall of Bitterness" was written as a direct response to the backlash from readers of *The Crisis* about the publication of images of lynchings in the previous issue and its satirical and bitterly ironic commentary on the state of racial oppression, which readers mistook for sensationalism.[68] In one of his regular columns in the controversial January issue called "The Burden," Du Bois argued that it was important to talk about oppression during the Christmas season, and that the release of "the burden" temporarily leading up to Christmas was an illusion. As he writes: "with the rejoicing of December days oppression has grown no less; and while in every Christian church there has been the song of "Peace on Earth," it has brought no hope that the burden would slip from the weary back into the open sepulcher."[69] The piece had more than a merely Grinchy tone in its delivery, as it was accompanied by images of lynchings complete with captions.

It was not merely photographic, but also poetic images that produced a kind of dialectical interplay of content and medium. On one page following "The Burden," Du Bois shows two photographs of lynchings that are paired with a poem entitled "Vision of a Lyncher" by Leslie Pickney Hill. Du Bois saw bitterness as a superior rhetorical strategy to the sweetness and deception of racist laughter, and as "Vision of a Lyncher" shows, he envisioned the bitter tone which *The Crisis* cultivated as a way to create a bitter feeling in the magazine's readership in order to motivate them to take action. While both the poem and the photographs depict lynchings, their purpose is to plainly depict *the lyncher* and thereby undermine claims made in court that it was impossible to identify whites who murdered blacks: what emerges is a delicate interplay between the individual (the person who lynches), the mob (a collection of depersonalized

contributors to racialized terror), and the culture that produces both of them. The first image shows a crowd of white faces posing surrounding a black man who is bound to a large piece of wood, and the caption reads “IN DURANT, OKLAHOMA: ‘BY A PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN.’” Parodying a newspaper story about the murder, the caption targets reporters and juries who claimed they were unable to identify the lynchers, bitterly mocking the notion that the identities of the murderers are known and making clear to reader that the evidence was readily available but covered up by the same reporters and courts.

The second photograph also shows the dialectical interplay in which the meaning of both the image and the poem depend upon juxtaposition with the other – formally not unlike the dynamic of an individual and a mob in the scene of a lynching. However, this image is more bitter, showing a crowd of white men surrounding a black man who has been hung from a tree. The body of a second black man can be seen hanging in the background. The white men are well dressed--some give an intimidating look at the camera, others betray a smile--and the caption reads “A FRENZIED MOB OF PROMINENT CITIZENS.” The caption of the second photo builds on the satirical tone of the first, showing that not only are the men identifiable, but some of the most well-known figures in the community, appearing calm and enjoying the spectacle of the lynching. The poem that ties together the images on the page, “Vision of a Lyncher,” is ironically dedicated to “His Excellency, the Governor of South Carolina.” The poem turns the readers’ act of identifying the lynchers in the photos into an act of identifying the sin that landed the lyncher in hell. As the great voice in the poem reveals, the lyncher is doomed to hell for the “chastity/ Of dear, confiding Law he raped,” taking for

the target of the sin the *extrajudicial* murder that circumvented the law, which it compares to rape. This throws the objection about bitterness at Christmas into relief, raising the prospect of horrific sin not only during the holidays but structuring and pervading the culture that was celebrating an ostensible season of transcendent peace and mercy. Besides their abrasive bitterness, these pieces all share in the goal of convincing readers of the harm lynching does to due process, which had broader implications for harming the United States. Bitterness was thus a strategy for affectively engaging readers on an intersubjective level, to translate the structure of experience of racism through tone and form.

The bitter tone that Du Bois fashioned in *The Crisis* was not only for his foes, but also those white abolitionists who called themselves "friends." In the May 1914 issue of *The Crisis*, he penned an editorial that links his bitter tone and the rejection of carefree laughter to a rhetorical strategy of rejecting complicity with racial violence. In a column called "The Philosophy of Mr. Dole," Du Bois responds to a letter from Charles F. Dole, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist who would become an anti-war leader in 1915, and a man who was a personal friend of Du Bois. Dole's letter, published in the same issue and titled "A Question of Policy," criticizes the magazine's use of language (the capitalization of the word "Negro" but not the word "white," for example) and the characterization of Du Bois' political opponents (Mr. Ogden, a financial supporter of Booker T. Washington, "did not admire a self-conscious Negro, he did not like self-consciousness in anyone").

But what gave Du Bois the most ire was the letter's closing, which urged patience in the face of the blight of lynching: "Here are ninety millions of people emerging from

the barbarism of only a few generations ago. The wonder is that there is so little killing: the fact is that society is steadily setting its face against it."[70] Dole's letter cautioned against bitterness and encouraged the magazine to strike a tone of magnanimity and good-humor because as Dole wrote, "good will is the only irresistible power in the universe." In his response, Du Bois extends his argument in "The Gall of Bitterness" about the direction for the rhetoric of his magazine that differentiates it from older kinds of abolitionist propaganda that were conciliatory in nature and intended to appeal to those who were neutral to the cause of racial equality. A signal aspect of this rhetoric is the rejection of certain kinds of laughter that participate in the complicity, ridicule, and shaming of African Americans:

> For now nearly twenty years we have made of ourselves mudsills for the feet of this Western world. We have echoed and applauded every shameful accusation made against 10,000,000 victims of slavery. Did they call us inferior half-beasts? We nodded our simple heads and whispered: "We is." Did they call our women prostitutes and our children bastards? We smiled and cast a stone, at the bruised breasts of our wives and daughters. Did they accuse of laziness 4,000,000 sweating, struggling laborers, half paid and cheated out of much of that? We shrieked: "Ain't it so?" We laughed with them at our color, we joked at our sad past, and we told chicken stories to get alms.[71]

Du Bois used the letter as an occasion to make a more general statement about the propaganda strategy of *The Crisis*, and this involves the rejection of ostensibly unreflective black laughter. For Du Bois, this sympathetic laughter, which joins the ridicule of the white laugher as a defense mechanism against harm, is just as

dangerous as white laughter because of its role in perpetuating the status quo for African Americans and coercing them into working against their political interest.

While skillfully acknowledging the utility of Dole's call for conciliation, Du Bois all but rejects this strategy and risks antagonism and the appearance of bitterness in his campaign to represent the truth. His justification for abandoning conciliatory rhetoric is that while this may have made friends for African Americans, it failed to bring an end to the lynching epidemic.

> And what was the result? We got ""friends." I do not believe any people ever had so many ""friends" as the American Negro to-day'. He has nothing but ""friends" and may the good God deliver him from most of them, for they are like to lynch his soul.

Using lynching as the rhetorical litmus test for progressive ethics and political rhetoric enabled Du Bois to draw a line between supporters of *The Crisis* and those who supported the abolitionist cause in word only. The rejection of laughter arose not just in relation to the history of minstrelsy but also in response to white abolitionist "friends" raising problems with the magazine's language and politics. The case of Mr. Dole and those like him was that the magazine needed to expand progressive circles and bring more supporters in, and that the only way to do that was with good-humored rhetoric. Du Bois agreed with the premise that he needed to continue building his base of supporters in order to end lynching, and this is evidenced by the obsession of *The Crisis* with growing the magazine's readership among black and white audiences, but he disagreed that the only way to do this was with good-humor, especially when the subject was lynching.

The History of a Flavor

The opposition between bitterness and sweetness that Du Bois traces in his editorial is not new, with a long discursive history dating back to debates in ancient Greek medicine. The metaphorical imbalance between sweetness and bitterness that Du Bois conjures for his cultural political work has antecedents in ancient medicinal texts and practices that used flavors and feelings to conceive of the relationship between temperaments, diseases, characters, and cures. The history of bitterness reveals the longstanding connection between the sensation of bitterness and the feeling, and it shows the various approaches of physicians and philosophers to finding bodily cures for an abundance of bitter feelings. Starting with Hippocrates and Galen of Pergamum, the ancient Greeks developed a theory of the body called humoral theory, which survived as a model for medicine through the middle ages and until the 19th century. The theory of humors conceived of the body as a collection of substances in need of proper regulation, with imbalances in these substances responsible for maladies or what Galen referred to as “dyscrasia,” meaning bad mixture. The four fluids or humors of humoral theory included blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm, with each humor corresponding to a person’s physical qualities and temperaments. In this schema, blood was associated with wetness, warmth, and a sanguine temperament; yellow bile with dryness, warmth, and a choleric temperament; black bile with coldness, dryness, and melancholia; and phlegm with coldness, wetness, and placidity. While circulating through the body, humoral theory posited the locus of each humoral fluid in specific organs--blood was produced by the liver, yellow bile by the gallbladder, black bile by the spleen, and phlegm by the brain—and each of these humors was related to a

flavor—blood was related to salt, yellow bile to bitterness, black bile to sourness, and phlegm to sweetness. Thus, the character of bitterness was related to an overabundance of yellow bile from the gall bladder, resulting from an imbalance of bitter substances within the body. This chain of reasoning led physicians to posit cures for humoral imbalances by increasing or decreasing the offending substance in the patient, with academic disagreements emerging about how to treat maladies (to cure a glut of sweetness, do you add more sweetness or counter with bitterness?) that lasted from antiquity to the late middle ages. As Noga Arikha lays out in her book *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours*, treatments for imbalances or dyscrasia could also require increasing the amount of the *corresponding or contradictory* humor.[72] Theories like this led to bloodletting but also strategies to focus on the flavor of the medicine to determine its effect inside the body.

Although excluded by modern science in the late 19th century, humoral theory survives in intellectual discourse today as a "new" method of philosophical investigation to observe the various entanglements between mind and body during a subject's sensuous experience. In his essay "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics," Ben Highmore foregrounds the flavor of bitterness as a key example of the connection between *sensation* and *feeling*, arguing through literary and ethnographic examples that the *sensation* of eating bitter foods and the *feeling* of bitterness that it creates are not so separate but connected. The innovation of Highmore's affect theory is to see that the value of a sensation/feeling vector like bitterness is involved not just in connecting body and mind, but to show how this connection is used in the production of difference and how it has overtly political consequences. Highmore traces the history of

the use of bitterness to produce and ameliorate difference, referencing the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, he refers to this process of intentionally using combinations of sensation/feeling to cultivate difference as schismogenesis.[73] This leads Highmore to observe that ethos, or the "orchestration of perception, sensorial culture, affective intensities" is the form of behavior that brings together sensation, feeling, and cultural difference, and reveals the political aims underpinning the production of a given way of being. For Highmore, the use of bitterness, rather than having a determinate meaning, reveals the extent to which ethos can be molded by "experiments in living," leading him to redefine politics as a kind of "experiential pedagogy."[74]

Molding the ethos of readers through "experiments in living" was exactly what Du Bois had in mind by reworking the laughter of racist humor into a feeling of bitterness. The problem for Du Bois was that a good-humored attitude towards white supremacy was perceived as a tacit consent to the continuation of racial violence. When African Americans laughed at jokes or representations of themselves, they were giving the wrong aesthetic response to the object of their laughter—blackness or themselves—an aesthetic problem that he sought to address by teaching his readers to respond differently, and in doing so, creating a new kind of ethos. "The Gall of Bitterness" is a defining text in Du Bois' pragmatic attempt to mold the ethos of his readers by establishing the ethos of his magazine. One of the focal points for this ethos was laughter, and not only responding to racist humor with bitterness, but as I show in the conclusion of this chapter, developing a qualitatively different form of laughter to reframe the horizon for a politics of black self-determination.

Reading humoral theory alongside “The Gall of Bitterness” situates Du Bois’ prescription for a bitter approach to cultural politics within a framework that relates the sensational world to the inner world and it offers a material framework for this rhetoric. With the diagnosis that “facts” were spoiled by the sweetness of laughter, Du Bois’ bitter remedy references the materiality of laughter and its sweetness and the pacifying effect that it has on the body. It counterposes sweetness to the materiality of bitterness, the refusal to laugh, and the physiological consequences of this withholding on the body to spark anger as the treatment. If in humoral theory bitterness was the foil for sweetness, the choleric temperament of bitterness was also the counterpoint to the phlegmatic temperament of sweetness. By this logic, combating a glut of phlegm with something bitter could spice things up, changing a phlegmatic temperament to aggression or anger. Envisioning bitterness as an antidote to the sweetness of laughter was a move which had political consequences, and Du Bois wasn’t the first to do so. As Justin-Lewis Anthony points out, humoral imbalances were often put to work to deduce the source of political conflicts in maladies of the body, and increasing bitterness was known to result in revolutionary passions.[75] By refusing to dissipate emotion and pacify the subject with laughter, Du Bois saw a bitter tone as a method of agitation, and in Highmore and Bateson’s terms, a version of schismogenesis meant to polarize African Americans against whites.

Highmore’s reading of bitterness echoes humoral theory’s emphasis on the connection between sensation and feeling, but other contemporary accounts read bitterness as a form of shared subjectivity within a constellation of negative emotions tied to social exclusion and exhaustion. These works locate the power of bitterness in its

rejection of the social instead of its pragmatic uses in the political realm. In her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love describes this form of bitterness grouping it with other feelings like "nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, [sic] defeatism, and loneliness," as parts of what she calls an "archive of feeling" that chronicles the experience of authors and individuals who encountered homophobia in the early twentieth century. Love's work struggles to recover these negative emotions as forms of political praxis, ultimately recognizing that they may indeed simply be associated with survival, writing. Bitterness and the other negative emotions might "describe what it is like to bear a "disqualified" identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury--not fixing it."[76] In another recent monograph Anna Katherina Schaeffer argues that bitterness is also historically aligned with forms of exhaustion, including melancholia and acedia.[77] The notion of "living with injury" was certainly not foreign to Du Bois or his manner of representing black experience. Psychoanalytic accounts too bear out a correlation between bitterness and the perception of an injury resulting in wrongful suffering. Beginning in the 1960's psychoanalysts identified bitterness as an affect of interest and described the feeling as a form of protest against a lost object and an attempt to reclaim that object. Many feelings and defenses arise when an object is lost, but the particularity of bitterness is that it is a reaction to what is perceived by the subject as a malicious attempt to obtain the object by another, causing resentment because the pain of object loss appears to be deliberate and deliberately painful.[78] Recent accounts have taken this analysis further, observing that bitterness is "always associated with a burning sense of unfairness or injustice, a protesting feeling of being

wronged without cause."[79] Where Love reads bitterness as a record of such a painful loss and a register of that injustice, Du Bois attempted to foment bitterness as a weapon against laughter and to agitate around it where it was already present among his readership, using it as a strategy for producing political engagement.

However, this approach was not without its risks. In both Love and Schaeffer's accounts, bitterness can last for too long, causing hopelessness and inaction. Contemporary psychologists have taken interest in this phenomenon too, naming the pathological condition of being bitter "embitterment."[80] The cause of embitterment is a prolonged feeling of bitterness resulting from a lack of remedy to the injury. Psychologists debate whether embitterment is a condition on its own or whether it is associated with the traumatic recurrence of the event that caused it, leading some psychologists to coin the term PTED (post traumatic embitterment disorder). Symptoms for PTED are debated, but to journal reviewers appear as "a mix of PTSD, angry depression, and perhaps personality disorders" including "paranoid, narcissistic, or passive-aggressive personality disorders."[81] Perhaps for this reason Du Bois tried to help his readers envision an end to bitterness. Du Boisian ethos featured the strategic withholding of laughter, but was not devoid of laughter, and rather used a new visionary form of laughter that could express joy free from suffering.

The Search for Bitterness: Laughter in *The Souls of Black Folk*

In his early work, Du Bois showed that laughter was an inadequate response to racism and worse, that it could be actively harmful to the cause of equality. Even so, he could not escape from the fact that laughter played a critical role in constituting African

Americans communities, especially as a shared acknowledgement of white oppression. In Du Bois' best known work, 1903's *The Souls of Black Folk*, we can see the roots of his belief in the power and the danger of laughter for the formation of the self. In *Souls*, Du Bois famously essayed the proclamation, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line"—a phrase that even white supremacists like Lothrop Stoddard admired. But much of *The Souls of Black Folk* focuses on the problem of education, with laughter holding a special place in Du Bois' philosophy of racial advancement. In "Of the Training of Black Men," Du Bois describes how unrefined laughter is associated with the poor and uneducated and a barrier that stands in the way of political advancement. As the title of the chapter suggests, he believed that unrefined laughter must be remedied with education:

> [Sic] We may decry the color-prejudice of the South, yet it remains a heavy fact. Such curious kinks of the human mind exist and must be reckoned with soberly. They cannot be laughed away, nor always successfully stormed at, nor easily abolished by act of legislature. And yet they must not be encouraged by being let alone. They must be recognized as facts, but unpleasant facts; things that stand in the way of civilization and religion and common decency. They can be met in but one way,—by the breadth and broadening of human reason, by catholicity of taste and culture. And so, too, the native ambition and aspiration of men, even though they be black, backward, and ungraceful, must not lightly be dealt with. To stimulate wildly weak and untrained minds is to play with mighty fires; to flout their striving idly is to welcome a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethargy

in our very laps. The guiding of thought and the deft coordination of deed is at once the path of honor and humanity.[82]

I quote this passage at length because it opens up a great many pathways in Du Bois' thought. Like his mentor William James, Du Bois lays out a relationship between fact, feeling, and action in addressing the problem of the color line. He criticizes those who would use merely affective or bureaucratic means of solving the problem, rejecting the idea that laughing at the fact of the color line or taking up righteous anger at the injustices of racism could solve the problem.[83] Favoring a sober affect to the vehement passions, he classifies racial oppression as a fact that must be registered rationally. Unlike James, who characterized the sentiment of rationality as "a strong feeling of ease, peace, rest" or a feeling of "lively relief and pleasure," Du Bois presents the fact of racism as an unpleasant feeling, a dull emotion of discomfort which contrasts with the Jamesian relaxation model and the often spectacular violence of life under Jim Crow.[84] The vehement emotions of laughter and anger are not simply ineffective tools against white oppressors, he argues, but they stir up passions in the masses that may lead to barbarism. In a moment of rhetorical cunning, Du Bois adds that such emotions unwittingly undermine the serious and sober will of the masses themselves towards progress.

This theory of a rational and sober reaction to the problem of the color line contrasts with the tragic and intoxicated laughter that Du Bois discovers in his travels through the black belt, and he reflects on the conditions that this laughter represents. In the black belt, laughter is tragedy and farce, a marker of the history of oppression of blacks in the South. And in his study of the black masses in "Of the Black Belt," laughter

is more than just a reaction or a spontaneous utterance, it represents an attitude towards both racism and black life that Du Bois insists must be corrected. “How curious a land is this,” he writes, “how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!” (92). Lines like this are key for understanding Du Bois’ thinking about laughter. The use of laughter instead of comedy as a foil for tragedy creates an equivalence between the physical expression of laughter and the implicit reference to the genre. One way to explain this absence is because the structure of comedy--with its redemptive possibilities--is absent from the South. Instead, there is only tragedy and laughter; laughter, which offers no relief from suffering, at least not in the present tense. But just as the absence of comedy makes laughter a sign of tragedy, Du Bois slips in another key to his thinking. The syntactical position of laughter, juxtaposed with “tragic past,” aligns laughter with “future promise,” making it a sign of futurity. So while tragedy is represented as history, laughter occupies a role as both present tragedy and future hope, making it a bridge to move from the present to the future.

The association of laughter with tragedy and future promise belies the fact that Du Bois observes laughter in the most mundane settings as a kind of low-level brooding that permeates the atmosphere with seething anger. He describes the landlocked city of Albany deep in the black belt of Georgia and the scene on Saturdays when its black workers leave their homes and set out to their leisure time. Like other scenes that he is familiar with in Europe, this leisure largely consists of families restocking their pantries for the week and men getting drunk in the street. Unlike his European reference points, the defining trait of the working poor in Albany is a lack of clearly defined emotion, yet

the presence of emotional intensity. His observations juxtapose laughter against sober rationality when describing the leisure time of poor African Americans, and like drunkenness, the laugh doesn't quite equal silliness, nor happiness, nor does it lead to any kind of action.

> They drink considerable quantities of whiskey, but do not get very drunk; they talk and laugh loudly at times, but seldom quarrel or fight. They walk up and down the streets, meet and gossip with friends, stare at the shop windows, buy coffee, cheap candy, and clothes, and at dusk drive home—happy? well no, not exactly happy, but much happier than as though they had not come. (Du Bois 87)

Laughter here is associated with violence or the expectation that it will produce social conflict, but unexpectedly for Du Bois, it does not. Nor does it produce happiness, but a muted emotion that is particular to the context—"happier than," as he writes.

Later, when Du Bois is documenting the plantation system, he encounters two convicts who describe to him how all of their earnings go to paying the rent for their miserable huts at the Bolton convict farm. When he sees their living conditions, Du Bois expands on his description of the atmosphere of the people of Albany with the two convicts: "They are not happy, these black men whom we meet throughout this region. There is little of the joyous abandon and playfulness which we are wont to associate with the plantation Negro. At best, the natural good-nature is edged with complaint or has changed into sullenness and gloom" (97). Countering stereotypes of the laughing, good-natured Sambo, the convicts are bound to the land, much the same way that sharecroppers are bound to their property. This produces a diffusing of particular emotions but the concentrating of emotional intensity, a phenomenon that is pushed to

an extreme in Du Bois' description of Scars, another resident from Albany. Du Bois ironically contrasts his sketch of Scars with his description of the masses in the street and the men on the roadside: "Happy?--Well, yes; he laughed and flipped pebbles, and thought the world was as it was….Careless ignorance and laziness here, fierce hate and vindictiveness there,—these are the extremes of the Negro problem which we met that day, and we scarce knew which we preferred." (98) Laughter here is a symbol of ignorance, but it emerges from the conditions of the plantation—in Scars, it represents ignorance, conceals casual violence, and manifests a hopeless nihilism.

The laughter of Scars is an image for Du Bois of the summit that must be climbed to achieve racial equality, and to get there, Du Bois must address the problem of self consciousness. In the famous first section of *The Souls of Black Folk* called "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois introduced his theory of double consciousness, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity," which links the struggle for racial equality with the struggle for a unified conception of the self. But double consciousness is not an *a priori* phenomenon, it is developed through experience, and *The Souls of Black Folk* provides dynamic examples of black subjects forced into a painful recognition of their racial difference, which bring them into the knowledge of their own double consciousness. For Du Bois, laughter is one emotional reaction to this recognition imbued with "amused contempt and pity," (a formulation curiously close to the emotions that Aristotle associates with tragedy) and it is echoed in the laughing response of African Americans to white laughter. Like the Veil and the Gift, the two metaphors that Du Bois uses to describe double consciousness, laughter is a

help and a hindrance, aiding black subjects in seeing the workings of racism and the color line, but the pleasure of their laughter also binds them to the conditions that created it, giving laughter a bitter flavor.

In “Of the Coming of John,” the second to last chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes a fictional narrative that focuses on the development of the character John Jones. This is the only fictional chapter in the book, and the story employs laughter at crucial moments to trace John’s educational development, political consciousness, and his changing relationship to the world of the South. Here, Du Bois makes his most clear statement about the relationship between laughter, education, and double consciousness, showing that laughter is a response to the knowledge of one’s racial difference, and that overcoming the laughter of others is a key aspect of black education. The narrative takes place in Johnstown and centers on two characters named John, one white and one black, who each represent the segregated experiences of white life and black life locked in competition where “neither world thought the other world’s thought, save with a vague unrest” (175). At first, the African American John is described as a lackadaisical student at the Wells Institute, where he was “always laughing and singing, and never able to work consecutively at anything” and whose “appalling good-humor” makes the teachers sore. When the Dean tells John that he must leave the school, John’s innocence and good-humor quickly fade, and he takes on an air of seriousness when he returns to the school after an absence and experience in the world. His newfound determination alienates him from his carefree laughter, and his new intellectual motivation reinforces his seriousness, forming him into an independent thinker—“he thought and puzzled along for himself,—pausing perplexed where others

skipped merrily, and walking steadily through the difficulties where the rest stopped and surrendered" (176). Seriousness is thus associated with intellectual and political development and the tolerance for difficulty, and laughter as an attitude that is used to avoid thought.

With this new intellectual awakening, a series of other changes come over John: to the narrator, his body appears to transform and mature, his clothes become more professional, and he has a stronger sense of himself and his individuality. But the most important realization that dawns on John is the reality of his oppression. As John sees the Veil between himself and the world come into focus, his affect changes and the carefree laughter from his youth fades away, replaced by sarcasm and bitterness. Du Bois takes us through this transformation explicitly, showing how the move from perceiving oppression as a natural phenomenon to what John learns is alien from nature and ideologically constructed makes the laughter melt away and replaced it with the feeling of bitterness and the expression of sarcasm at apprehending these facts of the world.

> he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him "Mister," he clenched his hands at the "Jim Crow" cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things." (177)

John's ignorant laughter turns to sarcasm as he realizes that what he thought was a natural racial hierarchy is revealed to be constructed. This new, ironic attitude expresses the knowledge of his oppression, and the chief emotion that he experiences is bitterness, which spurs him onward to imagine and think about possible action.

John's new consciousness prevents him from going back to the small Southern town he grew up in after he graduates from the Wells Institute, so he takes a chance and moves to the North where he chases the opportunities that he has been missing. In New York, he wanders into a concert hall as if possessed to see life on the other side of the Veil, and while meditating on the music of *Lohengrin* by Wagner, he experiences a romantic surge of feeling. Glimpsing life on the other side of his race, he experiences: "A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If he would only live up in the free air where birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood!" (178). His sense of what it must be like to be white begins with the feeling of the music, which gives him access to life on the other side of the Veil and it throws John's oppression into even sharper relief. At the pinnacle of his spiritual musings, he wonders "Who had called him to be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call when a world like this lay open before men?" (178). Wagner's opera transports John on a wave of transcendent feeling to an ethical reflection on his own position as the object of the laughter of others. Indeed, the recognition of a world beyond the world, represented by the opera, gives John the motivation to take action in this one. The answer he finds is another kind of feeling, which counters the dull feeling of oppression: "He would not like to be listless and idle, he thought, for he felt with the music the movement of power

within him. If he but had some master-work, some life-service, hard,--aye, bitter hard, but without the cringing and sickening servility, without the cruel hurt that hardened his heart and soul" (178). The realization that John has been the butt of the joke makes him reflect back on the kind of work that he wants, and he yearns for engaging "bitter hard" work to commit his life to instead of the slavish work that he associates with idleness and being the butt of the joke, and that Du Bois associates with dull, brooding laughter.

As John is rapt in these thoughts, he meets white John, his former playmate, who sits next to him with his date. When white John recognizes John Jones, he enforces the Jim Crow law and summons an usher to remove him, and it dawns on Jones that there is no escape from racism in the North, no world where he can escape being the butt of the joke, and he blames himself for being a fool to think there was. The glimpse of the other side of the Veil provides John with an orientation, but the recognition that he has been fooled sends him back to the South to confront his oppression where he lives. There he is received as different by the black community, who view him as cold and aloof, and by white people, who view him as more sophisticated and dangerous. Back in Altahama, John interviews with the Judge to be the teacher at the Negro school, and with the stipulation that he agrees not to teach the black children about equality, he accepts the job. A month into his new job, the white postmaster reports to the judge that John's teaching style is too radical, and the judge removes him. In an abrupt twist of fate, John Jones goes to the ocean and there discovers white John raping his sister. He picks up a log and strikes white John, killing him. Dreamily, he accepts his fate, and he tells his mother that he is going to head North and follow the North star, invoking the dream of an escape from slavery, which has already been cut off to him. He returns to

the ocean, where he has his only feeling of solace, with the waves approximating the emotion he felt in the concert hall when he felt himself move beyond the veil.

There he awaits his fate, and wondering what the students and teachers at the Institute will say, he sees himself through their eyes and forgets that he is the man about to be lynched. From happy memories of the school, he recalls the concert hall and "The Song of the Bride" from *Lohengrin* plays in his ears. As Fontenot points out, the lyrics that John hears are from "The Song of the Bride," but he changes them from "treulich gefuhrt, ziehet dahin" to "freudig gefurht, ziehet dahin," or "faithfully guided, come to this place" to "joyously guided, come to this place."[85] This is the first line of two verses that the chorus in the wedding party sings to the newly wedded couple, inviting them to leave their wedding and consecrate their marriage. The irony of this change in the lyrics is that John has forsaken his traditional "faith" for education, and he has also given up the joy of his innocent and idle laughter for a bitter attitude towards the world, all in pursuit of truth. Dolan Hubbard argues that "Of the Coming of John" offers a way out of the deadlock of racism where music replaces the traditional source of sublime feeling in black religious culture. Although it is connected to a dreamy, transcendent experience, that experience refers back to the moment in the concert hall that John Jones realized he had to abandon his merry idleness and awaken the desire for bitter hard work to overcome oppression. Instead of offering a way out, Du Bois' story attempts to rewrite the transcendent experience in the concert hall and by the oceanside before John Jones' death with the feeling of bitterness associated with the desire for cultural progress and political advancement. This is the feeling the reader is

left with when John Jones sees the rope and turns away from the angry Judge and looks towards the sea, dimly gazing from tragedy of the present into the future.

Laughing at Stereotypes, Laughing at Caricatures

The aesthetic dimension of bitterness and the complicated reconfiguration of laughter that Du Bois was working out in *The Souls of Black Folk* became one of the main thematics in both his personal life and in his editorial work for *The Crisis.* This is perhaps no clearer than in the letter that Du Bois wrote to his daughter Yolande on her fourteenth birthday. The letter, written in October 1914, instructs her, among other things, on the nature of laughter. In the letter, Du Bois warns against laughter that degrades, and the dangers of becoming complicit in laughing with others at yourself:

> Remember that most folk laugh at anything unusual, whether it is beautiful, fine or not. You, however, must not laugh at yourself. You must know that brown is as pretty as white or prettier and crinkly hair as straight even though it is harder to comb. The main thing is the YOU beneath the clothes and skin — the ability to do, the will to conquer, the determination to understand and know this great, wonderful, curious world.[86]

In this sentimental passage, Du Bois uses laughter to represent the social forces that are opposed to his daughter's development of her own self-consciousness. He takes his representation of the problem in "Of the Coming of John" further and is more direct about the role of laughter in discrimination. In observing that "most folk laugh at anything unusual," he figures the laugh as a kind of Bergsonian "social corrective" to the difference that her black body poses in a world where white is the norm. Du Bois sees

laughter as a mechanism for denying self-consciousness to African Americans by asserting distance between the white laugher and the black subject, a process of othering that makes the black body the object of ridicule. The danger for his daughter and for other African Americans is internalizing this white laughter. That's why he cautions his daughter against laughing at herself, and instead of letting the laughter of others diminish her beauty, realizing that her potential is separate from the appearance of her body all together. Du Bois' letter to Yolande is a precursor to *The Brownies' Book*, a monthly magazine for children that Du Bois edited with Augustus Granville Dill and Jesse Redmon Fauset starting in 1921, and an extension of his thinking on the education of black youth. In an advertisement for *The Brownies' Book* in *The Crisis*, laughter appears as one of the main values to convey to children, and it is associated with distinctly un-racialized categories that have to do with a traditional view of childhood that includes innocent experience and education: "It will be a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter and Emulation, and de-signed especially for Kiddies from Six to Sixteen." Du Bois' letter to Yolande and his writing for children emphasized the importance of laughter, but as the combination of laughter and emulation make clear, he aimed to teach children to act in the right way by laughing at the right things and the right ways—to laugh sincerely, not ironically.

The concern with white laughter that Du Bois expresses to his daughter is borne out in the pages of *The Crisis*, where Du Bois extends the argument about white laughter into an argument about the relationship between laughter and politics. The rejection of white laughter was a crucial aesthetic intervention that Du Bois linked, wherever possible, to furthering the cause of self-determination for African Americans.

To move beyond his own frequent rhetorical shafts, he established theories of stereotypes and caricatures to explain to his audience the ideological positions underlying representations of blackness. In part, Du Bois believed that stereotypes originated from humor that didn't make an essential claim about a group, but over time the repetition of laughter at a joke caused the subject of laughter to harden into fact. On the other hand, his argument was that the humor of stereotypes is not funny in the first place and should be replaced by other forms of humor that would combat stereotypes--in particular, modern humor and folk wit that demonstrate the intelligence of African Americans and already exist in folk culture. In pieces like "Smiles" from May 1917, Du Bois collected writings about humor and examples of humor to prove his point. "Smiles" starts with an article from *The Detroit Free Press* about stereotypes. The article makes the argument that humor about stereotypes is often taken as fact instead of its original intent as a playful generalization about a group of people. For this type of humor, the anonymous editor of the *Free Press* sounds an optimistic death knell or "chestnut bells" for the laughter of stereotypes, which offer nothing more than distortion over reality:

> It is time the chestnut bells were tolled for them on stage and platform, in print and in conversation. Take for instance those venerable stock jokes about the readiness of the Hebrew to sell things, of the Scotchman to save money and goods, of the Yankee to drive hard bar-gains, of the Englishman to be solemn, of the Frenchman to be flippant, and of the Negro to be improvident and thoughtless. These are all distortions of fact, carica-tures of virtues, and they give false im-pressions of races and individuals. They warp the judgment of hasty

thinkers and the prejudices of those who are too busy, too idle or too incompetent to think.[87]

The author follows these scathing comments by giving credence to stereotypes and describing how some stereotypes are actually aimed at the traits of a given group that are perceived as superior (for example, why is it bad that “Yankees” drive a hard bargain?), so why make a joke of it?[88] This, of course, is not a case for the harmful kind of stereotype that is associated in the editor’s example with African Americans. The article ends by focusing on this African American subject, who is the target of stereotypical humor. Yet, while defending the target of the joke and attempting to correct the “fact” of improvidence and thoughtlessness, the author, perhaps unwittingly reifies the stereotype, writing “the Negro in the United States is yearly becoming wiser, richer, and more of a contributor to world progress.” The article concludes by stating: “Can't the wits invent some new, really funny jokes?”

Du Bois follows this question with two examples of humor taken from *The Lexington* (KY) *Herald*. Both sketches represent African Americans without the presence of white people, and the jokes are Du Bois’ retort to the demand for “some new, really funny jokes.” If the humor that replaces stereotypes ought to thematize the notion that “the Negro...is yearly becoming wiser, richer, and more of a contributor to world progress,” the jokes from *The Lexington* (KY) *Herald* represent African American humor already rooted in wisdom that ironically laughs at stereotype of the ignorant Negro. Thus, Du Bois chooses examples of humor that reference the folk and mock the notion that black humor must confirm to the demands of progress. In the first instance, a black minister reached the climax of his sermon and proclaimed “I want only religious

people in my congregation," which was followed by a shout from a man in the back of the church who shouted "You are a liar! "All yo' want is money. You don't worry none about religion or nothin' else." The offender was arrested for disturbing religious worship and let go after agreeing to keep the peace for one year.[89] The second piece is more austere and precise. A group of women are waiting for a train that never comes on time. Eventually they leave and return and the train still has not come. One woman asks another if the train came while she was away. The second woman's response is the punchline of the joke:

> The colored woman was philosophical and sparing of words: "It's jes bound for to aint come," she said.[90]

Both examples demonstrate the kind of folks spirit that plays on ignorance with an underlying humor and wit. The punchline that the train's destination is to not come paired with the woman's heavy dialect performs ignorance and naivety while smiling at the laugher who would think her ignorant beneath the facade. The title of the piece, "Smiles," is an inside joke, offering its own, knowing smile, wink, and nod as to how the audiences of *The Crisis* should receive advice about what to do with stereotypical humor. While Du Bois railed against laughter, his "smiles," are amusing, if not laughable anecdotes resonant with his galling, bitter tone.

Articles like "Smiles" properly frame Du Bois' attacks on mainstream humor as attacks on the hackneyed objects of laughter. The danger he faced was that the constant invectives against laughter could be read by his opponents as a reactionary denial of laughter, undermining his progressive goal to defamiliarize the laughter directed at African Americans and to denaturalize their laughing response by way of

rhetorical and formal interventions. In a much later article called “The Humor of Negroes,” which was published in *Mark Twain Quarterly* in 1942, Du Bois similarly denaturalizes racialized laughter to an academic and largely white audience when he takes aim at the stereotypical misconception in the US that African Americans are naturally funny. As he writes, “one has only to see Africa to be cured of this. There is nothing more dignified nor serious than the African in his natural tribal relations.”[91] Situating African American laughter in the context of slavery in the US and the Caribbean and continued black oppression in the West, Du Bois describes how what whites perceive as constant laughter arises as a defense mechanism and a reaction to tragedy. Du Bois frames this as culturally conditioned by slavery, not an innate characteristic of race, and used for a variety of purposes, not the least of which is to navigate the constraints of white codes of public expression. Laughter for an older, wiser Du Bois is a socially acceptable means for taking and expressing pleasure in a world where gratification is denied by white society.[92] Yet, beneath the surface, the pleasure of laughter conceals “an undercurrent of resentment, of anger and vengeance which lies not far beneath the surface.” One way that African American humor works to transform resentment and anger is by intelligently criticizing whites who project superior authority. This form of laughter bitterly expresses insight with humor, parodying black stereotypes by laughing at whites and usually in a vernacular guise. The example Du Bois uses is a performance of feigned ignorance, where two black men are commenting on a famous politicians speech: “Who is dat man?” said one. The other looked on, without smiling: “I dunno, but he sutin’ly do recommen’ hisself mos’ high.”[93] This mocking example involves a play of serious ignorance, which the audience laughs at

because of its untruth, but which nevertheless plays on white stereotypes. However, the true source of bitterness is that laughter for African Americans must arise from the tragedy of their oppression, and he implies that this can't be remedied without ending oppression:

> to the oppressed and unfortunate, to those who suffer, God mercifully grants the divine gift of laughter. These folks are not all black or all white, but with inborn humor, men of all colors and races face the tragedy of life and make it endurable.[94]

Broadening from African American humor, Du Bois calls the humor of all oppressed people an "inborn humor," implying that it is somehow unnatural but related to their innate and uncontrollable way of being. The project of undoing this historical relation between oppression, tragedy, and laughter is Du Bois' goal.

In the struggle against the laughter of stereotypes, Du Bois' main focus was against caricature--that of blackface representations, illustrations, humorous songs, and the legacy of minstrelsy on African American culture and behavior. As "The Gall of Bitterness" and "The Philosophy of Mr. Dole" showed, Du Bois was intent on demonstrating to his audience that sympathetic laughter at the racist mocking of whites was antithetical to the cause of African American self-determination--it was better to lose white friends than to further degrade one's self to preserve the friendship. However, the problem was beyond what a mere column could fix.

The Laughter of Black Audiences

The laughter of black audiences at representations of blackness and the colorism within the African American community showed just how deep the problem went. In a 1920 editorial “In Black,” Du Bois chastises the response of the audience of *The Crisis* to representations of blackness as “*too* black.” He tells the story of a black audience in Chicago at an NAACP event, and the uncomfortable laughter that emerged at the mere mention of blackness. For Du Bois, this anecdote represents a broader aesthetic problem—the spontaneous laughing response to representations of blackness that is not spontaneous at all, but conditioned by the ideology of white supremacy:

> It was in Chicago. John Haynes Holmes was talking. He said: "I met two children —one as fair as the dawn—the other as beautiful as the night." Then he paused. He had to pause for the audience guffawed in wild merriment. Why? It was a colored audience. Many of them were black. Some black faces there were as beautiful as the night. Why did they laugh? Because the world had taught them to be ashamed of their color. Because for 500 years men had hated and despised and abused black folk. And now in strange, inexplicable transposition the rising blacks laugh at themselves in nervous, blatant, fur-tive merriment. They laugh because they think they are expected to laugh—because all their poor hunted lives they have heard "black" things laughed at.[95]

Recent scholarship has explored the patterns of reception of black audiences in the early twentieth century, a moment of growing popularity of black entertainment and an influx of black audiences due to the Great Migration.[96] This striking pattern of reception—the scripted anticipation of laughter at the mere mention of blackness, and the merry laughter that greets it—is even more peculiar given the speaker and the

occasion. Holmes, who Du Bois scarcely mentions, was one of the founding members of the NAACP in 1909, and a founding member of the newly-reformed ACLU, which was established again in 1920 after the first ACLU was dissolved as a result of the Palmer Raids. Given Holmes' position as a white abolitionist ally of African Americans, Du Bois' critique of the friendly laughter of the black audience is an implicit redux of "The Philosophy of Mr. Dole," reiterating the criticism that true allies of African American self-determination don't need laughter to remain comrades. But Du Bois' point is also that laughter at representations of blackness has been poisoned by whites—sweetened, as he wrote in "The Gall of Bitterness," to the point of being sickening.

Du Bois' goal in "In Black" is to reveal the source of the laughter at representations—even just the mention—of blackness, and to reconfigure blackness not as something laughable, but something beautiful *not* to be laughed at, but to be taken seriously. Du Bois' brief historical invective also recontextualizes "spontaneous" black laughter as a form of call-and-response that was constructed by the history of black oppression, de-naturalizing the relationship between laughter and the object of laughter. Du Bois saw this as "the pitifullest" of the pitiful race problems that African Americans faced, and a cultural barrier to self-determination because of the unconscious way that it inhabited people's behavior. Most importantly, Du Bois saw the phenomenon of African Americans laughing at blackness as inimical to people's ability to take themselves seriously as a political group or reaching their individual potential. Taking blackness seriously meant reckoning with reality instead of caricature and de-coupling blackness from white representations meant to further white supremacy. Du Bois preached this in the verbal register, teaching African Americans not to laugh at jokes at their expense,

but he also attempted to refashion the visual field, teaching his audience how to gaze at blackness without laughing.

Figure 2.2

In the same column “In Black,” Du Bois addresses the problem of visual caricature as an extension of the problem of black audience laughing at themselves. He describes the response of readers to the covers done by Frank Walts, which were criticized by the readership of *The Crisis* for being “*too* black.” Readers were responding to images like the cover of *The Crisis* from October 1919, which is an illustration of an African American girl drawn with bright white lines and skin and hair tones barely distinguishable from the black cover of the magazine. Other cover images drew laughter from the audience, including the photograph of a woman from St. Lucia, an exotic image

with the woman's hair wrapped up in a scarf and a patterned dress, and a broad smile. The result of the campaign to caricature African Americans resulted in the inability of African Americans to represent themselves as they really were—the familiar problem of colorism:

> If *The Crisis* puts a black face on its cover our 500,000 colored readers do not see the actual picture--they see the caricature that white folks intend when *they* make a black face.[97]

For Du Bois, images of blackness had been so layered with meaning by discourses of blackness engineered by whites that the actual images were too abstracted to be recognized as what they were. Du Bois also refers here to the problem of ownership of the image as being intertwined with the problem of seeing. Images of blackness produced by whites and intended to be caricature were assimilated as real representations—and black audience stopped being able to tell the difference between an image that is intentionally used to caricature and an image that is being used to uplift African Americans and validate their identities in the visual field. Du Bois's article provides a formal solution to the visual problem that he raises.[98]

As befitting the "Homes Number" of *The Crisis* in 1920, Du Bois uses the transition of blacks from one home to another to illustrate the transition from poverty to wealth, and along with it the symbolic association of blackness with denigrating laughter to something serious and imposing. Midway through "In Black," there is a page break, and in it two photographs of homes appear. The first home is labelled "The Old Cabin" and it shows a small house with a clothesline drawn from the house to a nearby tree, which imposes on the home; there is no yard, but brush surrounds the home, and other

“old cabins” are visible in the background of the photo. The next page is labelled “The New Mansion: Residence of J.W. Sanford, Memphis, Tenn,” and it shows an imposing, ornate southern gothic mansion with sharply pointed rafters and two visible chimneys. The owner of the mansion, Sanford was one of the founders of the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust, which at one point was thought to be the largest black-owned and operated bank in the world. Juxtaposed with “The Old Cabin,” his house is a representation of black progress, and it’s no accident that Du Bois inserts it in the middle of “In Black.” In the context of the article, the caricature of “The Old Cabin” is replaced by the reality of the mansion, pointing out the antiquated nature of the witless caricature of poverty. The comparison of “The Old Cabin” and “The New Mansion” transition Du Bois to the focal point of his argument, where he argues that African Americans aren’t actually ashamed of themselves but of the caricatures of themselves. Through a process of repetition as negation, the gaps between identity, representation, and misrepresentation are attenuated to the point of equation: “black *is* caricature.” But he acknowledges that the reality is different, and the visual recognition of blackness, especially in a white city, is evidence of how African Americans embrace blackness, especially in times of crisis. He urges his readers to accept this as the truth, and not the false caricature that blackness is funny, to unlearn disidentification with caricature and to learn to identify with new images of black success. Thus, he writes. “Off with these thought-chains and inchoate soul-shrinkings, and let us train ourselves to see beauty in black.” Notably, the issue following the publication of “In Black,” Du Bois returned to Frank Walts, who illustrated a modern and hyper-feminized line drawing of an African American woman, as if to reinforce the point that black is beautiful, and to answer

readers' criticism about their own identification with the cover image with a modern and idealized cover girl.[99]

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

Figure 2.5

While fighting harmful representations of African Americans and teaching black men and women to be bitter in the face of degrading caricatures, *The Crisis* was also not afraid to fight fire with fire, caricaturing racist whites and throwing the laugh back at them. These caricatures created a visual language to satirize and degrade the ideology of white supremacy, representing white supremacists as poor, backwards, uneducated, and willfully violent. They also illustrated the contradictions in American society that underlied white supremacy. Perhaps the most famous cartoonist from the early days of *The Crisis*, Lorenzo Harris' combinations of images and text gave the magazine a bitter, laughing retort to the caricatures of blackness propagated in popular magazines and entertainment. In an early cartoon from 1913 titled "American Logic," Harris depicted four men--two black, two white--paired up by race but representing different classes and implying different levels of education. The caption below the wealthy white and the poor white readers, "THIS MAN is not responsible for THIS MAN even if they do belong to the same race," while the caption below the wealthy African American and the poor African American reads, "THIS MAN is responsible for all THIS MAN does because they belong to the same race."[100] The cartoon deconstructs the "American Logic" that whites use to make generalizations based on race, which is in contrast to the blind spot of a racial logic to explain the behavior of their own race. The staging of the cartoon represents the wealthy white turning away as the poor white faces both black men simultaneously, underlining another dynamic--the attempts by poor whites to prevent African Americans from gaining wealth, with the wealthy whites represented as disinterested bystanders, and both black men, standing together. The simple

representation of the problem invites a smile, though by no means is the cartoon "funny."

One of Harris' most famous cartoons, "The Funny Page," makes a similar representation of the assault by poor whites on blacks. The cartoon depicts three grotesque white figures laughing at the open-book of the U.S. Constitution, which is turned to the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. One of the white men is labeled "LYNCH LAW" and the other is "DISCRIMINATION." While offering a fairly straightforward representation of the attitudes of poor whites towards the constitution and the laws which they claimed to love, Harris' cartoon is a lightly veiled commentary on the role of laughter in perpetuating racial violence, especially among poor whites. After all, the two figures are reading the constitution to a third figure and showing him how to laugh at civil rights. While some see cartoons like "The Funny Page" as a way to build agreement among readers of *The Crisis* that lynching must end, I see the mechanism for building this agreement as significantly more complicated.[101] Cartoons like Harris' were able to build this agreement by revealing the ways in which every day practices like laughter aided lynchers in their task of carrying out murders unaccountable to the law or the public. Harris' cartoons also encourage readers of the *Crisis* to read cartoons *critically*, offering up a bitter laugh and a critique of comics that perpetuate laughter at American foundations of law and culture like the constitution.

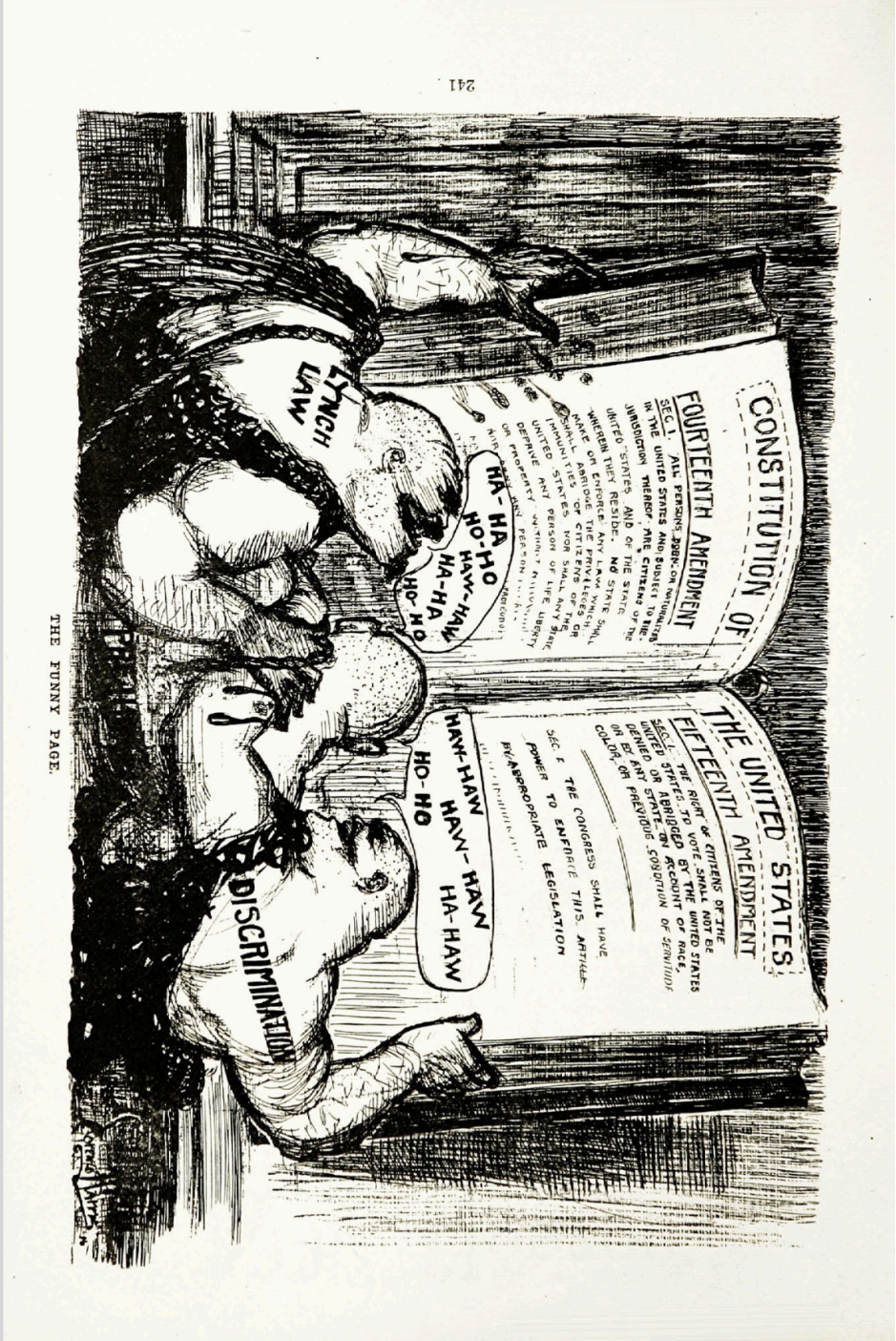


Figure 2.6

“American Logic” and “The Funny Page” are bitter representations of poor, racist whites, and their use of humor to attack African Americans. However, the editorial “Logic” that follows “American Logic” advances the critique that Harris’ visuals provide

and takes it further, tracing the links between racial prejudice, education, economic and voter disenfranchisement, racial hatred, and lynching, provocatively framing his argument thus: “the logical end of racial hatred is murder.”[102] The editorial provides insight on the relationship between the disinterested, wealthy white man and the poor white. Du Bois doesn’t spare rich white men, who he writes, support the behavior of the lynch mob:

> Race prejudice has often been professed by men of highest ideal and motive who would shrink at violence of any kind. But this is because such men are deliberately illogical, and their followers in the long run are not illogical, but carry their leaders' doctrine to the bitter end.[103]

So the wealthy or intellectual bearers of racial prejudice may not partake in violence themselves, but their politics trickle down to poor whites who perpetrate those crimes. For Du Bois, the illogic that underlies racial prejudice is not accidental but meant to deceive poor whites, whose actions are logical within that illogical schema that wealthy whites created. Rich and intellectual whites are directly involved in the production of racial violence, with murder being the end result. Du Bois shows that the true cause of white supremacy is the fear of economic competition and the transfer of money and property into the hands of African Americans. Du Bois makes this clear, showing in the accompanying chart the value of African American properties in Virginia, which rose 123% from 1900 to 1910. By linking racial prejudice to the accumulation of wealth, Du Bois reworks the caricature of wealthy whites, whose appearance and sympathetic affect would position them separate from racial violence to aligning them directly in the

production of racial prejudice, disenfranchisement, and ultimately death at the hands of the lynch mob.

Fighting representational fire with representational fire was one strategy, but there were also tragedies documented by *The Crisis* where black men and women could not withstand the mocking of whites, and their anger and resentment turned to violence. In “The Burning of Jim McIlheron: An NAACP Investigation,” Walter White, then the assistant secretary of the NAACP, went to Estill Springs to investigate a notorious lynching that the NAACP used to highlight the epidemic of burnings at the stake that happened in Tennessee in 1918 and to once again call on President Wilson to outlaw lynching. This article documented the story of the lynching and it implicitly warned of the dangers of losing one’s cool in the face of threats and actual violence--which was really a danger of being too bitter and refusing to laugh along with whites. In White’s report, there is a long section called “The Cause of the Trouble,” which anatomizes the situation leading up to McIlherron’s brutal murder. White finds that McIlheron and his family were hated and despised by the whites in the town because of their status as landowners and because the family “resented ‘slights’ and ‘insults.’” Framing this problem for the Northern audience, White describes the dynamic in the town that made McIlheron an outlier:

> [Sic] He was not what is termed “a good nigger,” which in certain portions of the South means a colored man or woman who is humble and submissive in the presence of white “superiors.”[104]

McIlherron’s resistance to white degradation made him a target for the whites of the town, but this made him a hero for *The Crisis*. The conflict that resulted in his lynching

arose because of McIlherron's refusal to play along with white supremacist pranks and mockery. McIlheron was the victim of a "rocking," which White explains was a pastime of youths in the town who would throw rocks at African Americans for fun. This is the prehistory of the lynching. One day, McIlheron was walking down one of the main streets of Estill and encountered the same men who rocked him, and the situation quickly becomes tense. The men make fun of McIlheron for eating candy, throwing laughter and insults at him. When one man gets up to go into the store, McIlheron believes he is preparing to fight, and he pulls out a pistol and kills two of the men and injures another. Later, when McIlheron is caught and brought back to the town for the lynching, White reports that 1500-2000 people flooded the small town from a 50 mile radius, some of whom "laughed and joked in anticipation of the event" and the unthinkable torture of McIlheron "to have some fun with the damned nigger before he died."[105] White's report attempts to combat the narrative by the white press of re-subjugating transgressive African Americans through lynching. Indeed, White challenges the narrative that McIlheron lost his defiant spirit that refused to laugh along with his oppressors, claiming that he never cringed or begged for mercy despite being tortured. As White writes:

> He was evidently able to deny the mob the satisfaction of seeing his nerve broken, although he lived for half an hour after the burning started.[106]

In this story, laughter and fun accompany each successive aspect of the lynching event. Laughter is the cause of the provocation against McIlheron, and his bitter rejection of racist laughter--his unwillingness to take the insults of whites--was what initiated the conflict. The lynching itself as it is related by White was something whites laughed at, a

fun spectacle of torture, grotesque defilement, disfiguration, and death. The narrative contest over the pleasure of the lynchers and whether or not the promise of pleasure was ultimately fulfilled by the submission of McIlheron is the final disturbing aspect of the lynching scene, and an avowedly political one. In representing McIlheron as defying torture and denying the lynchers pleasure, White's report turns McIlheron into a folk hero and a martyr for *The Crisis* in his response to white laughter with bitterness.

Laughing at Lynching in the Editorials of *The Crisis*

If part of Du Bois' rhetorical project was to undermine the stranglehold of white laughter on black laughs—from white supremacists and white abolitionists alike—he did this by daring to laugh at the thing sentimental white abolitionists could not: lynching. Starting in the first volume of *The Crisis*, Du Bois reacts to spectacles of lynching using the vocabulary of comedy, reworking the image of monstrous black bodies in the white narrative of lynching, a narrative whose raizon d'etre was to demonize racial difference and celebrate white supremacy. By bringing laughter into the spectacle of lynching, Du Bois shifts the affective terrain of the scene from earnest sentiment to grim humor, creating a new kind of reception of the lynching images for his audience. Laughter introduces an ironic element that infuses the lynching scene with bitterness, creating an intellectual vantage point for anti-lynching activism. This laughter also mocks the role of law in preventing lynching, satirizing calls from other abolitionists for the U.S. federal government to intervene.

The origins of this strategy for Du Bois actually may originate in the white press. In a March 1912 opinion piece called "The Terrorists," Du Bois collected and reprinted

parts of editorials from Southern white newspapers that condemned lynching. Opinion pieces like “The Terrorists” acted as a news summary for the evolving debates about the ethics and effects of lynching. They featured opinions from the North and South, from white and black papers, and through Du Bois’ editorial commentary, they exposed the political leanings of these periodicals and synthesized the discourse to form a kind of snapshot of the climate. Du Bois presented such snapshots largely without context, juxtaposed one to another, paragraph by paragraph, as a modernist collage of the news. Through curation and ordering, Du Bois formed his narrative, and the juxtaposition of different elements was often how he emphasized the absurdity of the debates themselves. These juxtapositions also created their own source of laughter. Du Bois starts “The Terrorists” with a piece from *The Galveston News* that characterizes lynching as a joke:

> Really, the record furnished by the Tribune, noting the number of people murdered and the number of exe-cutions, reads like a grim and scan-dalous joke...the record proves that we as a people do not mean what we say; that we do not stand for law and order at all.[107]

Where, for the anonymous author, the joke is initially the number of lynchings that they are confronted with, the most scandalous aspect of the joke turns out to be the law. Other collected pieces espouse a similar fear that the institutions of law and order are being undermined by extrajudicial lynchings and murders. Especially in the case of “the Harris county affair” where four African Americans, including one woman, were killed by a lynch mob while they were awaiting trial for the alleged murder of a farmer, the editor(s) of *The Atlanta Constitution* feared that such actions served to undermine the

courts in the Northern and foreign press, and that had they stood trial, "their guilt even reasonably established, legal execution would quickly have followed."[108] Among the four black men and women who were killed in Harrison county, the death of the young woman was particularly scandalous. As *The Wilmington Delaware News* put it, "it is no worse for a Negro to force his attentions upon a white girl than it is for a white man to force his attentions upon a Negro girl."[109] Yet another paper—*The New York Sun*—finds that it was precisely the perceived innocence of the victims of the lynching or the "Referendum in Western Georgia" that motivated the lynchers in the first place. As the editor(s) write:

> How much more piquant and enjoyable participation in such a referendum must be than in a stupid case, where the criminal is caught in the act and no demand made upon the imagination of the referees. How can the referees be induced to take part in the hemp referendum if it is not made attractive?[110]

The satirical blade of *The New York Sun* piece reframes the clippings from *The Galveston News* and *The Atlanta Constitution*. While those editors argued seriously that the legal execution was superior to lynching because it would preserve the image of law and order. *The Sun* reverses the logic of the white Southern press from the point of view of enjoyment. Ironically, it is the absence of "cold considerations of evidence" that make the lynching event possible because the imagination is a more sinister inventor than reality. Although it does not reveal itself to be serious, the joke that the lynching victims must be innocent to induce the angry mob to take action turns out not to be a joke at all, but a bitter observation framed through the vocabulary of comedy.

The “Terrorists” ends with a resolution from the Cosmopolitan Society of America to the Russian Government requesting their intervention in the U.S. on behalf of African Americans. The curiously-named Society was founded in Brooklyn by Mary White Ovington and came out of gatherings of high-born white philanthropists and abolitionists that took place in her family’s living room. As David Levering Lewis notes in his biography of Du Bois, the Society’s gatherings of wealthy white patrons and black activists were often the venue for confrontations about the direction of abolitionist politics and organizations like the NAACP.[111] This may have led Du Bois to frame the resolution for his readers as a joke, but one that ironically expressed the truth about life in the US, which included the spectacle of human beings burned at the stake. By framing it as a joke, Du Bois also mocks the prospect of the U.S. federal government intervening to aid its citizens and outlaw lynching:

> "And, whereas, the President of the United States has thus far declined to use, in any way, the influence and power of his great office to suppress this horrible practice of primitive barbarism and savagery: "Be it, therefore, resolved, that the Cosmopolitan Society of America peti-tion, and it hereby does petition, His Imperial Majesty, the Czar of Russia, the organizer of the Hague Peace Con-ference, to use his good offices with the government at Washington, to urge upon the President and the Congress the human necessity of discouraging and suppressing, if need be, by federal legislation, the burning of men, women and children at the stake.”[112]

This represented an ironic turn in strategy for *The Crisis* and other abolitionist periodicals from directly engaging the U.S. federal government with requests for aid to

framing petitions to the government as a joke. By humorously calling on the notoriously authoritarian, tsarist Russian government to help, Du Bois is able to bitterly show his readers the need for more leverage to force the U.S. to act.

By framing the serious as humorous and the humorous as serious, Du Bois attempted to accurately tell the truth without exaggeration or understatement. However the truth was often so absurd that an exaggerated narrative voice *was* an understatement. This paradox led Du Bois to use the vocabulary of comedy in his rhetorical attempts to make sense of the unthinkable, to "rationalize" it in a sense so that it was connected (or strategically disconnected) to appeals for political action. In a 1913 column called "Lynching," for example, Du Bois introduces his news summary by proclaiming that "lynching has gotten to the joke stage," describing an article from *The New York Sun* about a lynching in South Carolina as a "laugh." The article satirically describes the gathering of a lynch mob outside of a Spartanburg jail with mock-heroic bravado, "a gathering of brave and spirited 'Anglo-Saxons' out for a social evening. A lynching bee; going to 'hang the Nigger.'"[113] At hearing the mob approach the jail, the county sheriff telegraphs the Governor of South Carolina, who returns the message with a "little jest"--that the trial of the black man accused of assaulting a white woman would be rushed to avoid the lynching. The mob smashes the gate and tosses dynamite over the prison wall, but the Sheriff steps into the open yard with a shotgun and confront the unexpecting lynchers:

> Sheriff White (by the way, he has a wife and a couple of sick children in the jail) steps forward into the place where the gate was. He has a gun; likewise a certain quiet resolution; speaks a little piece: " 'Gentlemen, I hate to do it, but so help me

> God I am going to kill the first man that enters.' "Nobody in that press of heroes cared to be that first man. 'He means it, boys,' said somebody in the crowd. He did mean it. Nobody dared to come in. The crowd wilted.[114]

The Sun's editor(s) proceeds to describe the outcome of the night--the black man saved from lynching before his inevitable execution by the State, the triumphant sheriff who will lose his next election because he confronts the mob--and offers this mock-heroic praise of the event: "Honor, beyond the breath of mobs or the votes of cowards, to that man of un-shaken physical and moral courage!"

That the editorial celebrates the white sheriff is absurd, and self-consciously so; but the question is whether Du Bois supported this fun and whether he thought it advanced the cause. The final news story in the column was more sober because it has a scapegoat--South Carolina Governor Coleman Blease. The story describes a lynching and how the following day evidence came to light that exonerated the lynching's victim. The author turns the blame for this to the Governor for validating mob justice against blacks. Du Bois' approval for this story seems to be based on the connection between the sober tone and the political attack. Unlike the story about Blease, *The Sun's* "laugh" is at the absurdity of the actors in the situation and the "victory" of the rule of law, which will claim its victim in spite of the sheriff's intervention. This issue of *The Crisis* ends with an "Afterthought" on the issue--the Children's Number--that realigns laughter with a sincere tone. As Du Bois writes: "Wherefore let us stand in the sunlight and raise our faces to the blue sky. and in the midst of affliction and oppression thank God for light and air and laughter and little children." The Children's Number was the precursor to *Brownies' Book*, and according to Du Bois it was the most popular issue of the year.[115]

The juxtaposition of *The Sun's* "laugh" and the innocent laughter of children points towards Du Bois' ultimate interest in shedding his bitter ironic tone, and it signals to his readers that his tone is not bitterness for bitterness' sake, but in the service of ending lynching and creating a better future for children, which he represents metaphorically through laughter.

Another bitter subject for *The Crisis* was white humor, which Du Bois often reprinted in the magazine's "Opinion" section. In one "Opinion" column from 1914 titled "Is the South Awakening?", *The Crisis* printed evidence of editors of Southern white papers grappling with the racism, segregation, and the problem of the color line. Du Bois qualified these observations by writing, "*The Crisis* is not among those who greet every manifestation of ordinary decency on the part of a Southerner as a foreshadowing of the millennia," but nevertheless he embraced the prospect of the South coming to terms with its racist past, writing "we are glad and eager to note every sign of the weakening of Southern provincialism and narrowness."[116] But after cataloguing several columns expressing the "weakening of Southern provincialism," he concludes the exploration of Southern awakening by analyzing two bits of Southern humor, for as he writes, "joy, like grief, reveals the man."[117] The first is an editorial in *The Greensboro Everything* about a black man who bought a house in a white part of Greensboro. As the story unfolds, the editor(s) joke that the whites would not let the black man move in, and that the matter will be settled amicably. Why? Because blacks and whites can't mix, and if they do, the editor(s) put this mixture in a humorous way: "The whites are always willing to treat the colored brother right—but if he tries to butt in in any way he is going to be made to butt out either legally or illegally."[118] The racist joke returns to the idea

that the law is inadequate to uphold the color line and the punchline is essentially *segregation or lynching*.

Another bit of humor from the *Taylor Journal* describes the response of a white farmer who advanced a black worker money in return for working on his farm and picking cotton at a later time. The editorial describes how the worker left without repaying the farmer, and when the white man finds him in town this "makes the axhandle in Mr. Schulenberg's hand very mad." The zany, minstrelesque scene of the axhandle gaining a mind of its own and pulling Mr. Schulenberg along rhetorically situates the white farmer above or outside of the scene of violence and equates the farmer with the tools that he works on, or which in this scene violently work on him:

> "The Negro ran up the street and the axe handle, accompanied by Mr. Schulenberg, ran after him and interested the Negro greatly. Don't know what the officers did about it, but guess they put the Negro to work on the rock pile and rewarded the axe handle."[119]

The end of the piece of course brings in the law and shows the black man's punishment and axhandle's rhetorical reward, demonstrating the cooperation of extrajudicial measures and the law. Both humorous pieces are entered at the end of the column without commentary from Du Bois save for "joy, like grief, reveals the man," but their presence reworks the entire tone of the column. Where the early excerpts evince an emotional and intellectual sympathy for African Americans by whites, the humorous anecdotes reveal the reactionary "truth" for Du Bois that is not expressed except through humor. In this way, Du Bois unpacks the logic of representation, showing that supposedly sincere commentaries are simply masks for shielding the underlying white

supremacist ideologies and actions that the local papers elsewhere document. In this sense, it is not surprising that Du Bois mirrors this logic of representation in his work, often calling on ironic laughter and not the sincere representation of truth in order to depict the horrors of lynching. The message to readers from his collage of *The Taylor Journal* is in spite of the appearance of decency, without a change to Southern white humor there is no awakening for the South.

Humorous barbs in white newspapers were often used to support the continuation of white supremacy, but in “The Burden,” white humor takes a more cautionary tone. Every addition of “The Burden” begins with a tally of the number of African Americans lynched without trial, a statistic that starts to be tracked in 1885. Given its proximity to the death toll, humorous pieces in this section take on a bitter flavor and must be read in the shadow of the growing lynching tally. In one column from the 1914 Christmas issue, Du Bois reprints a bit of racist white humor taken from Omaha republicans targeting black voters and black candidates. In the dossier of candidates that the party sent to voters, a picture was not included for J. W. Long, the only black candidate on the ballot. The implication is that this clearly disadvantages black voters because they are unable to recognize a candidate of the same skin color who might represent their interests. Adding insult to injury but revealing the color of the candidate, the county chairman printed this response to the criticism that he received for this omission, published in the *Omaha World-Herald*: “Oh, Long couldn’t take time to have his picture taken [sic], he’s very busy as a porter on the Burlington and couldn’t get to do it.”[120] In this joke, white humor acknowledges the omission while making the black

candidate the butt of the joke, and in so doing performs the work of disenfranchisement in another, more socially acceptable way.

A month later in January 1915, “The Burden” included a column called “Mississippigrams.” The column collected stories of an anonymous African American traveler in Mississippi and chronicled the ever present dangers that he faced while moving through the South. In one gram called “At Greenwood, Miss,” the traveler related a story of going to the post office to pick up the mail. When answering the woman at the counter without saying “ma’am,” he gets chastised and threatened by multiple people. When he recounts this as a joke to his hosts at his roadside inn, they become grave and respond by advising him to leave while he still can:

> “You may congratulate yourself that there was only one white man who heard you. Don't you go to that post office any more, but you get out of this town as soon as pos-sible," said the man of the house, "for a mob may come after you at any moment."

What begins as a grim laugh at the state of white supremacy for the traveler quickly turns serious, and it points to the disjunction between the Northerner’s experiences and the racism he encounters in Mississippi. The column ends with the traveler reckoning with these experiences and what he hears from other African Americans who live in Mississippi, who ask him not to relate the stories because it will only make conditions worse for them. The logic of representations in this sense depends on the location of the teller: truth may be a successful strategy for achieving the desired goal in some places but not others. The very end of the column is an acknowledgement that he didn’t find *The Crisis* on any newsstand he visited. Like “Of the Coming of John,” the column

relates the experience of going from the North to the South and the bitterness that attends it.

"Laughing It Out": Laughter and Self-Determination in *The Crisis*

Despite the ironic use of laughter to manufacture a bitter tone and create a bitter feeling for his audience, Du Bois also used laughter as a way to represent the most sincere ideas that filled the pages of *The Crisis*. Indeed, laughter provided a vision for Du Bois' magazine beyond the violent laughter that he represented in the mouths of racist whites and the bitter laughter that he taught African Americans to use to fight back. Starting in the earliest issues, he frequently uses laughter in conjunction with values like joy and purity to describe the affirmative political program of *The Crisis*. In the invitation to the "Short Story Competition" from the August 1912 issue, Du Bois describes the three types of story submissions that he has received from readers. The first was Didactic stories, which he dismisses, writing "nearly all have been hurt artistically by the always present desire to instruct the reader."[121] The second, Old-timey "darky" stories, bear the mark of stereotypical white humor, which Du Bois rejected in a friendly way, writing "we want humorous tales, but we would like them in a little less threadbare clothes." Finally, he remarks on the character sketches he received, which he favors for presenting a new viewpoint and their ability to interpret human life. But by the end of this curious taxonomy of reader production, he turns out an axiom for stories that centers joyful laughter in conjunction with the truthful representation of reality: "We hope that our readers will send us other stories. We want the good plots well worked out; we want merriment and laughter; we want pictures of the real colored America."[122]

Du Bois' first call for entries for his Short Story Competition bears the same marks of later calls, which offered incentives for black cultural production, which he saw within his and the NAACP's larger strategy to eradicate racism through culture. This description offers a unique vantage on Du Bois' early thinking about what this production ought to look like, and it resonates with the magazine's aesthetic mission to offer wholesome representations of black culture and black life in contrast to the degradation and violence perpetrated against African Americans by whites. Core to this mission was to represent "merriment and laughter" not separate from but as a core aspect of "the real colored America." Du Bois situated sincere laughter as one goal of African American aesthetic production.

The goal of representing the "merriment and laughter" that existed in black culture meant a different kind of representation, which unlike the ironic commentary that *The Crisis* so often provided on political issues, could stand up to irony, reject bitterness, and create sincere representations resulting in sincere actions. In the first issue of 1913, the Emancipation number, Du Bois composed a brief covenant which he called "Philosophy of 1913." In it, he describes his identity and how it was created vis-a-vis the law, writing, "I am by birth and law a free black American citizen." Next he describes his "rights and duties" as a citizen, which have a reciprocal relationship--"if I neglect my duties my rights are always in danger. If I do not maintain my rights I cannot perform my duties." The mutually-reinforcing relationship between rights and duties leads Du Bois to forcefully reject racism and discrimination but frame this rejection around the necessity of his "duty" to maintain those rights as a citizen. He frames acting on rights such as voting, claiming public spaces, and socializing with others, as

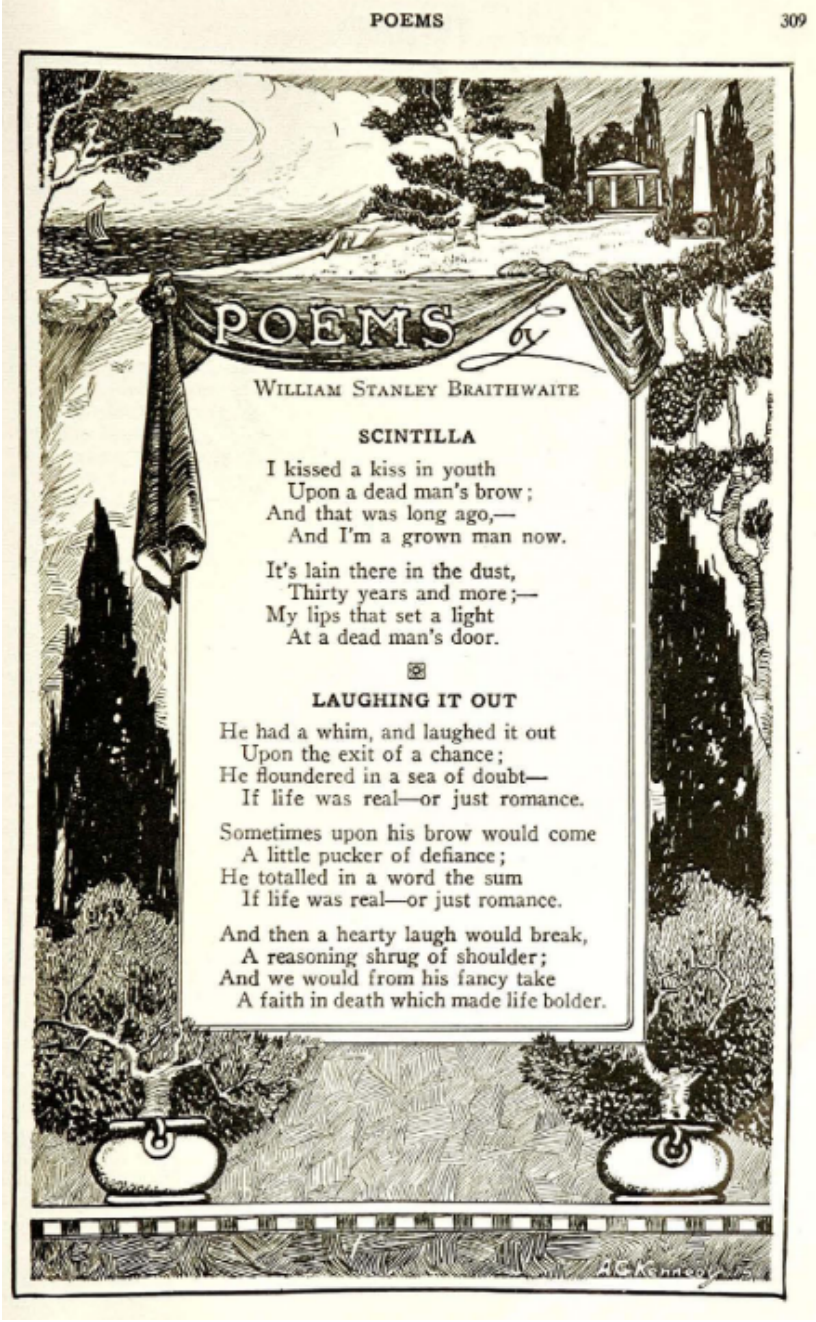
necessary to their continuation and the furtherance of those duties that will lead to expanded rights. But in recognizing the mental strain of doing this, Du Bois describes the elements that nourish him and allow him to wage those difficult but necessary battles to assert his rights. Invoking a series of pleasures and purities, he centers laughter as an affective component of this struggle for self-determination:

> While thus fighting for Right and, Justice, I will keep my soul clean and serene. I will not permit cruel and persistent persecution to deprive me of the luxury of friends, the enjoyment of laughter, the beauty of sunsets, or the inspiration of a well-written word. Without bitterness (but also without lies), without useless recrimination (but also without cowardly acquiescence), without unnecessary heartache (but with no self-deception), I will walk my way, with uplifted head and level eyes, respecting myself too much to endure without protest studied disrespect from others, and steadily refusing to assent to the silly exaltation of a mere tint of skin or curl of hair.[123]

Framed now as the antithesis of racism, laughter joins with other symbols of social and aesthetic value both as the thing needed to fight racism and as an essential good that African Americans must protect. The tense of this covenant echoes the future orientation of laughter, stretching it from a thing present to an object on the horizon. While the passage is oriented towards the future tense, it is not a subjunctive clause because the enjoyment of laughter is an imperative fact. The mixture of future and imperative tenses creates the sense that *things that will happen have already happened*, giving laughter a preternatural power to prefigure the future or perhaps to foreshorten its coming. As he goes on to describe, sincere laughter, like the other

elements of value he lists, is “without bitterness (but also without lies).” This reframes his aesthetic theory of bitterness as a temporally static and a strategic responsive to injustice. Bitterness is not future-looking, but an affective tool to convey information with accuracy and to produce a response to news in his readers. Du Bois contrasts bitterness with the dignified and sincere laughter of his ethos—“I will walk my way, with uplifted head and level eyes, respecting myself too much to endure without protest studied disrespect from others.” And here, too, Du Bois uses the vocabulary of comedy to disparage the “the silly exaltation of a mere tint of skin or curl of hair,” revealing laughter to be part of the ethos of serenity that he resolves to cultivate, which he uses to parry discriminatory attitudes.

The relationship between sincere laughter and the ethos that Du Bois lays out in “Philosophy of 1913”—a future-oriented laughter that fuels the struggle for political self-determination—is the subject of numerous poems in *The Crisis*, which Du Bois solicited from renowned to relatively anonymous contributors. “Laughing It Out” by William Stanley Braithwaite was published in April 1915 and deals with the ability of laughter to work with this ethos and create a rational mindset, both for the subject of the poem who is laughing and for the audience reading it. Braithwaite’s poem is part romantic, part didactic, and aims to give the reader an expansive sense of the possibilities of life beyond the everyday, reframing the political tasks of the everyday with renewed urgency. The poem reads:



POEMS 309

POEMS by

WILLIAM STANLEY BRAITHWAITE

SCINTILLA

I kissed a kiss in youth
Upon a dead man's brow;
And that was long ago,—
And I'm a grown man now.

It's lain there in the dust,
Thirty years and more;—
My lips that set a light
At a dead man's door.

LAUGHING IT OUT

He had a whim, and laughed it out
Upon the exit of a chance;
He floundered in a sea of doubt—
If life was real—or just romance.

Sometimes upon his brow would come
A little pucker of defiance;
He totalled in a word the sum
If life was real—or just romance.

And then a hearty laugh would break,
A reasoning shrug of shoulder;
And we would from his fancy take
A faith in death which made life bolder.

Figure 2.7

The short metaphysical lyric echoes Braithwaite's quasi-modernist, quasi-realistic poetics, which he describes in *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1914*, which the February 1915 issue of *The Crisis* published. Countering what he sees as the problem with modern poetry--that it has no relation to life--Braithwaite's verse uses a traditional

structure of address to create a symbolist atmosphere of heightened feeling, which it brings down to Earth in the poem's conclusion. The poem begins by sounding out the enigmatic relationship between laughter and feeling, which consists of a spontaneous, everyday response to a drawn out period of reflection on the nature of reality--"if life was real or just romance." This is the poetic idea that Braithwaite expresses, too, and the line could easily be rewritten to read: "if *poetry* was real or just romance." To arrive at the unsatisfying answer, the subject must swim through a sea of doubt that is ultimately broken by the laugh again and "a reasoning shrug of shoulder," a combination of utterance and gesture that draws the metaphysical doubt and the intellectual questioning of the subject into relief against the backdrop of life. Furthermore, the poem may be said to exist on a kind of juxtaposed continuum with the prior poem on the page: the repetition of the word "brow" in the second poem reminds the reader of the intimate contact with death, "the kiss."

But true to his poetics, Braithwaite's urging to the reader is for the philosophical and cosmic contemplation of his subject to give us "a faith in death which made life bolder." "Laughing It Out" was published in April 1915, curiously preceding Wallace Stevens' iconic line "Death is the mother of beauty" which appeared seven months later in the first publication of "Sunday Morning" in November 1915. In "Laughing It Out," laughter is aligned with emboldening the poem's subject and the reader to act as a response to the certainty of death. For Braithwaite, as for Du Bois, "laughing it out" helps to create the serene and sincere ethos devoid of bitterness that Du Bois modeled for his readers and encouraged them to cultivate. "Laughing It Out" appears in the April 1915 issue of *The Crisis* directly ahead of Du Bois' "The Immediate Program of the

American Negro," which begins where Braithwaite's poem left off in contemplating the lofty potential of the black subject: "The immediate program of the American Negro means nothing unless it is mediate to his great ideal and the ultimate ends of his development."[124] In this way, Braithwaite's poem and the contemplating subject that it represents serves as a kind of aesthetic-moral justification for Du Bois' more elaborately theorized and recognizably "political" agenda.

Another poem, 1917's "Laughing In and Out," approaches the depiction of reality with the themes and poetic rhythms of the blues, the vernacular style that would become more widely disseminated and recognizable during the 1920's thanks to Langston Hughes and others. Written by a little-known poet, Edward Ide, "Laughing In and Out" is an aesthetic theory of the blues mantra "laughing to keep from crying" and how this form of emotional/performative expression works on audiences. The poem also represents the degradation of African Americans across classes, but shows them reacting ironically, "laughing in and out of life," as opposed to Braithwaite's subject who laughs out his own intellectual and existential curiosity. The poem begins by contrasting "the Moaning, Mourning," who the public pass on the street with "a hard and heartless scorning" to the "limber-hearted laugh" that makes people "pause to listen, smile."[125] Unlike Braithwaite's laughter that imbues the laugher with reason, Ide's laughter is agnostic to reason--"laughing in and out of season/ laughing with or without reason"--and omnipresent--"well or ill--laugh they will!" It also develops a more curious spectator dynamic, which differs from the simple moralism that the spectators in Braithwaite's poem glean from his laughing subject. In Ide's poem, the laughers laugh, and at the same time the audience experiences a series of emotions that position the laugher as

inferior: “while we wonder, while we thrill/ At an innocence as novel/ As in children.” Later in the poem with laughter’s incessant repetition, this laughter of childlike innocence changes to a laugh that “seems with utter treason/ To the conscience.” At the end, the poem ironically emphasizes the ongoing march of progress in spite of oppressive conditions:

> Yet they meet unequal strife,
> Laughing in and out of life.
> Come what may of their day,
> They are witty, they are gay--
> To the drum and the fife
> Go on marching![126]

The realism of Ide’s poem is markedly different from Braithwaite. Where Braithwaite’s poem blends romanticism with a modern poetic sensibility, the narrative is about the experience of laughter disrupting thought, and it represents this narrative without irony. For Ide, however, the poem is about the ironic expression of bad feelings through laughter and the ethical position of the audience in relation to the laughter of the other. As the poem progresses and the laughter continues, the audience’s position becomes more untenable, from stopping to hear a laugher to gawking at the childlike innocence of the laugher to feeling the painful sting on one’s conscience of observing the spectacle of painful laughter until finally the audience is absent in the final stanza and the reader is left simply with the image of the march. Here laughter and bitterness merge in the struggle for self-determination and the laugh becomes the music of the fife--keeping the same hard “ff” sound but doubling it up--that keeps the time for the march. The

substitution of the laugh for the fife offers a final ironic inversion: while the audience has been gaining sympathy of the laughers, the laughers have grown more resolute, and the laughter has been keeping time in a military march right beneath the audience's consciousness.

Conclusion: "A glory, a blunder, a joke, and a crucifixion": Laughter and the War Effort

As the 1910s waned and the Great War intensified, the struggle for African American self-determination took an unexpected turn towards the war effort and the political advantages of conscription for black Americans. In perhaps his most controversial editorial during the early years of *The Crisis*, Du Bois heralds this strategy in "Close Ranks," which appeared in *The Crisis* in July 1918. "Close Ranks" called on African Americans to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks," making the case that the struggle for self-determination would no longer be possible in a world dominated by German power.[127] The more pragmatic and personal concern for Du Bois may have been trading his power to get African Americans involved in the war effort for a position as a captain in the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Branch, though he was ultimately denied the position because of his reputation as an agitator.[128] Along with Du Bois' new enthusiasm for the war, *The Crisis* also shifted its use of laughter, summoning laughter to propagandize the war effort. However, the pivot to embracing the war was not as abrupt as it seemed. As Mark van Wienen argues, Du Bois and his cohort including William Stanley Braithwaite had long since embraced the figure of the black soldier as a way to construct "an ideal of masculine heroism and martyrdom that

articulated a patriotic American identity masking racial difference."[129] This identity was created using the vocabulary of comedy as a way to ironically describe the impossible bind of black soldiers caught between a country that did not recognize their humanity and a series of intractable military conflicts and wars where the only certainty seemed certain death.

In "Carrizal," an editorial from August 1916, Du Bois describes the cosmic joke-like structure of the scenario of the Punitive Expedition for blacks. In June 1916, what later became known as the Punitive Expedition began as Wilson's campaign to punish Pancho Villa and his band of Mexican guerillas for exploiting the U.S. border with Mexico, and later became a scandalous international conflict that led the two countries to the brink of war. When General John J. Pershing, who was in charge of the expedition, received intelligence that Villa was in the Carrizal, he sent a detachment of black soldiers from the U.S. Army's 10th Cavalry to march into the city. Instead of meeting Villa's forces, the 10th met Carrancista forces who were at war with Villa's guerillas but nonetheless opposed the incursion of U.S. troops into Mexico. A bloody battle ensued with 10 black soldiers--including the Cavalry Captain Charles T. Boyd--killed on the U.S. side and 24 soldiers captured by the Mexicans. The news about the slaughter of black soldiers brought a mixed response from *The Crisis*, which decried the tragic and senseless deaths but attempted to capitalize on the positive press for African Americans to further its anti-lynching campaign. This contradictory dynamic, which the editorial called "a glory and a blunder, a joke and a crucifixion," bitterly characterized the bind of the soldiers who were faced with a country that lynched and murdered them and sent them on a fool's errand in the Punitive Expedition. Du Bois used the vocabulary of

comedy to describe this bind because it provided him with a symbolic language to represent the contradictory feelings of black soldiers.

> Laugh? Why shouldn't they laugh at simple death and grim duty? Have they not faced harsher and more horrible things? "Jim Crow" cars, helpless disenfranchisement and organized in-sult? Why should they not laugh at death for a country which honors them dying and kicks and buffets them living? God laughed. It was a Joke.[130]

Du Bois' ironic editorial represents death as a simple and superior choice compared to the discrimination that the soldiers experience as African Americans. At one level, the laughter of the soldiers was a representation of the ease of death compared to the difficulty of living in America. Coming just one month after a special supplement called "The Waco Horror" about the lynching of a black boy in Texas, the irony of black soldiers dying to defend their country from the incursion of guerillas of color into *Texas* was not lost on Du Bois (or presumably his audience). The laughter of God is an ironic and merciful laughter at the impossibly paradoxical positions and conditions that African Americans faced. Laughter expressed this contradiction and the relief of black soldiers at dying for their country in a foreign land instead of being lynched by other American citizens within the country's borders.

Figure 2.8

Du Bois also used laughter because the emotions of the soldiers in the Battle of Carrizal was represented by laughter in the broader press. In the “Looking Glass” section from the same issue, Du Bois collects press clippings from other papers about the black soldiers from The Battle of Carrizal. While some of the editorials he finds would offer up black soldiers as “unskilled labor” to be sacrificed in war, most of the editorials praise the black soldiers as heroes, like this one from *The Boston Traveller*:

> “The graphic story of this one-sided fight, brought back to us by one of its few sur-vivors, Capt. Morey, will become one of our patriotic classics. Schoolboys of coming generations will read how the troopers faced certain death with smiles on their lips; that they joked with one another, and burst into song as they fought their last fight against overwhelming odds.”[131]

The smiles and jokes of the soldiers becomes a symbol of patriotic martyrdom, writing the black soldiers into the history of American Imperialism alongside white imperial

leaders. What's more, as the photo of The Survivors of Carrizal shows, the black soldiers of the 10th Cavalry were laughing at death, or rather laughing after surviving their encounter with death.

Explaining the laughter of the soldiers offered Du Bois an opportunity to inject his own reading of laughter into the broader discourses about the laughter of the soldiers, and to explain their laughter in relationship to politics, rewriting the stereotype of laughing African Americans with a more complicated picture of emotion. Indeed, *The Crisis* capitalized on the political opportunity to compare the death of the black soldiers in Mexico to the deaths of lynched blacks in the U.S., drafting two editorials in response to the slaughter at The Battle of Carrizal—the first, a reprint of the U.S. Secretary of State's letter to the Mexican government urging them to take action against Pancho Villa and his band of murderers, and the second, a fictional letter from Wilson to the Governor of Georgia, urging him to take action against white supremacists and their band of murderers.

The second—fictional—letter adopts the mode of satire rather than eulogy, political incitement, or encomium, laughing bitterly at the strong rhetoric that Wilson could take against a country led by people of color, but could not take against his own white guerillas because he needed their votes. Ultimately, the editorials about black soldiers provide a sympathetic portrait of their involvement in the battle--even from Southern white papers—convincing Du Bois that despite the contradictions black soldiers experienced, that fighting was a net positive for the cause. Du Bois's editorial is thus a bitter rewriting of those emotions, which honored the soldiers by describing the

meaning of their laughter, and in doing so, used laughter to describe the political problem at the core of the conflict for black soldiers.

Descriptions of black soldiers as cheerful and good-humored recurred throughout World War I and were featured in *The Crisis* as a way to glorify African American soldiers and communicate that enlisting and demonstrating this humor was a strategy for advancing the cause. For example, this clipping form *The Brooklyn Standard Union* that Du Bois included makes explicit reference to the good-humor and laughter of black soldiers and connects it to their inclusion within the American nation:

> Of the American Negro soldiers it has been frequently said since we have been fighting in France, that they are decidedly the most cheerful troops who have spilt blood in this war, and as highly courageous as any who have shouldered guns ... . Under his smile and ready laugh or grin, the colored man has the qualities of the fighter—cool-ness, patience, steadfastness, optimism, pluck and, of course, courage. All these have been brought out in recent months, and honors have fallen upon him in France, in a manner that is cause for national pride.[132]

The editorial turned the laughter of African American soldiers into "cause for national pride," a sentiment that Du Bois undoubtedly echoed for the political opportunities that it offered. But not without irony, the editorial appeared in the same issue as a column called "The Silly South," which lamented the continued disenfranchisement of black voters in the South. That column described the reaction of African Americans to a particularly fierce denunciation of voter rights by New Orleans politicians at the same time black soldiers were being shipped off and killed abroad. Du Bois' reaction runs the gamut of negative emotions, but echoing the laughter of God metaphor at the ironies of

the slaughter at Carrizal, he describes the emotional expression of this weighty irony as "inextinguishable laughter": "The reader cannot help feeling disgust, surprise, anger, and above all, an impulse to 'inextinguish-able laughter.' If this speech is represen-tative, then the South lacks both logic and humor. Democracy anywhere, every-where, but none in the United States."[133] On one hand, laughter was useful to African Americans for aligning them with patriotism and national pride; on the other, it was a reaction to extreme disenfranchisement and to the extreme contradiction of being both a source of national pride by some and shunned and oppressed by others.

The rosy view of African American participation in the war effort quickly turned sour when black troops returned home from the European theater, and by the "red summer" of 1919, the prospects for an end to the lynching epidemic looked worse than ever. In nostalgic editorials published after the war, black soldiers lamented their return to the U.S. and looked back fondly on their time fighting abroad. These editorials represent laughter as an uncomfortable reaction of Europeans to the stories of racism in the U.S. and a dream-like form of interracial collectivity that was absent upon their return. One soldier's account sums up the feeling:

> MY God! For what am I thankful this night? For nothing. For nothing but the most commonplace of commonplaces; a table of gentlewom-en and gentlemen — soft-spoken, sweet-tempered, full of human sym-pathy, who made me, a stranger, one of them. Ours was a fellowship of common books, common knowledge, mighty aims. We could laugh and joke and think as friends—and the Thing—the hateful, murderous, dirty Thing which in America we call "Nig-ger-hatred" was not only not there— it could not even be understood. It was a curious monstrosity at

> which civilized folk laughed or looked puz-zled. There was no elegant and elab-orate condescension of—-"We once had a colored servant"—"My father was an Abolitionist"—"I've always been interested in your people"— there was only the community of kin-dred souls, the delicate reference for the Thought that led, the quick defer-ence to the guests you left in quiet regret, knowing they were not dis-cussing you behind your back with lies and license. God! It was simply human decency and I had to be thankful for it because I am an Amer-ican Negro and white America, with saving exceptions, is cruel to every-thing that has black blood—and this was Paris, in the year of salvation, 1919. Fellow blacks, we must join the democracy of Europe.[134]

The evolution of laughter from a bitter fruit of oppression to a beacon on the horizon of political self-determination to its status as a symbol of integration and equality during the war demonstrates the rhetorical flexibility of laughter and shows how Du Bois' thinking about African American laughter and politics evolved in relationship to one another. The idea of closing ranks necessitated a way to talk about the cooperation of races in the war effort and a formal concept for a symbolic resolution of the conflict between whites and blacks. Du Bois boldly trumpeted the laughter of black soldiers, which he saw as a source of bravado and sympathy that appealed to white Americans. For a brief moment, laughter was freed of its bitter implications to encourage his readers to join the war, embracing a conservative strand of African American nationalist sentiment. But ultimately, as the failure of the war for African Americans became a fact in the black press, so the possibility of laughing together with other white Americans disappeared. Du Bois and other black writers entered the 1920's fighting an intensified epidemic of

lynching and with no concept of how to use either laughter or tears to bridge the gargantuan divide between the races.

The Ticklish Feeling of Passing

"Three colored novelists have recently essayed this intriguing and ticklish subject of a person's right to conceal the fact that he had a grandparent of Negro descent. It is all a petty, silly matter of no real importance which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty. But today, and in the minds of most white Americans, it is a matter of tremendous moral import. One may deceive as to killing, stealing, or adultery, but you must tell your friend that you're 'colored', or suffer a very material hell fire in this world, if not in the next. The reason of all this, is of course that so many white people in America either know or fear they have Negro blood."[135]

"To tickle is, above all, to seduce, often by amusement."[136]

Introduction: "It's funny about passing"

In a period of US history when segregation was legal and crossing over the color line was a moral transgression punishable by state sanctioned violence and the threat of death, what did it feel like to pass?[137] According to Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, it might have felt funny. Larsen's novel stages the encounters between two women living on opposite sides of the color line and represents the "funny" feelings that they have for each other and about the idea of passing. Larsen's protagonist, Irene Redfield, is a "race woman" living in Harlem in the late 1920's.[138] When Irene returns from a trip to Chicago, she confides in her husband Brian about a chance encounter she had with her childhood friend and former acquaintance, Clare Kendry. Irene recounts to Brian her scandalous discovery that Clare is permanently passing as white, but what

begins as a story about Clare evolves into a curious pronouncement of Irene's feelings about passing:

> [Irene] said: 'it's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.'[139]

The theatrical form of Irene's lines resembles a soliloquy as she delivers a conspicuously staged pronouncement, which appears to express not just her own opinion but a broader sense of the confusion that African Americans felt about the relationship between racial identity politics and passing. "Funny" captures Irene's ambivalent feelings about passing, and for a single word it does a lot of work. Funny blends amusement with uneasiness, attraction with repulsion, and identification with disidentification, and it implies that those feelings could be humorous or serious depending on the nature of the situation.[140] As a broader pronouncement, Irene's feelings about passing stage a problem for the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance: why does Irene condone passing, and what are the political stakes of this "funny" feeling?

In his 1929 review of *Passing* for *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois may have inadvertently provided the answer when he described passing as "an intriguing and ticklish subject," making a metaphorical linkage between political debates on both sides of the color line and the notoriously ambivalent expression of laughter in tickling.[141] Du Bois' review surveyed *Passing* and two other novels of the passing genre, *Plum Bun* by Jesse Redmon Fauset and *Flight* by Walter White. In the review, Du Bois identified the central problem of passing as a problem of feeling: "the great problem [sic] is under

what circumstances would a person [pass] and how would they feel about it? And how would their fellows feel?"[142] Du Bois' answer that passing is ticklish identifies the incongruous views on passing that were held between between African American, white, and interracial subjects based on their relationships to race. By juxtaposing passing as "a silly matter of no real importance" to African Americans and "a matter of tremendous moral import" to whites, he stages the different sets of feelings and racialized dynamics surrounding the pass. As the gravity of the response from whites (and as I show, from African Americans) to passing indicates, these feelings are also loaded with political content.

But what is the nexus between feeling ticklish and politics? To call an object "ticklish" is to suggest a range of serious meanings which, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, include "sensitive," "unstable", "difficult", "easily offended", "fickle", or more dubiously, "liable to end in disaster unless treated with great care."[143] And yet, to be ticklish also bears an obvious relation to laughter and the potential—if one is receptive to tickling—for pleasure. Historically the metaphor of a "ticklish subject" has been used to characterize difficult or intractable problems, and Du Bois' use of ticklish certainly implies that the subject of passing was a sensitive topic liable to rub someone the wrong way.[144] While the metaphor of tickling is often used as an analogy for describing controversial or highly politicized subjects, the structure and dynamics of physical tickling that provide a method for examining the political conflicts underpinning the passing encounter for both passing subjects and for those who couldn't pass or who identified as African American.

In this chapter, I take Du Bois' suggestion of passing as a "ticklish subject" seriously, reinterpreting Clare's performance of passing and Irene's reaction to it as a situation akin to the physical experience of tickling. By juxtaposing the passing situation with the narrative of physical tickling, I identify a form of racial feeling that I call *the ticklish feeling of passing*, which uses laughter to mediate feelings of pleasure and pain associated with the excitement and danger of the pass.[145] Ticklishness describes the structures of feeling around passing, and it reveals the relationship between the self and the other in passing encounters.[146] In contrast to a melancholic response to racialization, the ticklish feeling of passing materializes ambivalent feelings about race, using laughter to dramatize the instability of racial identity while capturing its absurdity and stubborn persistence as an ideology structuring life during the era of the color line. The laughter associated with *the ticklish feeling of passing* takes racial passers and racial passing as its object and represents a new form of laughing off white supremacy by showing how African Americans used laughter to navigate complex encounters with interracial subjects and the contradictions they revealed about the color line.

The contradictions revealed by the ticklish feeling of passing, however, were not exclusive to the color line. Ticklish feelings abound in the under-theorized encounter between those who pass and their racial confidantes in realist accounts of passing, of which *Passing* is a prime example.[147] The contradictions between those interracial passers and their confidantes represent an emergent politics of anti-racism in the 1930's which questioned the Du Boisian assumption that a cultural strategy like the one implemented during the Harlem Renaissance could successfully transform the dominant discourses and social modes of white supremacy represented by the color line.[148] As

the “ticklish subject,” Clare is the tickler who uses her confidence and guile to amuse white and black observers alike, and Irene gets tickled by her performance. These feelings demonstrate how passers (Clare) and their confidantes (Irene) deferred the affective experience of racialization and elude loss with laughter, which gave rise to new modes of ironic self-expression. Yet, the repetition of the desire to elude detection and to keep laughing at the absurdity of race binds those confidantes to the passing situation and tempts them into working against their own personal and political interests by supporting those who choose to cross the color line. Later I characterize this phenomenon as being a *tickled subject*, a phrase which registers a violation of trust and the formation of a new perverse bond. My analysis of Irene’s development as a *tickled subject* shows that as she loses her ability to laugh with Clare, Irene also loses the feeling of kindship that sustained their precarious friendship and Clare’s ability to pass. This inability to laugh is not “unlaughter”–a strategic withholding of laughter in response to harm disguised as humor—but a conspicuous absence that Irene registers as grimly ironic feeling of loss.[149] The feeling of ironic loss, which is proximate to the feeling of abjection, shows how passing could polarize confidantes against passers by bringing their personal experiences and political beliefs into conflict. Thus, the *ticklish feeling of passing* shows how solidarity between passers and confidantes can be cultivated—and lost—through the success or failure to make the confidante laugh. In doing so, *the ticklish feeling of passing* points to the possibility of passing’s success rooted not just in performance but in acts of interracial solidarity.

“Sometimes a little nerve will put discrimination to rout”: On Laughing at Passing

Before DuBois compared passing to a ticklish subject, his contemporaries were aware of the silly/serious structure of racial feeling around passing, which they represented by comparing passing to a joke. In a 1911 article called “When is a Caucasian Not a Caucasian?”, the anonymous author of the piece ironically calls passing “a conundrum which is no joke,” emphasizing the humorous and serious feelings that passing evokes. The author goes on to write, “it is a very serious matter with many of the first Creole families in Louisiana. To us who look on it is absurdly amusing, as the antics of those who make fools of themselves always are, no matter how serious the participants.”[150] Framing the problem in terms of perspective, the author describes the serious perception of passing to the mixed-race Creole families who are the subject and the amusement of those who can see the roles being played. From the perspective of the black onlooker, the entire passing situation appears as comedic farce where to treat race seriously reveals the foolish beliefs at its core. A 1915 column from *The Chicago Defender*, similarly characterizes affective responses to passing as humorous. For the author of “Melting Pot,” the joke of passing turns the white fool who has been tricked by the pass into the object of laughter in the eyes of the black onlooker. By embarrassing the white fool, the laughter of black onlookers represents the possibility of transforming the bigoted, white perspective on race. As the anonymous columnist writes: “If our friends on the other side but knew what a laughing stock they made of themselves in our eyes they would drop forever this question of color being a badge of inferiority.”[151] The author suggests that black laughter at whiteness could result in a shift in perspective that would have political ramifications. Both of these columns anticipate Du Bois’ comment about the ticklish subject and

suggest that laughter could be the key to representing the feeling of the color line to whites, and by representing it as laughable, destroying its “serious” symbolic power.

While some writers believed that the laughter generated by this scene had political potential, other writers were less optimistic. For a younger Langston Hughes and for some other African American writers, laughter was not a revolutionary tool, but the folly of white people’s prejudices could provide laughter to compensate for the sadness of their circumstances, and in certain cases it could even be a tactical aid to help them pass. Langston Hughes for one argued that African Americans viewed passing as a potential source for gratification because white racists deserved to be tricked. In “Jokes on Our White Folks,” a column in the Chicago Defender, Hughes describes the “joke” of being read as African American by a female clerk at the Selective Service bureau when he registered for the draft. This act of racial interpolation on its face does not appear particularly funny, but it becomes a joke to Hughes when he describes how some well-known African Americans like Walter White could pass for white on their draft cards because White was “as white as Henry Ford.”[152] Not only did White fool the censors, but his name was “White,” a doubly ironical twist. Despite Hughes’ bitter emotions, the metaphor of the joke of passing represents the color line as a ludicrous concept destined to fail because of its failure to account for anomalies like White.

Such flaws provided much needed comic relief, but they also offered economic opportunities to passers. In a later column with a nearly identical name called “Fooling our White Folks,” Hughes writes, “Most Negroes feel that bigoted whites deserve to be cheated and fooled since the way they behave toward us makes no sense at all.”[153] By

changing the “Jokes” to “Fooling” in the title, Hughes shifts the focus of his article from the apparatus of the color line to the process by which people go about turning it to their advantage. “Cheating,” which he vividly describes as “trimming off the biscuits of racial prejudice,” is an essential economic practice for African Americans, including everything from street hustles to forms of legitimate employment “downtown” that rely on the fiction of passing. The phrase “trimming the biscuits” itself a reference to an apocryphal story of a slave cook stealing from her white mistress. As Hughes tells it, the mistress would count the biscuits every night to make sure that the slaves were not eating them, but the cook outsmarted her, trimming a piece off every biscuit. In the era of the color line when the trappings of this biscuit-withholding slavery remain, Hughes put the question to his readers thus: “simple, our white folks: so why not fool them?"

Fooling white people had both an affective and a pragmatic function: it offered pleasure to African Americans in need of good humor, it provided economic opportunities, and occasionally it accomplished both at the same time. In one instance, Hughes recounts how, when he was in the army before the war, he sat in the middle of a whites only dining car. When he was asked his race by the white steward, he made an indignant, humorous reply, and the laughter of the African American workers in the dining car shamed the white waiter into serving him as they would serve any other white man:

> The white steward leaned over and whispered politely in my ear, “Are you a Negro or foreign, sir?” I said, “I’m just hungry!” The colored waiters laughed. He went away. And I was served. Sometimes a little nerve will put discrimination to rout.[154]

This anecdote dramatizes the relationship between passers and their African American confidantes, and more than just an inducement of pleasure, the joke and the laughter that accompany effectively demonstrate the working of the pass. By answering “Are you a Negro” with “I’m just hungry” Hughes’ joke displaces the question of racial identity with the importance of bodily need. The confidence with which he dismisses the waiter is a sign of his whiteness, and the laughter that accompanies it confirms the status of the comedian as white, saying ‘even those black waiters know I am not black.’ Of course, this laughter is ironic because it works at another discursive level. Echoing DuBois’ characterization of passing as “a silly matter,” Hughes repeats the phrase “silly, our white folks,” throughout the article, and empirically demonstrates its validity by tricking them. In doing so, he uses laughter to “own” his white oppressors, momentarily inverting the racial hierarchy. When the waiter retreats from the scene, Hughes condenses the message of his performance into an aphorism about fooling whites, writing, “sometimes a little nerve will put discrimination to rout.”

But as nerve indicates, Hughes’ performance is not without anxiety, and indeed read together, the joke relies on the confidence of the passer to overpower the white fool. In this instance, Hughes as the passer is able to cultivate solidarity with other African Americans, which clinches the joke by mocking the stupidity of the white waiter. Despite the zeal with which Hughes mocked whites for their foolish belief in the certainty of race, his confidence betrays his anxiety about being detected as black, which is only allayed by the feeling that the laughter of other African Americans creates and its function in aiding him to pass. Laughter at passing in this sense was a way to temporarily overcome the constraints of the color line, either through helping people to

pass (if you're the bystander) or by creating the opportunity for other potential allies to laugh at the foolishness of white people. Hughes would later revise this strategy of using the "fun" of passing as a weapon to attack the color line. In one of his later columns called "Passing for White, Passing for Colored, Passing for Negroes Plus" written in 1952, Hughes writes: "It has always seemed to me more fun being frankly colored, AMERICAN NEGRO COLORED, than pretending to be anything else. But I do not condemn people who, for financial reasons, find it advantageous to be something else, at least not in the USA."[155]

On Ticklish Laughter

As I have shown, there was a history to laughing at the phenomenon of passing in African American communities, which had its roots in folk laughter and trickster tropes. This history shows that African Americans theorized the humorous/serious affective structure of the pass from within the period, and that it depended on the position and point of view of the person involved in the passing scene. These early accounts of passing reveal a triangle at the heart of the passing situation involving three figures: the dupe, the passer, and a member of the in-group often called "the in-group clairvoyant," a term that signifies both an affinity of identity and secret knowledge of the "truth" that the passer is concealing. Through this structure, which Amy Robinson calls "the triangle theater of the pass," Robinson and others have argued that passing stages a clash between different epistemologies of race, making the passing situation a discursive encounter where identity is represented as a function of reading practices

and not as an essential given.[156] In other words, the identity of the passer depends on the standpoint of the spectator.

The relationship that Robinson locates in the act of passing bears striking similarities to the triangular relationship between joke-teller, the object, and listener that Freud locates in the "tendentious joke," and it reiterates Clare's question about whether there is something funny about the act of passing. For Freud, the triangular relationship in the tendentious joke involves staging a conflict between the first and second person to satisfy the third, whose expression of laughter offers release for pent-up feelings:

> A tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled. [Sic] In the case of smut the three people are in the same relation. The course of events may be thus described. When the first person finds his libidinal impulse inhibited by the woman, he develops a hostile trend against the second person and calls on the originally interfering third person as his ally. Through the first person's smutty speech the woman is exposed before the third, who, as listener, has now been bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.[157]

In Freud's analysis, the success of the joke depends on the relation between the third person and the second who is the object of the joke. The quality of the tendentious joke depends on the ability of the first person to surprise with anger and therefore satisfy the third person's libidinal drive, which was previously stifled by an element of social repression. By contrast, in the passing scene whether the scene evokes humor depends on the relation between the second and the third person. Seriousness exists in

the first person's assumption of a static racial identity in the second, and humorousness arises when the absurdity of this assumption is revealed to the third. In the passing scene, instead of demonstrating the first person's power—as happens with the tendentious joke—the joke backfires on the teller, revealing their lack of knowledge about the world, which undermines their perceived power to others. In the case of the smutty joke, the sexual object is present and unmasked by the first speaker for the "effortless" pleasure of the third. In the racial joke of passing, the genius of passing is that the first person unmasks themself in their misreading of the race of the second person, which turns the scene into a hilarious joke between the second person and the third. Read together, the triangle of the tendentious joke elucidates the serious and humorous aspects of the triangle theater of the pass, and it demonstrates the existence of a ticklish subjectivity both for the passer and for the clairvoyant. By inverting the relations of the tendentious joke, the passer tickles the clairvoyant, who is by degrees amused and alarmed by the presence of danger in the passer's performance. The laughter of the passer and the clairvoyant ironically corroborates the joke of the dupe, creating laughter at two levels that helps the passer pass and preserves good relations with the clairvoyant.

Likening the relationship of the passer and the clairvoyant in passing to the relationship of the tickler and tickled allows me to examine the intimate dynamics of the relationship between passers and their racial confidantes. Indeed there is also a long history in western philosophical thought that interrogates the narrative of tickling and shows how the feelings involved in tickling can have political ramifications. In these accounts, ticklish laughter has a politics because of the perceived morality of tickling as

a pleasurable activity which also has the potential to be a violation. I draw on these theories of tickling to further historicize my account of laughter and to elucidate the dynamics of tickling that Du Bois links to the narrative of passing and which appear as moments of amused/anxious laughter in Larsen's novel.

Starting in the 19th and early 20th centuries, theories of tickling identified the feeling of ambivalence as central to the experience of being tickled, and this feeling has long been a way for critics to conceive of tickling's social character. Since Aristotle wrote about tickling in *On the Parts of Animals*, philosophers have argued that tickling was a form of primitive communication between children and adults based on surprise and deception, which often results in delight but sometimes results in pain. The foundation for this argument is the idea that humans cannot tickle themselves. Innocuous as this observation may seem, the need for the touch of another has been the critical engine for discussions of tickling (and laughter) since the time of the ancients, while the quality and moral status of this touch has been subject to debate. [158] As Charles Darwin observed in his writing on tickling, the element of surprise involved in physical tickling has to do with the unknowable location of a person's ticklish spots, which have to be discovered by the exploratory touch of the tickler.[159] When the ticklish spot is found, it often produces goose bumps, which reads as both a defensive posture and a form of arousal in the body. In Darwin's biological analysis, this automatic bodily reaction could indicate the beginning of a counter attack by the person being tickled. The body's response to tickling becomes a metaphor for Darwin's claim about tickling's social effect. Tickling prompts a defensive, hardening posture, but it also is a form of response that is used to parry or counter the tickling attack, giving it an ambivalent

character (is it defensive or offensive) and an inherently ironic character. To the extent that tickling is about a search for pleasure in the body's sudden reaction, the dynamic between the tickler and the tickled is one of tactile discovery and laughing disclosure. In its hostile forms, the tickler becomes a hostile interrogator and the person being tickled turns inwards to protect the parts of their body that are vulnerable to tickling. In both cases, the surprise produced by finding a ticklish spot creates an intimate relationship between the person who is tickled and their tickler, binding them together with the personal knowledge of a shared secret.

The modern narrative of physical tickling that begins with Darwin's work in *The Expression of the Emotions in Men and Animals* extends from the body in the act of physical tickling to the metaphorical tickling of a thought or idea. Darwin himself makes the leap between the situation of physical tickling and the way the mind responds to ludicrous situations, observing that the bodily response to both physical and mental stimulation is similar, writing "the imagination is sometimes said to be tickled by a ludicrous idea; and this so-called tickling of the mind is curiously analogous with that of the body."[160] By linking physical tickling to mental tickling, Darwin leads his reader from the aggressor who is the object of physical tickling to the ludicrous idea, which is the object of the mentally ticklish laughter and resembles the idea of the absurdity of race, which makes race a laughable object throughout much of the African American literary canon. For Victorian and Modernist literary critics, it was the *threat* of tickling and not the physical touch bridged the gap between the ticklish body and the ticklish mind. In his anti-laughter treatise *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (1875), George Vasey characterized tickling as a violation, which produced bonds between adults and children

by the very suggestion or imitation of tickling. As Vasey wrote, "[children] learn to laugh, not because they like it, or because they are pleased, but solely because they are tickled; and the association of tickling and laughing is so intimate, and so instantaneous, that children actually begin to laugh even when they merely see the hand of another approaching with the apparent intention of tickling them."[161] Like Darwin, Vasey understood tickling to be about more than physical contact. By imitating contact, tickling provokes a reaction in the child as a response to the threat of violence, making tickling akin to other forms of humor, like mockery or ridicule.[162]

Next to Darwin's explanation of mental tickling as a pleasurable response to ludicrous situations, Vasey suggests that the child's knowledge of the adult's intent to tickle them causes laughter, simulating the experience of tickling without physical contact and making laughter a physical reflex dissociated from both pleasure and pain. The later modernist critic JC Gregory (1924) used the situation of simulated tickling to argue the opposite:

> The inevitableness of the comparison between the ludicrous and the tickle and the inevitable discovery of mingled pain and pleasure in tickling seem to necessitate at least one attempt to explain comic feeling as "a rapid oscillation back and forth between pleasure and pain" or as a mastery of pain by pleasure in an oscillation or struggle between them.[163]

Gregory's critique of what he refers to as the "tickle-theory" of laughter argues that not every situation that oscillates between pleasure and pain produces laughter. Unlike the sudden tickle, which can lead to pleasurable surprise, the expectation of tickling changes the dynamic of the tickling act so that a child who expects that they will be

tickled may not laugh but will squirm or convulse in order to get away. Gregory provides a squeamish vignette to illustrate his argument: “Tie the victim down, bare his soles and tickle them vigorously: torture annuls amusement. The squirm of the tickled is a struggle: there is no struggle in laughter.”[164] This account echoes the need for surprise as a condition for producing pleasure in tickling, but Gregory’s revision to the tickle-theory of laughter is more ambitious, calling on these mixed responses to tickling as a way to install ambivalence as a central feature of ticklish laughter. The same action that produces pleasure can produce pain if it is anticipated. The key for anticipating the tickling attack is simply the repetition of tickling itself. By distinguishing between playful tickling and malicious tickling, Gregory theorizes two outcomes: the first is laughter, which signals relief following the tension and strain of simulated danger; the second, the squirm, has a more serious function, registering “violent efforts to escape.” The receptivity of the person being tickled is thus essential to the circuit of tickling. To produce pleasure, the tickled must tacitly consent; without consent, tickling is unwanted, irritating, and if it is persistent and strong enough, it constitutes a serious violation of bodily sovereignty.

While critics have long recognized that tickling combines pleasure and pain, a feeling akin to ticklishness appears to be the unstated foundation of Sigmund Freud’s concept of ambivalence, and shows one way that the desire for contact with a harmful object can create a perverse bind for the subject. Freud never directly related tickling to ambivalence, and he wrote very little about tickling in his work. Tickling arises in Freud in relation to the development of infant sexuality, and later, in a passing reference to hysteria and laughter.[165] On the other hand, Freud wrote extensively about

ambivalence, which was associated with obsessional neurosis or melancholy, and he understood ambivalence as a feeling that constituted a relation to an object that held two opposing views—like love and hate—simultaneously. Psychoanalysis complicates the ambivalence of tickling by situating ambivalence in the contradictory emotions of pleasure and pain which are experienced simultaneously instead of as alternations associated with the back and forth motion of tickling. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud theorizes ambivalence, making a link between the taboos of indigenous people and the psychological prohibitions of neurotic patients. The basis for Freud's theory of ambivalence was the neurotic's complicated relationship to touch, which figured as both the fear of physical touching and the helpless desire to come into contact with the object, a state which appears to be a striking corollary to the situation tickling, particularly when squeamishly anticipated. Freud describes the symptoms of obsessional neurotics as "*delire du toucher"* or "touching phobia."[166] This fear of touching is the basis for the particular relationship between the neurotic patient to the object of prohibition, which encompasses both the fear of physical contact with the object and the fear of the *idea* of physical touching. The move from physical fear to imaginary fear is similar to the effect of moving from a real touch to an imagined one in tickling. Yet Freud's analysis of the neurotic patient indicates the presence of a latent or repressed desire for contact with the prohibited object, which triggers the neurotic's obsession with repeatedly encountering the dangerous object. Even as the patient seeks to block it from their mind, their perverse desire *for* the prohibited object draws them closer. The ambiguous rationale behind the construction of such prohibitions on touching in the first place are both rational and "silly" (similar to Du Bois' description of

passing), and once the prohibition is apprehended, it becomes in Freud's words "extremely liable to displacement," contaminating other objects with the attraction and repulsion that the neurotic feels towards the object that contains the original taboo.[167]

The repetition of a dangerous encounter is fundamental concept in Adam Phillips' work on tickling, and it revises the perverse bind that Freud theorizes in his work on neurosis. Unlike my reading of Freud, tickling for Phillips is not about an obsessive desire for the object *per se*, but about an obsessive desire to elude capture. In *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, Phillips argues that tickling is structured around the interplay of distance and proximity from an object, and it provides two particular insights into tickling. First, to tickle is "above all, to seduce, often by amusement," even as tickling represents the "impossibility of satisfaction and of reunion…in which the final satisfaction is frustration."[168] The seduction involved in the tickling scene, as we have seen, is the establishment of bonds of intimacy, but for Phillips this is also a metaphor for fantasies of reunification even as it repeats the trauma of separation from the parent. This dynamic of fantasy/trauma structures the simultaneous pleasure and pain of tickling: the pleasure arises in being able to represent and then elude pain, and then in the repetition of the scene. In childhood, the child who is tickled practices being elusive to avoid capture, and this pattern of elusiveness creates a situation in which the child is only capable of thinking about the presence of an object in its absence. This dynamic reverses the terms of Freudian neurosis, so that "elusiveness…is the inverse of obsessionality," making an attachment to pleasure in tickling an attachment to frustrated desire.[169]

If the bind involved in physical tickling is about a fixation or obsession with eluding danger and the repetition of frustration associated with it, Phillips also shows how the failure to elude danger can create a traumatic bond that preserves the ticklish subject in a degraded state. This degraded subject no longer depends on the ticklish object for pleasure, but simply relies on them for contact, so that they do not have to face the terrors of the world alone. Phillips' second major insight about tickling is that it is a game of primitive pleasure that requires the adult to develop trust with the child. This trust demands a commitment by the tickler to:

> Stop at the blurred point, so acutely felt in tickling, at which pleasure becomes pain, and the child experiences an intensely anguished confusion; because the tickling narrative, unlike the sexual narrative, has no climax.[170]

Failure to obey the unspoken rules of the tickling game threatens to violate the relationship of trust and degrade the bond between adult and child, resulting in humiliation and disarray. The focus on narrative repetition that Phillips introduces adds degrees of intensity: tickling both establishes trust, but its intensification can also result in a violation of trust that causes permanent trauma. Preserving trust requires the tickler to carefully manage the feelings of the person being tickled, and to allow them to escape so that the tickling encounter can commence again. If this condition is not met and trust is violated, this can also create a bond, a "perverse contract," in which the subject "agrees to be destroyed or damaged" in exchange for maintaining a connection, no matter how degrading it is. As Phillips writes: "It is the solitude of being separate they cannot risk. There is also, one should remember, a terror of the absence of dependence."[171] Phillips's account of tickling provides insight into the nature of the

intimate bond between the ticklish subject and the ticklish object. In *Passing,* Irene is the subject who is tickled by her relationship with Clare Kendry and with passing. As I will show, the dynamics of the tickling scene play out in surprisingly accurate ways with Clare figuring as the tickler and Irene as the tickled subject.

The Ticklish Feeling of Passing: A Technique for Emotional Management

What does it take for a person to pass? According to Clare Kendry, "if one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve" (25). Clare's flippant aside to Irene during the first encounter of *Passing* belies her talent for passing: confidence. To cross over the color line for good or to be a "permanent passer" is an art form that requires conforming to visible, aural, and linguistic markers of race.[172] As Larsen's novel reveals, the success of passing turns on qualities of performance—confidence, flexibility, and fortitude—which Clare is able to secure by developing strategies to manage her emotions, and crucially, the emotions of other people.[173] But perhaps the most important strategy in Clare's arsenal, echoing Hughes, is her ability to amuse others, a move akin to tickling. Clare's ability to delight and amuse others allows on both sides of the color line enables her to elude harm and to transform danger into pleasure. Laughter, perhaps the main weapon in her arsenal, allows her to flirt with danger, maintaining her proximity to risky encounters, and confidently pass off her anxiety about racial detection as pleasure.[174] Clare's laughter is thus a defensive, affective response to brushes with detection, which allows her to manage her feelings by ironically coordinating her inner fear with the outward appearance of happiness.[175] Yet Clare's performance and the ironic laughter that accompanies it is not merely defensive, it is also an assertion of her flexible identity

in relation to the fixed identities of others. Irene's theatrical description of Clare at the beginning of the novel affirms the duality of her subjectivity. According to Irene, Clare might be "selfish, and cold, and hard," but she also possesses "a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (10). This characterizes her way of being as a twinned defensive hardening and performative, embodied response that "transforms warmth" and circulates those warm feelings to others. If as Phillips writes, "to tickle is, above all, to seduce, often by amusement," Clare's ability to tickle Irene and make her laugh is her way of keeping up relations and preventing her from oscillating into antagonism.[176]

In this section, I show how Clare's talent at delighting and amusing others helps her to create intimate bonds with Irene, which are necessary for her to pass. Like tickling, Clare's talent involves seducing Irene with the amusement and the pleasure of her attention, and she utilizes her coldness and the danger that she exposes Irene to in order to create a circuit of desire that attracts Irene to Clare again and again even though this attraction seems to cut against Irene's will. The novel begins with a vignette that shows Irene imagining how Clare learned this way of being in her childhood with a violent encounter akin to tickling with her father. When Irene receives a letter from Clare, it triggers a kind of vision for Irene of Clare as a child with her father:

> And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he

> did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work. (9)

The scene is anything but humorous, and yet the structure of the scene that Irene imagines has all the elements of the tickling scene: the adult prowling aggressively, feigning attacks and occasionally making real attacks, and the child maintaining her proximity to danger by cultivating pleasure in escape, which is here represented by the sewing. Even the color scheme of the scene corroborates Clare's ability to transform warmth, as the scene moves from the coldness of the blue sofa to the patches of red cloth that Clare sews together to make a red frock that she can wear to school. When Irene reads Clare's letter, it has a similar, transformative power that affects Irene directly. In the letter, Clare writes, "You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of," and the subsequent, embarrassing link that Clare makes between her "wild desire" to return to the company of her race and seeing Irene in Chicago makes "brilliant red patches flame [sic] in Irene Redfield's warm olive cheeks" (11). Like Irene's vision of Clare and her father, the letter proceeds from coldness—"this pale life of mine"—to images of brightness and vitality associated with African American society, and it makes Irene's cheeks glow with the same red patches that Clare sewed together to make her dress.[177] As both a metaphor for intimate contact and an object that makes a physical connection between Clare and Irene, the letter tickles Irene, causing her to recoil with a blush.

Irene's ticklish responses to Clare's contact recur throughout the novel, establishing a dynamic where Clare's overt flirtation amuses Irene and causes her to recoil, stoking her obsession. This pattern intensifies as Clare's contact becomes more frequent and more dangerous. When Irene recalls meeting Clare in Chicago, she recalls her feelings of "humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled," but perhaps intentionally fails to recall the amusement and excitement she feels upon first recognizing Clare (11). The scene traces the complex interplay of furtive glances and feelings of amusement, pleasure, irritation, and fear that accompany Irene's accidental walk on the white side of the color line and the threat of racial detection that she endures while visiting with Clare. Accidentally finding herself passing on the rooftop of the white's only Drayton hotel, Irene encounters a strange woman with a "peculiar caressing smile," and when she smiles at the waiter, Irene thinks that "she would have classed it…as being a shade too provocative for a waiter" except that on this woman "there as something that made her hesitate to name it that…a certain impression of assurance, perhaps" (14-15). The staring contest that ensues between Irene and the woman with the odd smile represents the gaze as a kind of physical contact, which mingles pleasure and pain and makes Irene uncomfortable, though she cannot stop staring. Irene blushes under the woman's continuous stare, then she returns the glance because looking into the woman's "strange languorous eyes" gives her pleasure.

In the next sequence, Irene interpolates herself through the eyes of the woman who she believes is examining her race, and she considers the serious/humorous ways in which race is visually perceived. At length, Irene feels a "small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar," and she becomes aware of the threat of detection. She

responds to this thought by laughing aloud in an effort to diffuse her anxiety, but this seems to only heighten her rising tension, making her wonder, “did that woman, could that woman somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (16). In response, Irene ponders the absurdity of her own question, cataloguing the “ridiculous means” by which white people ascertain racial identity, including “finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” (16). Despite downplaying these silly markers of race, Irene feels “anger, scorn, and fear slide over here,” as she considers the consequences of being discovered and having to leave the Drayton. The disconnect between the abstract conception of race, routed through visible signifiers, and the real consequences of detection make the idea of passing both silly and serious, and it provokes a laugh as a mixed affective response. The woman, or more accurately her eyes, become the focus of Irene’s attention. The humiliating idea of being thrown out of the Drayton makes Irene “turn [sic] away with the firm intention of keeping her gaze on the lake,” but “almost immediately, however, her eyes were back again” (16). Although Irene is determined not to look, the pleasure of the gaze seduces Irene causing her to turn her eyes back on the woman and take her beauty in.

When the woman approaches, she recognizes Irene by name, and when Irene cannot remember the woman’s name she registers the feeling of the other woman as “more gratifying than disappointing,” a feeling that continues to draw Irene in. At length, the woman laughs, and her laughter unmasks her identity as Irene’s old friend Clare Kendry, even as it shows her to be wearing an “ivory mask” which Irene believes conceals her true emotion of “scornful amusement,” another metaphor that combines

irritation with pleasure (24). While maintaining the outward appearance of whiteness, Clare's laughter celebrates the absurdity of race and provocatively tickles Irene with her successful pass and prompts the recognition of danger for both women who are both passing. As for Irene, laughter is the visible and audible way that Clare is able to navigate the hazardous social field on the white side of the color line, but the particular quality of her laughter—its metallic nature and rhythmic, back-and-forth sound—is her signature, and it is represented as the essential feature of Clare's identity, which moves metaphorically back and forth between coolness and warmth, mechanical and organic, pain and pleasure. It's not until Clare laughs "a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like and a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling" that Irene recognizes her (18). Clare's laughter is both an affective response to the danger of encountering another black woman passing in a white's only public space and a form of communication that announces her "true" identity. In its blending of hot and cold sounds, Clare's laugh serves as an ironic metaphor for her identity, and a conduit for "transforming warmth" in others.

Clare's warmth, however, is accompanied by a playful yet insistent assertion of power, the "soft malice" that tickles Irene and causes her to build up resentment. During the same encounter, Clare asks Irene what others from the old neighborhood said about her when she began to pass. When Irene attempts to evade the question, bright red patches rise in her cheeks. At this visual indication of embarrassment, Clare laughs, "a trill of notes that was Clare Kendry's laugh, small and clear and the very essence of mockery" (21). Clare's laugh is a response to her discovery of a ticklish subject for Irene, and the laugh amplifies Irene's feeling of irritation and discomfort. Mockery

reconfigures Clare's laugh as not solely a device of transforming warmth, but also an utterance that asserts her power over Irene to provoke a response. As both a playful jab and a poor imitation, Clare's mocking laugh locates the moment of embarrassment in the other while covering up her sadness, and it successfully conforms to the conventions of the white space that the two women are passing through, making mocking laughter a way to express an intimate emotion while remaining inconspicuous to casual observers.

Moments later, Clare uses her ability to tickle Irene to defuse/diffuse her anxious feelings by transmitting them to Irene, again demonstrates her method of managing her emotions. Clare's about how she first came to pass is a long monologue punctuated by Irene's observations of Clare's ambivalent expressions—resentful smiles and ironic, mischievous glances—and Clare uses it to express both her pain with amusement and laughter. When Clare jokes about her aunts' reading of her race—that she was a daughter of Ham and cursed by Noah to work for her room and board—Irene laughs at the verbal play but Clare responds seriously, explaining, "it was more than a joke, I assure you, 'Rene. It was a hard life for a girl of sixteen. Still, I had a roof over my head, and food, and clothes—such as they were" (26). Clare's refusal to laugh at her own joke reverses the power dynamics in the conversation, putting Irene in a defensive position where she is temporarily, if performatively, tickling Clare for a laugh. That is, until Irene registers this reversal and compensates for it by expressing her outrage on Clare's behalf, exclaiming "have you ever stopped to think…how much unhappiness and downright cruelty are laid to the loving-kindness of the Lord?" (26). Moments later, when Clare describes the ostensibly more serious episode of how her aunts forced her to

pass and abandon her ties to the African American community, Clare laughs at herself, transforming her anguish at being "tar-brush[ed]" into "ringing bells" which also have a "hard metallic sound" (27). This subtle interaction foreground's Clare's ability to strategically manage her ambivalent feelings and turn them for social gain. Throughout the scene, the narration carefully describes the minute adjustments of expression that both women make, tracking Irene's embarrassing desire to learn more about Clare's secret life, and Clare's desire to affirm her decisions by eliciting a sympathetic response from Irene. Irene's discovery of these secret vulnerabilities in Clare creates an intimate bond with Clare, even as Clare locates and exploits Irene's emotional vulnerabilities by withholding laughter and causing her embarrassment.

When Clare finally manages to tickle Irene hard, the two women achieve their deepest moment of intimacy. Clare's asks Irene—"Tell me, honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing?'"—a more overt mockery than her previous jabs, which Irene denies so forcefully that for she manages to embarrass Clare. Realizing Clare's mistake, Irene replies, "you see, Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money" (28). The unspeakable irony here is, of course, that Irene is passing while the conversation is taking place. Irene's touchy comment makes Clare laugh and creates an intimacy between the two women which had only previously been hinted at in the novel. Clare proclaims, "of course…money's awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price" (28). This seems to transfix Irene, opening up a split between her mind and body where "her reason partly agreed, her instinct wholly rebelled" and yet it enables her to maintain her proximity to the danger and that she feels while being with Clare. This is a ticklish feeling without

laughter or convulsion, injected with erotic tension that peels away the dialogue from the scene and returns their communication to the physical contact of the eyes, as Irene stares at Clare and, “into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed” (29).

When Irene finally manages to pull herself out of the spell cast by Clare, she feels irritated that she allowed herself to be flattered. Yet, as Phillips tells us, irritation is the satisfaction of elusiveness that the subject who is tickled feels having escaped danger, but desiring repetition. This irritation intensifies when Irene considers the promise that she made to see Clare again, and as if in resistance to her conscious thoughts, she convinces herself that she will protect Clare’s privacy by not discussing their meeting with her father, because in fact, “she had no desire or intention of making the slightest effort” to meet with Clare. Irene uses her ambivalence toward Clare to justify her decision to stop communicating with Clare, but this also serves her unconscious desire to protect Clare by maintaining silence about their contact. But what was again an effort to protect Clare from danger leads Irene straight back to Clare. Clare’s talent for delight and amusement succeed in managing Irene’s ambivalent emotions, creating a conscious desire for distance even as it provokes Irene’s desire for a reunion with Clare.

“Just somebody walking over my grave”: Passing, Tickling, Trauma

If the ability to manage the emotions of others enables passing characters to move easily between different social worlds, Larsen’s novel demonstrates the difficulty of managing these worlds simultaneously. Towards the beginning of the novel, Clare

announces this difficulty when she describes how her marriage to John Bellew effectively ended her relationship with the African American community on the south side of Chicago that she was a part of in her youth:

> When Jack, a schoolboy acquaintance of some people in the neighborhood, turned up from South America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that I was coloured, and many to tell him about the severity of the religiousness of Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna. You can guess the rest. After he came, I stopped slipping off to the south side and slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn't manage both. (27)

Clare's admission—"I couldn't manage both"—frames the passing encounter as a conflict of situation management. While the novel insists on Clare's ability to tickle others to successfully manage her own feelings and the feelings of others in a particular group, it represents the limits of this technique in an encounter that requires her to manage the feelings of people from different groups at once. This limit is interposed as an intensification of the ticklish feelings that Clare imparts to Irene, which causes Irene to burst with laughter, rupturing the intimate bond that she shares with Clare. Although this rupture does not have an immediate impact, it reveals to Irene the pattern of her repeatedly subordinating her desires to Clare's. This makes Irene feel sardonic, a grimly ironic feeling that registers the trauma of being tickled to the point of humiliation, and turns her into what I call a *tickled subject*, a phrase whose past tense registers the violation of trust and the formation of a new antagonistic bond. In registering the traumatic experience of the clairvoyant in helping the passer pass, Larsen shows how

the techniques of passing could polarize clairvoyants against passers by bringing their personal experiences and political beliefs into conflict.

When Irene, Clare, and their mutual acquaintance Gertrude meet at Clare's flat for tea the novel illustrates the signature failure of Clare's emotional management and the traumatic consequences of the encounter. While Clare's skills of "conversational weightlifting" are able to manage the mood with Gertrude and Irene, the entrance of Clare's white husband John Bellew changes the dynamics of the situation, introducing a dangerous element and forcing the three light-skinned women to pass (38). The setup for the passing encounter is Bellew's greeting to his wife—"Hello, Nig"— which announces his presence and frames the passing encounter as a situational racist joke (39). Bellew's greeting startles Irene and Gertrude, but Irene's silence and Gertrude's "dutiful laughter" register a tacit, outward approval for his remark. When Clare acknowledges his greeting—"Did you hear what Jack called me?"—this initiates a ticklish situation where husband and wife begin a routine that ironically exposes the joke of Clare's white racial identity to Irene and Gertrude while burying it from Bellew's sight with their laughter (39). Bellew continues the routine in blissful ignorance of his audience's "true" identities, revealing the dramatic irony at the heart of the passing encounter:

> 'Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker. I tell her if she doesn't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger.' (39)

From Bellew's standpoint, the humor of the joke is rooted in the notion that racial identity is static and cannot change over time, and the impossibility of changing this natural phenomenon (the equivalent of 'when pigs fly') is laughable. This scene directly interposes the scene of the tendentious joke onto the passing scene, with Bellew as the dupe/first person, Clare as the passer/second person, and Irene and Gertrude as the clairvoyants/third persons. But the dramatic irony of this joke is of course that Clare's racial identity *is* flexible and changes with each social context that she enters.[178]

Bellew's joke makes the whole company erupt in laughter, and the cacophonous sound brings each character temporarily together in a moment of shared pleasure even as it reveals their different pleasures (and pains) through the laughter's sound. The punch line of the joke causes Bellew, the racist aggressor, to roar with laughter, while Clare's laugh answers his, ironically chiming back and forth like a bell. Clare's laughter bears traces of what Ralph Ellison named "blues-toned laughter," which doesn't exactly harmonize with others but adds a self-conscious ironical sentiment, a minor chord.[179] After a moment of silent surprise, both Gertrude and Irene join in the laughter, with Gertrude adding a painful "shrill one" and Irene's laughter pouring out of her in "gales" (39). Gertrude, the wife of a butcher, registers crudity with her laughter, which is grotesque and exaggerated like her other shrieks and snorts, classing her differently than the other dicty women. Instead of a sonic metaphor, Irene's laughter figures as a violent wind pouring out of her, a soundless force that foregrounds the laugh in itself, as in the repetition of the word: "she laughed and laughed and laughed" and "she laughed on and on and on" (39). The convulsive laughing reaction that Bellew's joke provokes from Irene threatens to unmask the "truth" of Clare's genealogical heritage, a "fact"

which the laugh temporarily reveals before being choked back in Irene's throat. Indeed, Irene's laughter poses a threat to Clare's performance because too much pleasure in the joke would raise the suspicion that it was true, but only when Irene "catche[s] sight of Clare's face" does she registers this threat, a moment that also announces Clare's belated attempt to manage her friend's unruly behavior. Clare's ticklish provocation fails to properly mediate between her African American friends and her white husband because the irony of Bellew's joke amplifies the danger of the ticklish situation instead of reducing it. The duration of the laughter and the tears that flow down Irene's cheeks from within the storm index a rupture in the encounter between Irene and Bellew and Irene and Clare, which is solidified by Bellew's assertion of the real violence lurking behind his humor: "no niggers in my family" (40). This is the moment when the stakes of the joke become real, and the point when the ticklish encounter veers into torturous territory where one is held down without the possibility of escape and tickled against their will.

If Bellew's racist joke is akin to the situation of passing, the need for Irene to laugh at his ticklish provocation and conversely the threat that her excessive laughter poses to Clare's identity reveals a key element in the passing encounter—the necessity of near total complicity with the terms of whiteness that the situation requires.[180] In this sense, the passing situation emphasizes norms of control, restraint, and social ceremony as a safeguard against the dangerous revelation of racial difference. In *Passing*, laughter is a visible and audible signifier that bridges the gulf between decorum and individual expression in the passing situation, creating a mechanism for characters to ironically express their anxieties or antagonisms in a way that further aids

in the masking of their identities. Yet, Irene's ticklish laughter also reveals the pitfalls of the need to carefully regulate one's self-expression. Irony backfires and scorches Irene, leaving her seething with rage and forcing her to reckon with her position of submission to Clare Kendry.

> It was, Irene, thought, unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, and shame. (42)

The feeling of mortification is a new addition to anger and shame, which were previous responses to Clare's tickling. For Irene, mortification is how she imagines the deathly feeling of fear and emotional suppression that Clare must have, as opposed to her own exaggerated passions. Yet when the scene concludes, Irene is left pondering the look on Clare's face, which was "partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing" (45). After nearly being unmasked by Irene's laughter, Clare's "soft malice" intensifies, becoming a serious form of mockery that tickles Irene hard. The memory of Clare's face alone creates a "recrudescence" or repetition of the immediacy of the feeling, which causes a shiver to run through Irene's body (45). Attempting to reassure herself of her safety, Irene tells herself a joke about her shiver, "just somebody walking over my grave, as the children say," but the joke backfires, and instead of laughing she finds that she is "close to tears," signifying her own feeling of mortification (45).

This moment of failed laughter marks a major transition point in the novel, when Clare's tickling passes the "blurred point" at which Irene's ambivalent emotion toward Clare becomes pain, imprinting on her as permanent humiliation. This is apparent in Irene's resolve to not to let herself be put in the position again: "she needn't, and didn't

intend to, lay herself open to any repetition of a humiliation as galling and outrageous as that which, for Clare Kendry's sake, she had borne 'that time in Chicago.' One was enough" (51). Yet, this is itself a repetition of her own search for pleasure in distance and denial. Remembering her experience in Chicago, Irene still finds "amusement" in "the violence of the feelings which it stirred in her," an amusement that is structured around the repetition and the immediacy of the feelings of fear and panic, which from her future vantage she thinks is "silly" (51). It also makes Irene reconsider her solidarity with Clare, recognizing her pattern of "taking a chance, and not at all considering anyone else's feelings" (44). The resentment that Irene holds for Clare eventually turns inwards and becomes a hostile evaluation of her habit of subordinating herself to Clare. This "feeling, a question" frames Irene's inaction and her complicity in violating her own self-interest to protect her friend as a political problem: "Why hadn't she spoken that day…simply because of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defence of the race to which she belonged?" (52). If the notion of a performative identity in passing posed a political challenge to the essentializing politics of racial uplift, Irene's question offers a provocative response: what does racial solidarity look like when solidarity itself only extends in one direction.[181] This question leads back to a feeling that hovers in a blissful way on the border of abjection:

> Irene asked these questions, felt them. They were, however, merely rhetorical, as she herself was well aware. She knew their answers, every one, and it was the same for all of them. The sardony of it! She couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that that defence might in some infinitesimal degree lead the way to final

> discovery of her secret. She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever. (52)

As Kate Baldwin provocatively suggests, there is "a particular 'passing' that in *Passing* figures itself as a death within life, or abjection," though she suggests that this abject feeling is more of a fear for Irene than it is a reality in the novel.

Here I want to pause in order to posit a different interpretation. Irene's ticklish feelings for Clare bind the two women with a special, erotic intimacy, and as Irene asserts in the passage above, she also feels bound to Clare by "ties of race," which Clare does not reciprocate. However, Clare's violent rejection of both bonds throws Irene into an abject state, which Larsen refers to as "sardony." Sardony, a term that Larsen coins in *Passing*, is the feeling of being tickled past the point of humiliation that metaphorically describes the contradiction between the self and the other, or as Brian Keith Alexander calls it, "the self as other," in the place where the self ought to be.[182] For Dorothy Stringer, sardony refers to "something like the Real," which arises unexpectedly when Irene attempts to understand her own place in the narrative's progress and didactically identifies the forces that bind her to her inaction. Stringer traces the etymology of sardony back to a Sardinian plant rumored to produce "convulsive laughter ending in death" and she uses the word's association with this "traumatic repetition" to describe Irene's loyalty to Clare as a "compulsion that politics fails to address."[183] While I am indebted to Stringer for her etymology of "sardony," I disagree with her assessment that sardony is somehow a feeling apart from politics. At the height of the novel, Irene repeats the phrase, which captures the intensification of

her abjection with the revelation that Brian may be cheating on her with Clare. After considering outing Clare to John Bellew, Irene again opts for inaction even as she feels the contradiction deepen:

> She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic. (98)

This moment, it seems, could not be any *more* political. Irene finds herself located within the contradiction between the politics of racial uplift, which subjugates the interests of the self to the furtherance of the race, and its modernist critique in the form of Clare Kendry, who is wholly selfish and denies her ties to her race: “Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it” (52). Notwithstanding criticisms of the concept of race that the novel invites, Irene’s abject, sardonic feeling offers a critique of both racial uplift and the deconstruction of race offered by the idea of racial performativity, and it locates this critique in the intensification of the ticklish feelings that she has in her relationship with Clare. At the moment when Clare’s safety is threatened, she bares her claws and severs the bonds that she cultivated with Irene. Yet, this appears to be no fault of Irene’s, but Clare’s failure of managing the disparate coordinates of the passing situation. Thus, while many have read *Passing* as an ironic critique of the bourgeois lifestyle of Irene Redfield, Larsen reserves the novel’s most devastating critique for Clare Kendry as a representative of the individual autonomy which is figured as the goal of New Negro cultural politics.

Passing's Critique of the New Negro

In the preceding sections, I have argued that the ticklish feelings between Irene and Clare structure their relationship to each other and to passing. This relationship is predicated on intimacy—the exploration of boundaries and the establishment of trust—and a process of intimately discovering knowledge of the self and the other. Ticklish feelings result in pleasure and irritation, and in situations that include members from different racialized groups together, these feelings intensify, creating acute pain and lasting trauma. The ticklish subject of passing binds people together and enables the pass, but when these bonds are put under too much pressure, they result in the destruction of the important bonds underlying them and the act of passing fails. This analysis of passing's ticklish feelings helps to resituate the cultural political critiques that Larsen is making in the novel. While Clare's individualism undoubtedly offers the reader a critical perspective on Irene's devotion to the ideology of racial uplift, from the standpoint of the racial clairvoyant, Irene's feelings reveal a different problem: a critique of the expectation of racial solidarity between self-identified African American women and "permanent passers." Judging by the novel and extant source material, this criticism seems like it was nearly impossible to voice outside of ambivalent comments like the one Irene makes to her husband in the confines of her own home: "it's funny about passing" (56). In his attempt to recuperate Larsen's novel into the canon of New Negro fiction, Du Bois' review ironically reveals a similar anxiety, because he can only characterize passing as "ticklish" instead of representing it as a threat to his political program. Thus, against the grain or perhaps on the serious side of "funny," the "ticklish subject" of passing critiques the seriousness (not silliness) of passing for African

American cultural politics and reveals the anxiety about the coexistence of two kinds of black bourgeois figures: permanent passers and race women.

The relationship between permanent passers and race women in the novel raises questions about the limits of solidarity in relation to passing. Critics initially saw a lack of solidarity as one of the defining features of Larsen's rewriting of the tragic mulatta type.[184] Later, Judith Butler would point to Irene's ambivalence as a double-bind between identifying with Bellew and identifying with Irene, which served to both destroy their solidarity but also presented the "incipient possibility of a solidarity among black women. The identification between Clare and Irene might be read as the unlived political promise of a solidarity yet to come."[185] Writing from a more pessimistic perspective, Gayle Wald argued that *Passing* is about a lack of solidarity between Irene and Clare, and that the text tracks "not the development of individual subjectivity through an act that ultimately must be repudiated, but the very status of 'racial community.'"[186] Wald's analysis spotlights the growing divide between Clare and Irene as a divide between competing ideologies of American individualism and racial uplift, but in particular, she points to the contradiction within uplift represented by the characters as an "attempt…to construct a class-based solution to the problem of African American citizenship, and its recognition…of segregation as a 'leveling' narrative that ultimately triumphs over class distinction."[187]

The model of physical tickling provides a heuristic for interpreting Irene and Clare's encounters and addressing racial solidarity as a problem of feeling. Indeed, the problem of passing is less about the feelings of the passer and more about the clairvoyant, whose feelings determine the success or failure of interracial communities.

The possibility for solidarity between the women requires the continuous production of amusement, which fails at a critical juncture in the novel because of Clare's inability to maintain her equanimity in a moment of strain with Bellew. This failure rupture her intimate bonds with Irene, and their solidarity turns into a relationship of competition over Brian and domination akin to the racialized power dynamics that Irene perceives with Bellew, which in the conclusion of the novel she must end.

The model of physical tickling also allows me to address this chronic related to the contemporary criticism of Larsen's novel, the question: what were the politics of passing (and *Passing*)? The recent form that this debate has taken is an argument over whether the performance of passing could undermine the systems of racial classification responsible for the color line. Recent scholarship on Larsen's novel and the practice of passing has taken up a familiar position—against psychoanalytic readings of silence as repression—in order to argue that passing's utterances could be used as a tool for the creation of the self, for resisting the aesthetic demands of African American expressivity, and at its most didactic, for igniting social movements.[188] These arguments, loosely organized around the rubric of "language politics," challenge prevailing assertions that silences or gaps in expression are consonant with repression, and they aim to restore a political value to indirect, low-level, or silent forms of resistance, often drawing on theories of feminized or racialized modes of expression. As Joshua L. Miller writes,

> Larsen's "New Negro" is a middle-class woman, and what establishes her female protagonists' newness as social actors and literary characters is not only interracialism but also agency in seeking to choose and control their own modes

> of expression, perhaps even reinventing the racialized self through strategies of articulation.[189]

But in their enthusiasm to excavate new examples of literary resistance, or as Miller puts it, simply "newness," these arguments, at times against their own best intentions, fetishize expression for expression's sake and fail to consider the relationships between characters who pass for white and those who openly identify as African American.

Prior to this new wave of critics, a previous generation argued that passing was not capable of undermining systems of racial classification. The paradigmatic version of this argument is Sara Ahmed's claim that transgressive laughter associated with passing is a symbol of how passing temporarily destabilizes systems of racial classification responsible for racialization, but ultimately helped to secure relations of power by recuperating the instabilities caused by transgression back into the system.[190] While challenging the notion that passing's politics was inherently liberatory, the political pessimism of this position obscures the pressing political conflicts engendered by passing within African American communities. While some critics have attempted to move beyond this debate many persist in returning to Larsen's novel to relocate forms of political action in passing that they claim destabilize practices of racial identification. These arguments, framed around the "language politics" of the novel, highlight the importance of nonvisual modes of expression in enabling passing subjects to struggle for individual autonomy. But abstracted from the cultural politics of the period, what these new criticisms fails to contend with are the complex social relations that underlaid the performance of passing.

In contrast to accounts of the politics of *Passing* that focus on discrete linguistic performances and language politics, my focus on the affective structure of the passing encounter reveals that in many situations the success of passing is not determined by linguistic acts alone but by the relationship between those passing characters and their African American confidantes. By drawing on contemporary affect theory and historicizing literary and psychoanalytic accounts of ticklish laughter, this chapter reconciles forms of external resistance with internal feelings, and in doing so, endeavors to turn literary debates about *Passing* to questions about feeling, to the affordances and limits racial solidarity, and to the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance. In contrast to formalist readings that focus solely on the passing performance, I contextualize Larsen's representations of passing in order to reconstruct the situation of racial passing through the ticklish feelings of Clare's confidante, Irene, as expressed by her laughter. Irene's ticklish feelings about passing show the degree to which racial uplift politics were bound to the systems of racial classification instituted by white supremacist politics. But for Larsen's characters, to laugh at passing was also to laugh joyously at the foolishness of white people and at the same time to laugh ironically at the absurdity and persistence of white supremacist ideology. Laughter thus demonstrates a productive middle ground between debates about language politics and racial solidarity—and the possibility for passing's success rooted not just in performance but in acts of interracial political solidarity.

This dual role of laughter in *Passing* also serves as a self-reflexive form of commentary on debates about the relationship between laughter and politics in the Harlem Renaissance. Like the objective laughter that Jesse Fauset identified in the

comic routines of Bert Williams, Irene's laughter shows the imbrication of comedy with tragedy while gesturing at a future for laughter without irony. Clare's laughter, by contrast, is a symbol of the subjective laughter that accompanies freedom from the constraints of the color line, and a realistic representation of laughter as a tool for navigating dangerous situations. Unfortunately for Fauset, Larsen's novel dramatizes the failure of subjective laughter to replace objective laughter precisely because of the bind she points to between racial uplift politics and white supremacist ideology. The arch irony of *Passing* is that the novel pits Irene's objective laughter against Clare's subjective laughter and shows how Irene must kill her rival who has achieved the ideal of New Negro free expression in order to preserve her own social status. This devastating indictment New Negro cultural politics presaged the end of the Harlem Renaissance and its cultural political project and a return to a more didactic engagement between African American laughter and politics epitomized by W.E.B. Du Bois in his early years of *The Crisis.*

Laughing Off White Supremacy with Langston Hughes and George Schuyler

> *The race problem in America is serious business, I admit. But must it always be written about seriously? So many weighty volumes, long dissertations, cheerless novels, sad tracts, and violent books have been written on race relations, that I would like to see some writers of both races write about integration, segregation, and the racial state of the nation with black tongue in white cheek—or vice versa.*
>
> *– Langston Hughes, 1957*[191]

Figure 4.1

Laugh That Off!

The year is 1934, and a new kind of laughter has emerged on the interwar scene of the United States. The stage is Jacob Burck's *Hunger and Revolt: Cartoons*, a 248-page collection of proletarian cartoons taken from the Communist Party USA's magazine *The Daily Worker* and its more artistically inclined sibling, *The New Masses*.

In a short missive called “The Negro,” which heads a section composed of eight of Burck’s cartoons depicting the trials and tribulations of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama, Langston Hughes describes this new laughter as he warns readers about how white supremacy and state violence threaten the rise of working class power. His opening lines document the chilling scene of Ku Klux Klan members gathering on a hillside in the Midwest to re-form their broken terrorist cult, which Hughes curiously and repeatedly dares readers to “laugh that off!” in a test of their ability to laugh even in the most extreme conditions:

> Today, as the Fourth of July 1934, approached, the United Press sends out a release from Kokomo, Indiana, saying that, “The fiery cross blazed again today on the hill around which 100,000 Knights of the Ku Klux Klan met in 1923, summoning remnants of the hooded order for a new campaign…to rejuvenate the Klan ‘for protection of the constitution of the United States’.”
>
> Laugh that off![192]

“Laugh that off” becomes a refrain throughout the piece, where grim laughter stitches together scenes of racialized violence and class conflict. In one vignette, Hughes describes the repression of striking longshore workers in San Francisco during the 1934 general strike; in another he describes attacks by Pinkerton thugs and police against organized workers; in a final scene, Hughes invites readers to scoff at the structural racism of FDR’s New Deal government infrastructure, skewering newly minted programs like the CCC, NRA, and SERA as “new jim crow bars.”

The context—with “laugh that off” appearing as a punchline to a joke—may seem to suggest straightforward irony, where Hughes associates laughter with dismissal and

emphasizes the impossibility of "laughing off" tragic examples of the most violent race and class exploitation. But through the painful repetition of the phrase it becomes clear that Hughes' invitation to laugh—at least to workers—is actually sincere. Indeed, Hughes wants readers of the *Daily Worker* and *The New Masses* to laugh, for as he writes, laughter is the thing that both "chokes the proletarian throat" and "makes the blood run to the fists":

> Burck's powerful drawings, with their crooked judges peering out from behind the pillars of justice and their fat sheriffs carrying the ropes of the lynchers they whitewash, portray the America of today with a laughter that chokes the proletarian throat and makes the blood run to the fists that must be increasingly, militantly clenched to fight the brazen terror that spreads and grows from Alabama to the Pacific, from New York to Texas.[193]

As he describes Burck's cartoons, Hughes provides the reader with a poetics for this particularly grim form of laughing off white supremacy, which takes racialized violence against African Americans as its object and describes the dual-character of laughter as a form of tragicomic representation and a mode of resistance to white supremacy. Hughes suggests that this laughter will serve not just as a replacement for direct action but as preparation for that action: blood must first "run to the fists" before proletarian fists might draw blood from their enemies in return. In the first part of Hughes' description, laughter at the ropes of lynchers registers the oppression of black workers as figurative and literal suffocation (a haunting historical analogue for the Black Lives' Matter slogan "I can't breathe"); in the second, laughter circulates the blood as an image of life in a struggle for life, emboldening black workers to resist terror and fear, and

preparing them, both mentally and physiologically, for action. Certainly the idea of laughing at tragedy is at least as old Aristophanes, and as I have discussed throughout my dissertation, it was part of the shared emotional vocabulary of black writers and activists at the time; what is new about Hughes' invitation to laugh that off and what differentiates it from other accounts of black laughter is that Hughes paradoxically laughs at the suffering of his own race, not the suffering of an enemy, and turns it into a symbol of black worker power.[194] Taken together, Hughes' "The Negro" depicts a militant form of laughter directed at black suffering, which he envisions as a galvanizing agent for action against both white supremacist thugs and the white supremacy carried out by the U.S. State.

While Hughes' work offers a new take on the concept of laughing off white supremacy, the satires of George Schuyler might be its fullest expression. Schuyler, who was an editor of the socialist weekly *The Messenger*, laughed off white supremacy in his own way, developing a new form of laughing at tragedy in his "Shafts and Darts" column for the paper starting in the early 1920's before perfecting it in his satires and pulp fictions in the 1930s. Many of these works appeared in black newspapers like the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and include *Black No More* (1931), *Black Internationale* (1936-37), and *Black Empire* (1937-38). These serial novels drew Schuyler's critique of white supremacy together with the complicity that he saw black cultural institutions playing in creating essentializing representations of blackness and which he viewed as supporting the ideological stranglehold of the color line. Yet, Schuyler's laughter moves beyond a double attack at white supremacy and black institutions, turning laughter at white supremacy into serious reflection on the complicity of both the reader and the author in

the political project of his political foes. Like Hughes, Schuyler laughed at violence against black bodies and at tragic situations facing his characters; yet, the grim laughter that appears throughout his fictions of the 1930's exposes the violence inherent in enacting vengeance for racial violence, which his satire goes to great pains to reveal to readers.

Revising debates about laughter in the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes and Schuyler's laughter in the 1930s shows a departure from the ideal of laughter as a subjective expression of sincere happiness and a return to an older, subversive and ironic form of laughter that laughed at black suffering. This laughter had more in common with the "objective" style of blackface comedy—to use Jesse Redmon Fauset's phrase—than the "subjective" style of laughter she identified during the peak of the Harlem Renaissance.[195] Yet, Hughes and Schuyler demonstrate how this laughter was neither a reactionary nor quietist response to racism and white supremacy, nor a symbol of Old Negro stock characters, as New Negro writers like Alain Locke and William Stanley Braithwaite had argued. In their work, subjective laughter becomes an expression of anger and a tool for articulating and enacting political struggles as an embodied response to tragedy that preserves pain as an engine of action rather than dissipating it through the perceived catharsis that laughter provides.

Hughes and Schuyler's politically engaged practice of laughing off white supremacy has broader implications in studies of the period, revising a common narrative of laughter in the 1930s as a practice that marks a departure from collective political engagement. The boldest of these claims is Tyrus Miller's argument that

modern laughter in the 1930s turns inward and the satire associated with it fails to express a broader political consensus, instead becoming "satire for its own sake."[196] For Miller, the satirist of the 1930s senses that "shared moral values have evaporated and feels no moral solidarity with others." Miller's periodization and his account of satire's growing distance from a sense of collective political expression has everything to do with his account of laughter. In Miller's scheme, laughter in the 1930s is self-reflexive, a "stiffening" mechanism for subjectivity against danger, which marks "that minimal 'spatial' difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature: a difference that preserves the subject, however diminished, in situations of adversity" (51). Indeed, in this account satire fails to represent the political ambitions of a collective because laughter itself ceases to be a collective activity. This solipsistic laughter also signals the weaking of narrative form, where laughter appears at moments of formal rupture and characters stand on the precipice of death: "laughter only breaks out at points where the force of incongruity exceeds the containing energies of the image, at sites where figures rupture and forms fail" (57).

However, as I have argued previously, while this may be a critical appraisal of white British writers, the story was very different in the American scene and in particular for African Americans. Eruptive laughter was a fixture of African American life and cultural production in the 1910's, 1920's and 1930's, appearing in imaginative forms from jazz to poetry to realist fiction. As I continue to show, this laughter was not spontaneous but methodically developed as a response to white supremacist discourses and ideological formations. In this chapter, I show how Hughes and Schuyler shaped a new kind of laughter that renewed modernist forms, including modernist

political cartoons, satires and pulp fiction. While venturing into discussions of these genres, this chapter largely focuses on the forms of laughter found in these imaginative works, and in doing so demonstrates the ways in which these Hughes and Schuyler set about creating tragicomic representations and preserving angry sentiments through their laughter with the explicit goal of fomenting action or creating critical reflection to refine the nature of anti-racist action. At the heart of this argument is also the persistent question about the relationship between modernism and feeling. As Jonathan Greenberg points out in his monograph *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, modernist critics held a skeptical view of the role of sentiment in the work of modernist writers, and modern satirists used their self-expressed suspicion about feeling to fuel a broader rewriting of terms of the modernism in the 1930's.[197] While Hughes and Schuyler's work in the 1930's could be said to express a skeptical attitude toward sentimentality, their cool, matter-of-fact responses to images of black suffering and lynching are conceptually linked to a different genealogy of emotion that I have sketched starting in Chapter 1 that is related to the history of sentimental responses to lynching initiated by white abolitionists in the 19th century. Thus, the sincere and the satirical laughs at black suffering in the 1930s offered Hughes and Schuyler a chance to build on the bitter laughter that I identify in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois starting in the 1910s and use laughter as a way to preserve feelings of anger linked to the representation of injustices. Insofar as I discuss satire, I concur with Greenberg's analysis that the late modernism of Hughes and Schuyler builds on Du Bois' explicitly political agenda and moves beyond bitterness to weaponize the angry sentiments fueled by racial violence against African Americans, which they did through laughter.

Against the critical tradition exemplified by Miller, I identify a tradition of laughing at tragedy in America in the 1930s—in political cartoons and satirical works of fiction—that writers and comic artists used to bring their collective political critiques—of capitalism, imperialism, black cultural institutions, and white supremacy—to the front lines of pickets, anti-racist campaigns, and other sites of struggle. This tradition, which ironically reinvented the pacifying idea of "laughing it off," transforms laughter from a bourgeois pastime or a cure for the blues of the Great Depression to a form for representing deteriorating economic conditions and a style of performance that was used to mediate political struggles. Laughter during the 1930s did not simply turn inwards to preserve isolated, damaged subjects. Instead, a group of politically engaged American activists used laughter to represent their grim realities and to speculate about alternate futures, believing laughter to be a way to swing the odds in their favor and secure victory for the black masses.

From "Laugh It Off" to "Laugh That Off": Reading Hughes with Cartoons

What do Friedrich Nietzsche, Langston Hughes, and proletarian cartoonists like Jacob Burck have in common? All three developed aesthetic theories of laughing at tragedy, which posed alternatives to patterns of laughing it off that affirmed bourgeois values, instead linking laughter at tragedy to forms of collective action. As the brief genealogy in the introduction to my dissertation suggests, laughing it off was a dominant cultural value through the 1910's, 1920's, and 1930's, an ideology of bourgeois individualism, and a practice that was widely seen as a cure for mental strain and a boon to productivity under capitalism. But there was also a counter tradition that

included writers, cartoonists, and activists who used laughing it off to parody bourgeois values and to wage coordinated political attacks. One of these writers was Langston Hughes. In his collaboration with Jacob Burck and other proletarian writers, Hughes developed a new, ironic form of laughter that laughed seriously at scenes of black suffering, envisioning laughter as a weapon in the arsenal of the black masses, and as a way to win political campaigns like the campaign to free the Scottsboro boys. Yet, Hughes' laughter also had another proleptic function, which aligns it with Nietzsche's speculative, future-oriented laugh of "joyful wisdom."[198] Hughes would later identify laughter as a unique future-oriented function in the preface to his collection *The Book of Negro Humor*, published in 1966: "humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it."[199] Laughter for Hughes is thus both a way of representing exploitation and a hinge to a possible future. Hughes' laughter functions both to prepare black workers for battle and, more optimistically, to bring the victory for black workers over their oppressors closer. In its most prolific incarnation, laughing at tragedy can foreshadow the overcoming of that tragedy, becoming a performative method of resistance, and a way for black workers to secure the last laugh in the class war to come.

Burck's political cartoons provide the ground for Hughes' commentary and epitomize the grim state of racial politics in the early 1930s. The eight cartoons that Burck pens in the "The Negro" section of *Hunger and Revolt* form a loose narrative, mixing strategies of modern expressionistic representation with satirical caricatures that attack a variety of institutions—from the Alabama justice system to the NAACP to the Ku Klux Klan—and finally, grim representations of the possible death of the Scottsboro

Boys if justice is not served. The first cartoon in the narrative is the second panel of the sequence. Captioned "—In Black and White," the cartoon shows Alabama Attorney General Thomas E. Knight scratching off the names of black jurors from the Juror Roll, a reference to the argument that the Scottsboro boys were systematically denied due process, which took the first appeal of the case all the way to the Supreme Court. In the third cartoon, the Scottsboro Boys are shown in a jail cell looking at a calendar as it counts down the days until their trial, the caption there reading "They Won't Let Us Die!" Hughes famously visited the Scottsboro Boys in 1932, and prayed with them with a visiting minister and read them humorous poems, "nothing of any seriousness" he recalled in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*.[200] Yet the boys remained unphased by his visit, not moving to greet him, barely acknowledging his presence.

Although Hughes does not directly attack black institutions, Burck's cartoons link the KKK to the NAACP, making the same critique in Hughes' piece implicit. The fourth cartoon in the sequence shows one of the leaders of the NAACP talking to the Sheriff, telling him "The Boys'll Be Around Tonight!" with a can of gasoline in the foreground, and in the next, the NAACP is depicted as a cigar-smoking fat-cat with a money-purse labeled "money collected on Scottsboro." The struggle over who would take on the Scottsboro Boys' legal defense pitted the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) against the NAACP, and the CPUSA accused the NAACP of profiting from the case while refusing to offer any material support. Thus, the figure can be seen washing his hands of responsibility for the fate of the Scottsboro boys, surrounded by an army of hooded and robed Klansmen, the horizon dotted with gallows.

Figure 4.2

The final three cartoons go back and forth between the courthouse and depictions of white supremacist thugs as the trial date draws near. After the absolution of NAACP leaders, the Courthouse is represented with gallows hanging in the front, captioned “Pillars of Justice,” and the racist thugs are shown on the phone saying “The Jedge Says He’ll Do the Job.” In the final cartoon, a protest shows black workers marching in the streets holding a banner that “The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die!”

Figure 4.3

Given the gravity of the images, Hughes' invitation to readers to laugh at Burck's cartoons and at the catalogue of tragic episodes that he describes is not a happy one. Yet, if he is genuine in his insistence on laughing at lynching, what would this laughter sound like, and what would the feeling be that accompanies it? And what would this feeling be useful for? Towards the beginning of "The Negro," Hughes writes, "if you can laugh it off happily, then you can laugh happily, too, at the grim and ironic humor of Jacob Burck's cartoons."[201] Although Hughes wants readers to laugh, his suggestion of laughing happily is ironic: the only people who would laugh happily at Burck's cartoons are white supremacists. But Hughes' point here is more nuanced than an ironic jab at his opponents. Hughes' reading of Burck's cartoons and the laughter that he demands

temporarily makes his audience laugh along with those who would "laugh happily" at these scenes of injustice. This gives Hughes' formation of laughing off white supremacy a new value. Different from both the knee jerk laughter of white supremacists and the self-reflexive laughter of late modern satirists, Hughes envisions enemy factions sharing a laugh, before returning to their respective corners of the ring. This turns his laughing off white supremacy into a performance, a gesture that aims to create a temporary overlap between different political factions, though each express a different affect with this laugh. The laugh creates a temporary identification, and the disjunction between happiness and anger that people experience while laughing follows with disidentification, providing material to contemplate their own political position and to gain an advantage with the secret knowledge of their enemy.[202]

The epistemological advantage ascribed to laughing with one's enemies at scenes of exploitation is confirmed in an earlier piece in *Hunger and Revolt* called, "Strikes and Labor Leaders." That piece's author was William F. Dunne, a founding member of the Communist Party USA and editor of its daily newspaper. Like Hughes, Dunne praises Burck's cartoons for providing a laughter of insight for workers, which emerges out of the desperate scenarios he depicts. He writes: "It is impossible to estimate in any adequate terms the number of times a Burck cartoon has caused that grim laughter on a mass picket line which bosses' thugs fear more than bullets. It is impossible to estimate the number of workers to whom a Burck cartoon has brought lightning insight into a difficult question of strategy and tactics."[203] Dunne's characterization of grim laughter gestures at the political power of the laugh, and frames this laughter as an embodied response to class exploitation at the picket line. Not only

does laughter provide “lightning insight” into pressing questions of strategy, but it is a more powerful tool against police and strike-breakers than bullets. Appearing before “The Negro” in *Hunger and Revolt*, Dunne’s description of grim laughter provides context for Hughes’ piece and pushes his refrain to “laugh that off” further. Laughter expresses a response to the conditions and prepares workers to change it, but laughter for Dunne is also an action itself against exploitation, turning laughter into an embodied response that toggles between invoking a grim future for workers at the hands of capitalist elites and empowering the working class to overthrow racial capitalism.

With a sharper account of the uses that Hughes and Dunne ascribe to laughter, I want to return to the first cartoon in “The Negro” sequence. Although it ends with the image of struggle, the first cartoon of the section begins in defeat, showing a lynched, black male figure with others in the background, and in front of him a book that read “Alabama Law” in the foreground of the panel. This figure, who the reader is meant to identify as one of the Scottsboro Boys, is curious because none of the Scottsboro Boys were lynched, nor were they executed by authorities. The cartoon of the black figure lynched but not dead yet is an image taken out of time, depicting the consequences of the failure to prevail in the communist led campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys. The Black Christ imagery was common in the era of *The New Masses*, but critics of Hughes’ work have aligned it with his turn to communism, and with an aesthetic approach that attempted to appeal for unity between opposing political groups.[204] Hughes’ poem “Christ in Alabama” (1931), republished in his book about the Scottsboro Boys called *Scottsboro Limited,* was his first response to the case, and his concluding lines, “*Nigger Christ/On the cross of the South*” deploys the image of the Black Christ figure, a popular

trope for other black writers at the time, and an icon for black power. Yet by 1934, Hughes had become the President of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and when the NAACP opposed the International Labor Defense's involvement in the Scottsboro case, Hughes took the side of the I.L.D. Thus, Burck's use of the Black Christ appropriates the symbol of black power for the communist cause and showing an alliance between Hughes and the Communist party.

The image of the Black Christ appears on the recto side of the book opposite the end of Hughes' column, which sits in the place of the captions for other panels. This peculiar layout requires further comment. Hughes concludes his missive with these words:

> Some of Jacob Burck's cartoons picture the harsh realities of today, the wall of struggle; others foreshadow the marching power of the proletarian future. Let the capitalists, who pay for our oppression, laugh that future off, if they can."

In the final moment, Hughes turns the tables, calling laughter a "foreshadow" and daring capitalists to "laugh that future off." This completes the poetic reconfiguration of laugh it off by substituting the victory for workers, "that future," in place of the grammatical object "it," the laundry list of racism and oppression that he presents to the reader. "Laugh that off" offers a response to the bourgeois pastime of laughing it off, taking the agency from the object of laughter and giving it back to the laughing subject. Appearing opposite from the Black Christ, Hughes dares readers to laugh at the fictional lynching of the Scottsboro Boys as a way to ensure victory, not death, as a result of their struggle.

In other accounts of laughing at the absurdity of white supremacy, critics have argued that this laughter—at tortured bodies, lynching, "Negro burning"—resonates with the incongruity theory of laughter and with theories of tragicomic humor. The classic statements on incongruity, from Enlightenment philosophers, represent laughter as a reaction to the incongruity between our expectations and the reality of a situation, making laughter the experience of adjusting to new and unforeseen conditions. Similar to laughing it off, incongruous laughter allows the laugher to adapt and create a new perspective that allows for the potential to reshape and change entrenched behaviors. In *Laughing Fit to Kill*, for example, Glenda Carpio describes how incongruity theories relate to satirical and fictional accounts which treat slavery with black humor, as defined by surrealist writers, as laughter at absurdity: "at its best, the humor of incongruity allows us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place and to get us, especially when the humor is hot enough to push our buttons, to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race."[205] Another form of laughter, that Carpio identifies with black humor, the laughter of tragicomic humor, resonates with the sentiment creates by Hughes' grim laughter. Tragicomic humor involves the "feeling of the opposite," which evolves from the "perception of the opposite" associated with incongruity theory. This feeling is weighted with the foreshadowing of doom that will befall the tragicomic hero, and this has the effect of catching the audience in a state of ambivalence:

> One is caught between the desire to laugh and the suspicion that, in doing so, one could be cruelly laughing at a tragedy that is about to unfold. One is caught, that is, between wanting and not wanting to laugh. (30)

The paradox of laughing at lynching, or being told by Hughes to laugh at lynching, plays on this tragicomic sentiment, but offers something of the opposite—the desire *not* to laugh, while being told to laugh anyway. This is for Luigi Pirandello characteristic of the "troubled and obstructed" character of tragicomic laughter, because the end result of the tragicomic is tragedy. Obstructed laughter resonates with Hughes' identification of laughter "that chokes the proletarian throat," though for Hughes, the tragic ending is not certain. The usefulness of laughing at tragedy is that it uses the tragicomic sentiment to transform the tragic ending, using the power of the laugh to rescript both the genre and the denouement.

Dark Laughter At Home and Abroad: The Case of Langston Hughes and Ollie Harrington

Hughes' piece "The Negro" provides an aesthetic theory of laughing off white supremacy during the Great Depression, and it marks a departure from his prior representations of laughter in the 1920's in the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes' focus in those years was explicating the aesthetics of the blues, which he referred to in his autobiography *The Big Sea* as "laughing to keep from crying."[206] This project culminated in his realist novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), a bildungsroman, which catalogued the uses of laughter and their relationship to blues and jazz in African American communities in the 1910s-1920s. In *Not Without Laughter*, a coming of age novel about a boy learning the harsh realities of black life in a small town in Kansas, Hughes developed the theme of blues laughter—"laughing to keep from crying"—which as the title of the novel suggests is one of the central necessities of black life. This was

a laughter of the body, a laughter that affirmed life in its sadness and disarray as it marked the dissolution of family, represented interracial conflict, and was used to illustrate the dynamics of racial conflict.

By contrast, the 1930s saw Hughes return to laughter as a figure for drawing the melancholy affects of the blues into the service of proletarian literature. This was part of a larger transition for Hughes from the cultural sphere of the Harlem Renaissance, his association with those black writers and artists who his friend Wallace Thurman mocked as "The Niggerati," to the multiracial and fellow-traveling cultural front. The same year he wrote "The Negro," Hughes also published *The Ways of White Folks*, a short story collection that further marked his departure from the Harlem Renaissance and his entrée into the realm of proletarian literary politics. In his review of *The Ways of White Folks* for *The Nation,* Sherwood Anderson warned Hughes to temper his temper, reading the collection as a slap in the face to liberals who supported the Harlem Renaissance.[207] But perhaps the matter was even more simple: Hughes had lost faith in the politics underlying the aesthetic practices he had helped to invent, and which had brought him fame. Oceola, a character in Hughes' short story from that collection called "The Blues I'm Playing," had this simple takedown of the cultural politics of the New Negro movement in the late 20's: "And as for the cultured Negroes who were always saying art would break down color lines, art could save the race and prevent lynchings! Bunk!"[208] Hughes' turn to proletariat literature has been well-documented, but few have paid attention to how his grim laughter bridged his early interest in laughter and the blues with his well-known political humor in his Simple stories.[209] Before Hughes evangelized the power of humor in political rhetoric, like he did when he told a crowd in

Chicago in 1957 that the best strategy to fight the Dixiecrats was to "laugh them to death with well-aimed ridicule," he developed his ideas about laughter immersed in the political turmoil of the 1930s.[210]

Towards the end of the decade, and before he began writing Simple stories, Hughes paid a visit to Madrid, to the front of the Spanish Civil War, which had divided the city with trenches that were dug just outside houses and which streetcars stopped at to drop of soldiers from their neighborhoods. While there, he wrote a dispatch called "Laughter in Madrid," which framed the anti-fascist resistance efforts around the persistence of laughter as a symbol of the continuation of life amidst the war's rupture, an image of hope in dark times. This period shows the transformation of Hughes' laughter from one inflected by the political convictions of the 1930's to a laughter that attempted to evince universal social values associated with overcoming fascism and surviving the pressures of a world war. The piece begins like the setup for a joke but immediately becomes serious: "The thing about living in Madrid these days is that you never know when a shell is going to fall. Or where. Any time is firing time for Franco."[211] Compared to other articles he wrote in the preceding months for the *Afro-American*, "Laughter in Madrid," which appeared in the January 28, 1938 edition of *The Nation*, was less propagandistic and more focused on the persistence of humanity in the face of fascism and the threat of death. While in other articles he focused on the "double victory" of connecting fighting fascist racism abroad with fighting racism on the home front, Hughes' article in the nation focuses on two episodes of humor that he juxtaposes. In one, he explains how laughter is connected to the will to live, recalling the Spanish joke that Madrilenos tell each other when they have no food—"Bread with

bread, food for fools!"—which makes everyone laugh whenever the joke is told. This kind of laughter represents another kind of laughing it off. As he later describes, the scarcity of wartime conditions leads to ubiquitous laughter that is associated with bravery, not directed at a political opponent, but at the conditions themselves, which evinces comradery and aids the soldiers to continue fighting.

> Bad cigarettes, poor wine, little bread, no soap, no sugar! Madrid, dressed in bravery
> and laughter; knowing death and the sound of guns by day and night, but resolved to
> live, not die! (124)

The episode, which he would retitle "Death and Laughter" in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, ends with the ironic juxtaposition of fighting in Spain with fighting in America. The city's residents are in a theater, and shells begin falling outside. At first no one moves, but as the shelling gets closer, the manager checks outside, and he makes an announcement that he is cancelling the film, but before he can finish his sentence, a chorus of boos rain down on him, and he withdraws his protest; the movie goes on. Hughes ends the episode by identifying the name of the film, an American picture called "Terror in Chicago," and the experience shows him the connections between the fight abroad and the fight at home: "Artillery fire outside and machine-gun fire on the screen mingled, one hardly distinguishable from the other."[212] The laughter in the new piece called "Death and Laughter" recalls Du Bois' laughter in his editorial about Punitive Expedition in 1916 and points to Hughes' use of laughter as a grounding for identification between anti-fascist fighters aboard and anti-racist fights at home. Hughes'

practice of laughing at white supremacy shows his use of laughter as a mobile form that he could use to modulate between different contexts to cultivate solidarity and to delineate the bounds of one political group from another. Laughter gradually transforms from its alignment with proletarian values in the early 1930's to aligning with a more universal set of human values in the 1940's, not coincidentally due to the pressures of the war and the struggle against fascism in Spain. This also tracks Hughes' turn away from his involvement with the CPUSA, which he would notoriously deny in his 1953 hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations.

One counterpoint to Hughes' political transformation and the transition in his philosophy of laughter is the work of Oliver "Ollie" Harrington. Harrington, who got his start as a cartoonist at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, went from drafting humorless cartoons in the early 1930's to wickedly satirical and humorous cartoons in the later 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. Like Hughes, Harrington's work moves from humorless laughter to humorous laughter, yet unlike Hughes, Harrington's work retains a grim affect directed at the realities of white supremacy.

Like in Burck's cartoons from the same era, laughter is all but absent from Harrington's early cartoons, save for laughter of black subjects in confrontation with white oppressors. In some of his earliest published work from 1932, heavily-inked images owing to the Ashcan school show black workers confronting white capitalists or white mobs. In one cartoon entitled "Get Yourself a Job, Mr. Voter!" Harrington shows a white politician (ostensibly Herbert Hoover) in front of an expressionistic Capitol building in Washington, confronting a group labelled "Negro Voters," while hovering above their

heads are a row of white men representing different occupations holding sacks of money. A brief poem appears below the image:

> Never mind the sleek appointees holding jobs in Washington
> Organize in your home district where the jobs for you are won
> A windbag there in a swivel chair is a pretty sight to witness
> But a solid hold on the home payroll will better aid your business.[213]

With its humorous send up of politicians, the brief poem offers a sprinkle of laughter absent from the confrontation represented in the image while seriously emphasizing the importance of organizing locally. Like Hughes' commentary in "The Negro", Harrington's caption urges his audience to laugh at the grim image and take action. In another cartoon published in *National News*, Harrington depicts the confrontation between a black man and a lynch mob. In the first panel of the cartoon, called "Handkerchief-Head Negros Must Go," a massive figure on the horizon labelled "Mob Terrorism Lynching" is holding a torch and a noose and approaches a black figure who is pleading for his life. In the second panel, the same black figure wears a suit and holds a club in one hand while aiming his other fist at the figure of the mob, whose expression has changed to a fearful one. This simple cartoon represents a shift in tone from the Old Negro to a New Negro figure who is confidently fighting back and laughing at his oppressors. However, as I have previously argued, the operative emotion of this new figure is not happiness or joy but anger.

Harrington's early cartoons show the influence of communist propaganda, and later images are even more explicit. In one image accompanying an article called "Southernism" in *The People's Voice* (1942), a rich white couple is shown with halos

above their heads drinking sweet tea at the top of the frame while below them a collage-like sketch depicts a scene where white men and women are smiling and drinking and a sheriff holding a noose above black workers bent low carrying sacks on their backs. This heavily-inked image sets out to formally demystify the racism persistent in southern social relations that allows the white couple at the top of the image to exist. Yet, as Harrington's aesthetic sensibility grew into one of the defining images of the African American Popular Front, his work shifted from representing laughter as a humorless prize in the struggle between whites and blacks for superiority to the humorous reaction of his audience to the plight of his characters who are found mired in hopeless situations. His most famous comic strip was called "Dark Laughter," and was originally published in *The Amsterdam News* in 1935. In it, Harrington chronicled the trials and tribulations of "Bootsie," a hapless African American character trying to navigate the contradictions of racism in America. Compared to other content published in these magazines, "Dark Laughter" was often the target of criticism from readers. In one exchange, a reader named Dorothy K. Williams wrote to the editors of *The People's Voice,* who also published Bootsie cartoons, and complained of the low nature of the characters in "Dark Laughter" which she argued degraded the overall high quality of the paper. Harrington wrote a response which was published in the following issue:

> With characteristic perverseness peculiar to maniacs, Southern Congressmen and cartoonists, I do not consider my cartoons low, degrading, or otherwise odiferous to the sensitive masses. I still obstinately believe that there are some imbeciles left among us who find time in between bone-pulverizing bombings, mass murder and other sadistic forms of civilized recreation to laugh. Pee Wee

> [another character], Bootsie and company are harmless fun-loving beings, eternally catching hell but still coming up with a smile.[214]

In one cartoon, from 1941, Bootsie is shown being beaten by his nephew underneath the Christmas three with the baseball bat he gave him as a present. The caption reads: "Now Pluto, you stop beatin' your Uncle Bootsie with the present he give you. Go outside an' beat somebody who ain't give you nothin'." In another Bootsie and his friend look at their Christmas tree and the friend says "Guess we better not leave the tree up too long—the landlord may think we got something and jack up the rent." Indeed, it is the biting satire of these cartoons that earns them the name of "Dark Laughter"—both the laughter of African Americans at the realities of racism, and the grim character of that laughter. Yet, as a counterpoint to Hughes (who was a great friend of Harrington's), many of Harrington's images remain almost shocking nature. In 1942's cartoon in *The People's Voice*, Harrington illustrates a dead black soldier holding a note that calls for solidarity with the people of South Africa—an early reference to apartheid. The caption reads:

> War Alms: Freedom not only for the people of ravished Europe but also for the millions of oppressed colored people of Africa—signed by the Negro youth who shall soon be on the foreign battlefields.[215]

In another 1942 cartoon from *The People's* Voice, Harrington returns to a familiar trope from Du Bois, illustrating the contradiction of black soldiers dying abroad to fight fascism with a visual representation of a similar death due to lynching in the south. While Hughes may have softened his laughter with his Simple stories, Harrington's cartoons

show a grim laughter that extends beyond the 30's and a continuation of his political commitments of the 1930's into the 40's and 50's.

George Schuyler and the Right to Laugh

While Hughes and Harrington advocated for laughing sincerely at the specter of racial violence, George Schuyler pursued a grim laugh shot through with layers of irony. And yet, Schuyler shared Hughes and Harrington's commitment to use laughter at violence to manifest political consensus in reforming black institutions and challenging white supremacist discourses and ideologies. Beginning in 1923, George Schuyler wrote a column for *The Messenger* called "Shafts and Darts," which he worked on in collaboration with Theophilus Lewis in 1924 and 1925. The purpose of the column, according to Schuyler and Lewis, was to produce as much laughter as possible at the expense of everyone. Although this might seem like a nihilistic stance, a closer look at the column shows that Schuyler and Lewis intended their laughter to have a democratizing effect, unsettling the rigid and often commercially driven norms of what was considered laughable. In one column called "The Right to Laugh," the two satirists set their intentions for the column, linking objects of laughter to norms of race and class representation, and positing instead a "right to laugh" at everything, including those objects that didn't square with the accepted norms. As they write:

> One can laugh at the violent impact of a portly posterior on icy pavement, the crushing of a derby hat or the squashing of a lemon meringue pie on some citizen's physiognomy, but to laugh at an undertaker's funeral, a marriage, or the annihilation of a battalion of wage slaves fighting to make the world safe for

democracy, is sufficient to bring down upon our heads an avalanche of curses and calamities.[216]

In a word, Schuyler's critique of American humor in "The Right to Laugh" is a criticism of a normative politics of laughter. While he laments the elevation of slapstick humor at the expense of gallows humor, his main criticism is the set of values underlying what audiences were permitted to laugh at and what was considered taboo. As he writes, "We may smile broadly at the incantations of a Buddhist, but not those of a Baptist. We may chuckle at the fetish worship of an African, but we must maintain a straight face at the flag worship of an American" (263). In its bid for equal hits, Schuyler's "Right to Laugh" has been compared to Wyndham Lewis' description of satiric laughter in his study *Men Without Art* (1934). For Lewis, the ethical ideal underlying satirical laughter is the concept that "either everyone should be laughed at or no one should be laughed at."[217] Schuyler's democratic vista is less motivated by the ethical pressures of flattening laughter—the all or none that Lewis argues for—than by an impulse to counterbalance the inequalities that already exist. While Schuyler advocated the democratization of laughter, he did not demur from laughing, sometimes too often or too enthusiastically, at his political opponents. Instead of a "pure laugh" Schuyler's laughter is a laugh of reparations, which chose its targets in order to expand the possibilities for racial politics and otherwise. This bears out in Jeffrey Ferguson's assessment of Schuyler's theory of laughter as a political tool: "Those who want to change society must find their own objects of laughter."[218]

In this section, I argue that Schuyler's satire represented an attempt to use laughter to reform black political and cultural institutions, and to counter white

supremacist attacks. Yet, as I argue, he moved beyond this paradigm in the 1930s by warning of the dangers of excessive laughter against one's political opponents. Schuyler did this by inviting readers to laugh at scenes of tragedy, and in doing so, to become temporarily complicit with those who could laugh sincerely at tragedy because they thought it comedy instead. In *Black No More*, Schuyler draws on his reader's desire to laugh with revenge at the ironic execution of white supremacists to warn against the dangers of becoming complicit in spectacles of political violence, which all-too-often justify the killing of blacks. In *Black Empire*, he pushes this strategy further, forcing the reader to consider not just the narrative's ironic rendering of spectacular violence, but the alignment of laughter, aestheticized violence, and fascist politics.[219] Rewriting accounts of Schuyler's literary politics, his laughter is both the conduit for satire and a critique of satire's dehumanizing tendencies. In this sense, I align my reading of Schuyler's satire with Jonathan Greenberg's argument about modern satire that he makes in the introduction to his monograph *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* where he describes the joining of satire and the grotesque to fight against the perceived political coercion of sentimentality.[220] But just as Greenberg confronts the problem of what counts as sentimental, Schuyler's work provides a counterpoint where situations of racial violence that were historically sentimentalized by abolitionists are rendered with cool, matter-of-fact rationality and frequently accompanied by laughter. Schuyler's satire evinces modern satire's skepticism of sentimentality, but by representing the fact of racial violence through laughter, his work criticizes this standpoint by rendering the lack of sentiment as a marker of the horror of lynching. Thus, while Schuyler scholar Jeffrey Ferguson argues that Schuyler's laughter undermines ideology, creating suspicion for

more committed forms of politics, it is precisely Schuyler's ambivalence about laughter that blurs the lines between affirmation and critique, aiming at reviving norms for cultural institutions while criticizing the foundation that led them to become complicit with white supremacy. In this way, Schuyler was perhaps less an iconoclast than some critics would believe, especially in comparison with Hughes' aggressive indictment of the NAACP in Burck's *Hunger and Revolt*.

If Hughes' style of laughing off white supremacy was inspired by his growing interest in socialism and proletarian literature, Schuyler was inspired, along with other black satirists of the Harlem Renaissance, by HL Mencken, whose cultivation of native American humor served as a spark for Schuyler's thought on politics and their relationship to aesthetics. Frequently called the "Black Mencken," Schuyler, along with a cohort of satirists from Harlem, including Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Walter White, and others, developed a sophisticated "method" for laughing off their political foes, using newspaper and magazine columns and eventually novels as their platform. As Darryl Dickson-Carr has pointed out, James Weldon Johnson, whom Schuyler would later lampoon for his association with the New Negro intelligentsia, first touched on this method in a 1918 column which appears to lay out the blueprint for Menckenian invectives to come.[221] In the column, Johnson praises Mencken's ability to "shatter the walls of foolish pride and prejudice and hypocrisy merely by laughing at them," identifying a "lesson in Mr. Mencken for Negro writers," which provides a satirical, intellectual approach to writing about tragic political issues like racial violence and white supremacy. [222] Setting an example that Hughes would later follow, Johnson describes

the uses for this kind of laughter by addressing the limit case for political violence, the spectacle of lynching:

> Take the subject of lynching, for example; when the average Negro writer tackles the subject he loudly and solemnly protests in the name of justice and righteousness. By this method he may reach every one, except the lyncher. As far as this method reaches the lyncher at all, it makes him take himself more seriously. Instead of allowing the lyncher to feel that he is the one to whom appeals for justice should be addressed, he should be made to feel that is just what he is—a low-browed, under-civilized, criminal degenerate."[223]

The logic of Mencken/Johnson's method is a refusal to take lynchers seriously, which paradoxically engages them directly, and unlike protests, refuses to recognize them as arbiters of morality. The gambit of Johnson's satiric method is to disparage the lyncher with laughter, with the hope that being taken less than seriously, the lyncher recognizes the error in their ways.[224]

Johnson's column made Mencken's method available to black writers to deride their political foes, and in the case of white supremacists, a common structure for this satirical attack was to represent the foe as the perpetrator of barbarism against the forces of civilization, which the writer claims for their own rhetorical purposes. In his later column "Satire as a Weapon" (1922), Johnson would revisit this strategy and describe the limits of this form of satire, remarking that sometimes the only appropriate response to the absurdity of white supremacist positions on race is to laugh:

> There are a number of phases of the race question which are so absurd that they cannot be effectively treated except in a satirical manner. What is the use of

> arguing with, or even denouncing an ignorant, bigoted, Negro burning, low white of Texas, who believes more firmly than he does in his religion that he is innately superior, not only to all colored men but even to all such foreign whites as Frenchmen and Dagoes, etc. The only thing to do is to make him feel that you laugh at his pretensions to superiority and so far as you individually are concerned, he is a low browed, un cultivated, un Christian savage, in fact, a cruel joke on civilization.[225]

Johnson's exposition of laughing off white supremacy reconfigures laughter from the perspective of the white supremacist. Far from an expression of individual subjectivity, Johnson's laugh represents laughter in its most dangerous form, a bullet with no emotional depth, an expression whose sole purpose is to disparage. Unlike laughing it off, which sought to restore perspective and provide a quanta of emotional relief, this satirical approach to laughing at tragedy intensifies the situation, using laughter to create a vicious contest over the moral high ground of the situation. Johnson's laughter also posits a rhetorical advantage for the laugher because they appear to have a collective behind them, which has the effect of singling out white supremacists as individuals instead of a group. This inverts the social dynamics laid out in Nietzsche's theorizations of laughter. Through the rhetorical force that Johnson imagines in this satire, the black laugher lays claim to the norm-enforcing power of laughter. Schuyler's later work pushes this laughter further, putting an ironic edge on Johnson's straightforward critique of racist laughter and dampening the reader's enthusiasm for vengeance by tempering his satirical laughter with tragicomic pathos.

“AND SO ON AND SO ON”: Laughing with White Supremacists

Schuyler’s modern satires used laughter at tragedy to mediate between forms of individual and collective subjectivity and to create temporary moments of reflection on the ethics of taking certain forms of collective action. In *Black No More*, Schuyler uses laughter to ruthlessly skewer his political opponents. Yet the novel begins more modestly, taking as its starting point a typical blues theme, the main character’s search for laughter to cure his lonely blues. When the novel opens, it’s New Years Eve, and the main character, Max Disher, laments the fact that he can’t “share the hilarity of the crowd” because he doesn’t have a girlfriend. With his sidekick Bunny Brown, Max heads to a speakeasy in search of a date, but his hopes for “the democracy of nightlife” are dashed when the beautiful strawberry blonde woman he is pursuing rejects him because he is black. Already unable to laugh without a date, Max makes a fool out of himself in front of his friend Bunny, whose laughter and teasing target Max’s misidentification of the woman’s race: “You said she was a cracker, an’ now I guess you know it.[226] When Max goes home and later falls asleep, he has a humorous dream where he fantasizes about succeeding in asking the blond woman out and with her enacting his revenge on the white race by dominating an army of white slaves. By the end of the dream, he is brought back to reality by the haunting vision of a lynching:

> Then he fell asleep at five o’clock and promptly dreamed of her. Dreamed of dancing with her, dining with her, motoring with her, sitting beside her on a golden throne while millions of manacled white servants prostrated themselves before him. Then there was a nightmare of grim, gray men with shotguns, baying

hounds, and a heap of gasoline-soaked faggots and a screeching, fanatical mob." (6)

From the opening pages, Schuyler links the dream of his main character's romantic success, freedom, and power with horrific violence against his enemies. This prolonged joke celebrates the main character and the reader's desire for a carnivalesque inversion while also reminding the reader of the violent price that must be paid to reverse those racial power dynamics. Max's dream would also be familiar to black readers because it ironically recalls W.E.B. Du Bois's repeated invocations of Africa in *Darkwater*. Du Bois' novel repeatedly invokes the image of Africans as slaves prostrated at the throne of a white ruler: "Twenty centuries after Christ, Black Africa—prostrated, raped, and shamed, lies at the conquering feet of the Philistines of Europe."[227] Schuyler chuckles at Du Bois' overwrought rhetoric by making Max's dream an image of the carnivalesque inversion of the bondage of Africa. The inversion of racial hierarchy structures Max's desire and the reader's desire throughout the narrative, but this is only one half of his prophetic dream. At the same time, Schuyler laughs at the Garveyite fantasy of pan-African liberation by tying it to the lynching scene at the end of the dream. Indeed, the only way for Max to achieve dominion will be through political violence against his white opponents, but ironically Max characterizes the dream as a nightmare because he thinks the lynch mob is coming for him. In the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the other half of the dream—the nightmare of the lynching—is also a comic inversion where the bumbling antagonists are subjected to the violent ritual they claim to support, but the gruesome and realist representation of the lynching departs from the rest of the novel's

satirical tone, introducing an ethical dilemma and reminding the reader of the price that must be paid for power.

When Max wakes up, as if still in a dream, he discovers the “Black-No-More, Incorporated” process for racial transformation invented by Dr. Julius Crookman. With the vision of dominating the white race still in his head, Max takes the plunge to become white, and soon after the operation is complete, he takes his newfound identity on the road to experience the carefree life of whites and laugh at his own trickery: “He would just play around, enjoy life and laugh at the white folks up his sleeve. God! What an adventure!” (30). When he learns what life on the other side of the color line is like, his excitement fades and he finds the social life of white people dull. To him, white people’s happiness seems forced compared to the easy, gay expression of happiness that African Americans signify through their laughter. And because he is perceived as white, he is exposed to the racist tirades of whites, which infuriate him. Like the passing characters I reference in my second chapter, Max responds as if he were passing with ticklish laughter, though the threat of being discovered is nonexistent.

Max’s boredom on the other side of the color line leads him to conclude that he should at least use his newfound whiteness to make a profit, so he responds to a job listing put out by the Knights of Nordica, Schuyler’s thinly veiled reference to the Ku Klux Klan. After Max is hired on by the Knights of Nordica, he reflects on his relationship to the white masses, and unlike Johnson’s strategy of direct attack, Schuyler’s narration reveals Max’s lackadaisical attitude towards poor, racist whites, and his opportunistic view of their idiocy.

> He had no belief in the racial integrity nonsense nor any confidence in the white masses whom he thought were destined to flock to the Knights of Nordica. On the contrary, he despised and hated them. He had the average Negro's justifiable fear of the poor whites and only planned to use them as a stepladder to the real money (40).

Schuyler's representation of the white masses differs sharply from Johnson's, but then, so does his audience. In *Black No More*, the message of exploiting the white masses for money resonates with the novel's class analysis of racial essentialism: racial hierarchy is about making money for white and black elites alike, and Max's transformation from white to black lays this bare.[228]

With more and more blacks undergoing the Black-No-More process, the atmosphere of black neighborhoods changes, and laughter—an omnipresent sign of blackness in the novel—disappears with it. The sound of laughter is replaced by the sounds of economic production and accumulation, and without laughter, individual anxiety replaces more ambient or communal expression of racial joy:

> Gone was the almost European atmosphere of every Negro ghetto: the music, laughter, gaiety, jesting and abandon. Instead, one noted the same excited bustle, wild looks and strained faces to be seen in a war time soldier camp, around a new oil district or before a gold rush. The happy-go-lucky Negro of song and story was gone forever and in his stead was a nervous, moneygrubbing black, stuffing away coin in socks, impatiently awaiting a sufficient sum to pay Dr. Crookman's fee. (52)

If the novel begins with a search for laughter, its progress shows a steady decline in laughter because of the Black-No-More procedure and the growing number of whites. The rush to save money to afford the procedure also leads into Schuyler's most sustained critique of the black intelligentsia, including the NAACP, Du Bois, and other officials who panic at the threat of losses to their organizations. At the novel's most devastating, Max and Bunny (who also undergoes the Black-No-More process and works for Max as his personal fixer) hatch a plan to convince black leaders—including Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard (a caricature of W.E.B. Du Bois)—to lecture to white audiences for the Knights of Nordica because it was profitable for their organization to reinstate the racial hierarchy, with Santop Licorice (a caricature of Garvey) already working for the Knights of Nordica as an infiltrator. Like his attack on the white masses, and like Jacob Burck's alignment of the NAACP fat cats with the murderous KKK, Schuyler's "dart" at the black establishment represents organizations and leaders as motived by shallow monetary gains and prestige.

Towards the end of the novel, the Knights of Nordica set their sights on the presidency, and they combine forces with another white supremacist organization, the Anglo-Saxon Association, and plan to make their leader—Grand Imperial Wizard Givens—the Democratic presidential candidate, and the Anglo-Saxon leader—Arthur Snobbcraft—the Vice President. Their strategy is to oppose Black-No-More and to conduct genealogical research to expose the "true" racial identities of all who have undergone the Black-No-More process, a task which Snobbcraft enlists a data scientist named Buggerie to pursue. The plan backfires when Buggerie's research turns up that more than 50 percent of the population has black ancestry, and that a host of central

characters, including Snobbcraft, Buggerie, and Givens, all have black heritage. Snobbcraft and Buggerie move to destroy the evidence, but it already has been stolen by their political opponents and leaked to the press. The revelation of their blackness—at least as defined by 19th-century "one drop" understandings of race as a purely heritable, natural category—puts the election out of reach for the white supremacist Democratic party hopefuls, and Snobbcraft and Buggerie, the two fool characters, escape the riotous rank-and-file of their organization by stealing a plane and heading for Mexico, only to crash-land in Happy Hill Mississippi. Thinking they need to disguise their identities after their racial revelation, the two Anglo-Saxon Association leaders black-up with a tin of shoe-polish before heading into town. Little do Snobbcraft and Buggerie know they have just arrived in a town renowned for its racial purity, illiteracy, and love of lynching. When they enter the town in blackface, the townspeople seize them, parading them through the street and beating them before chaining them to iron-post in front of the general store. The two men plead for their lives, demanding that the townspeople remove their clothes so that they can see their white skin underneath. When they do, the townspeople are disappointed to discover their whiteness, and the men are released. Cleaning themselves in front of the general store, the news arrives that Givens and Snobbcraft are of Negro descent, and the townspeople identify Snobbcraft and Buggerie as fugitives and once more turn on them. The passage that follows provides a gruesome and realistic description of a lynching, that is out of place in the otherwise whimsical and carnivalesque passages of satire in the rest of the narrative. The scene unironically underscores the merriment involved in the lynching as festive activity, with the grotesque mutilation of the men and the game of their attempted

escape. After the two white supremacists have their genitals and ears cut off and sewed to their backs, Snobbcraft and Buggerie are told to run, and after a few feet, they are shot “amid the uproarious laughter of the congregation” (147). The victims are tied and burned, as the crowd laughs and woops with glee.

The end of the lynching scene describes the town’s patriarch, the Rev. McPhule, beaming out on his congregation as they fight for souvenirs from the burnt body. The narration here extends the gaiety of the lynching scene ad infinitum as the narrative makes a jump from the line “He was supremely happy” to a centered and indented ellipsis that reads:

AND SO ON AND SO ON.

The break in the narrative signifies an ironic return to laughing it off, and it gestures at a reversal of the Nietzschean idea of “eternal recurrence,” where the laughter of the white supremacist McPhule condemns the ethics of the lynching and the glee associated with it. The merry scene of the lynching formally replicates Hughes’ aggressive, rhetorical retort to the lynching scenes in Burck’s cartoons—“laugh *that* off.” Indeed, Schuyler forces his readers to confront their own violent desires during the slapstick scenes of Snobbcraft and Buggerie’s escape, which become the very realistic scenes of lynching. The scene is structured to make readers want to laugh, though that laughter is impossible to conceive of without laughing at the parallel and nondiegetic lynching of blacks that the procedural nature of the narrative references. As Sonnet Retman points out, however, this scene brings us into the uncomfortable position of being complicit with the townspeople.[229] To counter the seriousness—the tragic recognition of complicity and the recognition of tragedy—“AND SO ON AND SO ON” seeks to extend

the laugh—bracketing off the lynching scene from the rest of the novel, and framing it as a moment of slapstick excess to extend this moment of complicity, which inevitably becomes dramatic contemplation.

Like Hughes, Schuyler wants us to laugh at lynching: laughter bridges the gap between black readers and white supremacist characters, creating a momentary identification/disidentification and forces the audience to confront the violence lurking in their desire to invert the racial hierarchy. Where Hughes attempted to use laughter to rescript the tragicomic genre, Schuyler asks his reader to interrogate their casual complicity with the violent spectacle of lynching when the victim is their political foe. While Schuyler employ's Mencken and Johnson's technique of denigrating his foes with laughter throughout *Black No More*, his work moves beyond the scope of reforming political institutions to a more surprising goal.[230] By creating a prolonged moment of identification/disidentification with the white supremacist leaders, Schuyler's interest is in constituting an interracial community of readers through our failure to laugh at this comic scene. This also reconfigures satirical laughter as the paradoxical opposite of a defense against individual annihilation and instead as a potential conduit for intersubjective, interracial connections. This is in line with what Jonathan Greenberg has delineated as a different kind of modernist satire, a "self undoing (of) satire," which involves "a creeping wariness of satire's own strategies and their consequences" which "satire breaks down or gives way to a grotesque aesthetic based in aversive feelings of uncanny anxiety, fear, and revulsion," in order to establish new forms of authenticity.[231] Certainly Schuyler's satire sought to establish a new form of authenticity, and the lack of

laughter at the generically comic scene of the lynching creates a tragicomic sentiment that offers grounds for connection.

It is difficult, however, to avoid the disturbing racial disidentification that Schuyler anatomizes, which occurs in the novel during the lynching scene. When some of those who underwent the Black-No-More treatment in the town are caught not laughing with the rest of the townspeople, they are pressured to laugh and participate, forcing them to enthusiastically join in the violence for their own safety.

> Two or three whitened Negroes, who, remembering what their race had suffered in the past, would fain have gone to the assistance of the two men but fear for their own lives restrained them. Even so they were looked at rather sharply by some of the Christ Lovers because they did not appear to be enjoying the spectacle as thoroughly as the rest. Noticing these questioning glances, the whitened Negroes began to yell and prod the burning bodies with sticks and cast stones at them. This exhibition restored them to favor and banished any suspicion that they might not be one-hundred-percent Americans (147).

Thus, while Schuyler's *Black No More* attempts to create grounds for an intersubjective experience of identification through shared laughter, his novel ultimately remains ambivalent about the promise for such an interracial identification to take hold. Instead, Schuyler shows us how the structure of racial hierarchy compels disidentification for survival, an outsized tragedy that threatens the ability to build permanent bridges between members of different races.

Ruthless Laughter and Difficult Satire

If in *Black No More* Schuyler used laughter to check the reader's enthusiasm for political violence, in *Black Empire* Schuyler ups the ante, using laughter to critique the author's own appetite for violence, and in doing so measuring the reader's desire for radical political action against their humanist values. *Black Empire*, subtitled "Story of Black Genius Against the World," was a serial novel published in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier* from 1936-1938, with the first installment, "Black Internationale," appearing between November 21, 1936-July 3, 1937, and its sequel, "Black Empire," appearing from October 2, 1937 to April 16, 1938. The novels have been critically received as utopian fictions of sorts, which draw on tropes from sci-fi and detective fiction to chronicle the one man's quest to conquer Africa and reunify all black people under one black empire. The serials were produced quickly, with Schuyler writing each chapter and submitting them to paper's editors just a week before its publication. Only in 1991 was it reissued together under the title *Black Empire*, transcribed by the editors and scanned from sometimes-illegible microfilm. For these stories, Schuyler opted to discard his own name in favor of the pen name Samuel I. Brooks, a pseudonym that some critics have view as his schizophrenic alter-ego, which he used as a kind of repository for his black nationalist sentiments even as he posed as a critic for these sentiments under the name George S. Schuyler.[232] Others have argued that his use of a pseudonym was not an outlet for repressed feeling, but evidence of a nuanced, "strategic two-sidedness" in Schuyler's political thought, which demonstrated that Schuyler understood the relationship between race pride and miscegenation dialectically.[233] If Schuyler saw the advancement of anti-imperial struggles abroad as a

boon to his political philosophy of "chromatic emancipation," he sought to glorify and temper this impulse in his satire.

But who is laughing last? The serial novel continues to receive more criticism than *Black No More* because, unlike Schuyler's first novel, neither the narrator nor the narrative disavow Schuyler's representations of violence or the politics underlying it. This has given rise to a variety of interpretations of the novel's politics. Beginning with Mark C. Thompson's book *Black Fascisms*, critics have argued that *Black Empire* is both a critique of fascism, *and* that Schuyler paradoxically finds "positive uses for it."[234] Others have found a variety of politics in Schuyler's satirical novels. Alexander M. Bain argues that Schuyler "offers a vocabulary of pragmatic, deracialized nationalism," and explores "whether cosmopolitan perception…has a corresponding scale of political constituency"; Martha H. Patterson contends that Schuyler's narratives are less than fascist, but that they show "an increasing cynicism towards his audience and mass movements in general, which may very well signal Schuyler's sharp turn right in the 1950s"; Yogita Goyal argues that the novels critique black transnationalism, "as a form of black Zionism."[235] Most recently, Brooks E. Heffner has argued that Schuyler's novels undermine the white supremacist foundations of the pulp genre conventions in the 1930s, which Schuyler used "in the service of a radical vision of African American resistance and racial justice."[236]

Building on Hefner's work, I argue that Schuyler's work offers a complex, sustained critique of the Enlightenment rationality underlying Garveyism that began the same year that Germany made pacts with Italy and Japan directed against the Soviet Union. Laughter in these novels represents a continuation of Schuyler's desire to

skewer his political opponents, and it offers more than identification between the novel's readers and Schuyler's foes, who become one and the same. As one large, ironic performance of Garvey's black nationalism, Schuyler delighted in the way in which the very forces he was attacking became the novel's adoring readership writing in *The Pittsburgh Courier*: "I have been greatly amused by the public enthusiasm for 'Black Internationale,' which is hokum and hackwork in the purest vein. I deliberately set out to crowd as much race chauvinism and sheer improbability into it as my fertile imagination could conjure. The result vindicated my low opinion of the human race."[237] This certainly gives credence to Patterson's argument about Schuyler's increasingly cynical view of his readers, but the novel should be read as a longform demonstration of the hollowness at the center of Garvey's dream.

The novels that make up *Black Empire* move beyond the ethical critique that Schuyler introduced in *Black No More* and dwell on the ruthless and difficult laughter that accompanies his pulp characters who try to live out Garvey's fantasy of uniting African people to fight the white world. In a sense, *Black No More's* climax and the absence of laughter from the comedic scene becomes *Black Empire's* animating theme. Unlike *Black No More*, which is structured around the desire for shared laughter and the shared inability to laugh in its comic climax, *Black Empire* is structured by the presence of laughter amidst the absence of comedy. The novels are filled with violent delights as they explore a world in which Garvey's fantasies for racial conflict are played out, with laughter appearing as an increasingly cold and rational response to the sentiments of characters who question or oppose the use of political violence to create the eponymous black empire. The novel comments on the absurdity of the black nationalist

Garveyite fantasy of return to Africa and what some critics have argued is the fascist spirit underpinning this fantasy, all the while giving readers the satisfaction of experiencing the "revenge" fantasy.

Towards the beginning of "Black Internationale," the serial novel's haunting central figure and anti-hero Dr. Henry Belsidus proclaims his goal to the narrator Carl Slater—"world white supremacy must be destroyed"—and describes how the goal of ending black oppression has been impeded by people's emotional resistance to what Belsidus sees as politically expedient and necessary violence. To combat this, he proclaims a different approach, which shuns sentimentalism in favor of indifference to violence: "I will not fail because I am ruthless. Those who fail are the men who get sentimental, who weaken, who balk at a little bloodshed. Such vermin deserve to fail." (10). Laughter only becomes the desired, shared outcome at the end of struggle, as when the battle for Africa is won at the end of "Black Internationale" and Belsidus proclaims, "Eat, drink, laugh, dream of future because it belongs to you. Today you have nothing to fear, for today I, the King of Kings, rule" (111). But laughter appears throughout *Black Empire*, and it invariably accompanies racialized aggression and scenes of violence. If Schuyler's laughter in *Black No More* was intended to critique black and white cultural institutions while creating the grounds for interracial identification, his laughter in *Black Empire* is ruthless, demonstrating how in a world of cold, rational calculation, laughter loses its function of providing the grounds for intersubjective experience and instead becomes instead an angry expression of power over others and often accompanies violence.

Structured around the absence of laughter, the novels in *Black Empire* use laughter to delineate the boundaries of Belsidus' organization, those who are insiders to his plans and those whose anxious laughter relegates them to the status of outsiders. This dichotomy starts when Slater is summoned to see Belsidus at the beginning of "Black Internationale": "When I had on my underwear, socks and trousers, the dumb chauffeur clasped his hands sharply together. I started at the sound. He grinned broadly. It was in such marked contrast to the mysterious solemnity of the whole procedure that I had to smile myself" (8). The contrast between the chauffeur's grin and Slater's smile *at* the contrast between the solemnity of the occasion and the driver's smile figure him as an outsider who is adjusting to the changing conditions that he is learning. This repeats when Slater offers a "confused laugh" in the first meeting with his future love, Patricia Givens, when he wonders at her interest in "this bloody movement," which compares to her proud, insider's laughter when she reveals to Slater that she is in charge of the air force (43). Besides laughter that delineates an inside/outside of Belsidus' organization, laughter is also used to assert supremacy (over ideas, over people) by emphasizing superior knowledge or playing up power differentials. With Belsidus' operation employing black scientists to outsmart white scientists in the struggle to build their new world, the lead scientist of Belsidus' operation, Sam, mocks Slater for being naïve reaction to their grand plans to redesign agricultural production. When Slater meets Sam, the two tour one of the newly developed farms, and Slater remarks to Sam with surprise, "A chemist's place is in the laboratory," to which Sam responds "'That's all you know about it,' he laughed. 'We chemists are soon going to put farmers out of business'" (48). Sam continues to show Slater the farm and Pat laughs

mockingly at him. The good-natured ribbing that Slater gets from Sam and Pat belies the laugh of superiority that shows up throughout the novel.[238] The superiority theory of laughter also appears through African American culture in traditions like signifying and playing the dozens. However, Schuyler's superiority laugh functions as a realistic representation of the dangerous relationship between laughter and violence. The mocking laugh that Sam and Pat share at Slater's expense is a preview of violent confrontations to come: those who oppose Belsidus' plan will be crushed by their collective power.

Schuyler's representation of laughter accompanying innovation shows experts laughing at members of the uninitiated. *Black Internationale* is subtitled "The Story of Black Genius Against the World," which inflects the laughter in the novel as the laughter of the genius deriding those with inferior knowledge. However, the novel's genius character Belsidus never laughs, only smiling sardonically with each of his innovations: "He smiled that cruel, sardonic smile that I had seen so many times before when some devilish idea intrigued him" (169). Like other laughs I have discussed, Schuyler's laughter in *Black Internationale* has a proleptic function, gesturing towards the future and a new concept of morality, but Schuyler tempers this laughter with obvious criticism, when he connects the genocidal medical plan of Belsidus' forces with laughter. Slater meets the Surgeon General of Africa, a recent Howard grad, who describes the legacy of eugenics in indigenous African practices. According to the Surgeon General, these practices will form the backbone of the conquering forces strategy to combat disease:

> "Before the white man came to Africa…there were no hospitals, and yet the Bantu peoples had lived her for 50,000 years. How do you suppose they

> managed to flourish and develop such fine physical types? I'll tell you: In one way or the other they eliminated the unfit. That's what we shall do. That's what we ARE doing." "You mean you are killing the sick!?" I was shocked in spite of myself. It seemed so monstrous. He threw back his head and exposed his fine teeth in a hearty laugh when he saw the revulsion in our faces. "I see you are still soft in spite of everything," he jeered. (148).

Like *Black No More*, Schuyler shows how eugenics can invert racial hierarchy and therefore how race science is open to different uses by black and white characters alike. However, the Surgeon General's laughter reveals the malicious humor at the heart of eugenics and other forms of rationalization, both futuristic technological innovation, and solutions based on eugenic science.

As the novel transitions from the story of "Black Internationale" to "Black Empire", Belsidus' prediction about a future for laughter and merriment is nowhere in sight. In "Black Empire", laughter disappears completely save for the ruthless laughter that accompanies killing. Enemy spies are murdered to the tune of cruel grins, torture is associated with sardonic smiles, acid baths are remembered fondly as the murders snicker with thoughts of catching more spies and punishing their deception. As the plot moves from initiating the black internationale and creating an empire to the armed struggle to win it, Schuyler's laughter at the Garveyite fantasy gives way to the harsh realities of race war and the diligent world building that adds to the absurdity of the fantasy. The laughing encounters in the second part of the novel center on Martha Gaskins, Belsidus' secret double agent who works for the British, and who proves to be his most loyal henchmen, murdering everyone who stands in the way of the Black

Empire. In these encounters, Slater wonders, “Was there no end to this cruelty, this ruthlessness, this cold and calculating killing? But then what omelet was ever made without breaking a few eggs” (189). Slater’s joke on Machiavellian rationale repeats an earlier joke in “Black Internationale,” when Belsidus tells Slater, “You’re too squeamish, you must be hard…You can’t have an omelet without breaking eggs” (75). Now coming from Slater himself, the novel tracks Slater’s internalization of Belsidus’ rational methods and his ends-justify-the-means philosophy. When the novel ends and the Black Empire is consolidated and defended from its European enemies, Belsidus’ joke-logic proves true: the eggs are broken, and the omelet is made.

I have argued that Schuyler uses laughter in *Black Empire* to interrogate the radical political aspirations of his audience, especially the tendency of these politics towards fascism and violence. Yet, as his review of his readership confirms, the bite of his laughter could just as easily be misinterpreted as a recommendation of violence. Schuyler anticipates just such a reaction in the novel, when Pat muses on the uses of the black masses: “‘The masses always believe what they are told often and loud enough. We will recondition the Negro masses in accordance with the most approved behavioristic methods. The church will hold them spiritually. Our economic organization will keep control of those who shape their views. Our secret service will take care of dissenters. Our propaganda bureau will tell them what to think and believe. That’s the way to build revolutions, Mr. Slater’”(47). But in spite of the tight control of its message and ideology, the novel and the project of “Black Empire” end on an ambivalent note, which suggests something more beneath the veneer of superior laughter. As Slater observes, Martha Gaskins sitting in the front row of a massive crowd while Belsidus

delivers his victory speech, Belsidus' words are met with a roar of applause, but Gaskins sits there "twisting her tiny handkerchief in her hands, while a pair of tears courses unnoticed down her cheeks" (258). Gaskins' tears are an inversion of the smiling faces of Max Disher, Bunny Brown, and the former Imperial Grand Wizard Givens, and Crookman's smiling recognition of their escape from America that conclude *Black No More*. Instead of affirming our laughter at Belsidus' cruel domination, Martha's tears confirm the reader's sense of their own complicity in the novel's violent delights, making it a recognition of the tragic character of the novels even with their "utopian" ending achieved. Belsidus' most loyal assassin, Martha's tears measure the cost of their victory and symbolize the sentiments that have been masked by laughter. This scene has an uncanny parallel to the most explosive emotional moment in the novel, when Pat Givens bursts out laughing after overcoming death following a plane crash.

> Then came peal after peal of hysterical laughter, wild, insane, maniacal laughter. I looked up in astonishment. With tears streaming down her pretty cheeks, Pat was sitting bolt upright in her seat, her hands still closed on the stick, her eyes staring forward as she was screaming with laughter. It was the strangest nervous reaction I've ever seen after a tense ordeal (72).

Despite her iron-clad resolve, Pat's reaction to her brush with death is to laugh hysterically, and one imagines this to be an earlier complement to Martha's tearful reaction. Beyond the façade of laughter lurks each character's own personal terror, which leaks out as tears while they are laughing.

Dueling Authenticity: Hughes and Schuyler in Literary History

In this chapter, I have laid out competing visions of grim laughter at white supremacy in the 1930's and the relationship between laughter and evolving debates in black cultural politics. While both Hughes and Schuyler drew on aggressive grim laughter to point out the absurdity of race relations in the U.S., Hughes' laughter envisioned a laugh that can respond to scenes of racial violence and rally black workers to fight back while Schuyler's laughter reflected on the ethics of collective actions that respond to racial violence. Taken together, the two laughs produce a kind of implicit argument between Hughes and Schuyler, two of the biggest figures in African American literary. This is no accident, for indeed Hughes and Schuyler explicitly argued about the role of black authenticity and expression in conversations about aesthetics and politics. The most famous episode in this debate unfolded in the pages of *The Nation*, first in Schuyler's essay "Negro Art Hokum", and then Hughes' response "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The essence of the debate was: what is the value of blackness in African American cultural production? Hughes argued that blackness ought to be thematized in African American art and literature, and that great black art would express "the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul," which he represented through laughter: "the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed with a smile."[239] Schuyler argued that "the Aframerican is merely a lampbacked Anglo-Saxon," and that Hughes' embrace of blackness was "probably the last stand of the old myth palmed off by Negrophobists for all these many years, recently rehashed by the sainted Harding, that there are 'fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences' between white and black Americans."[240] Literary history has widely held Hughes to be the victor of the debate,

but in recent appraisals based on poststructuralist readings of race, Schuyler's view of blackness has become a contemporary favorite.

Yet, a critical examination of their satirical writings in the 1930s reveals that both writers attempted to create new forms of authenticity that were grounded in the struggles they waged over and through laughter. Careful to avoid sentimentality, Hughes fashioned a laughter that aimed to motivate the masses of black workers to take action, and Schuyler aimed to revive black cultural institutions by skewering their perverse incentives to preserve racism for their own benefit. Both writers also used their laughs to create moments of identification between their audiences and their enemies through shared laughs. These moments clarify and unsettle the certainty of political ideologies, demonstrating the flexibility of laughter to rake and affirm, to build consensus, and to destroy it. And finally, both writers shared the desire to laugh at the tragedy of blackness and the particular tragedies visited on black people. Although their purposes diverged, their work revises the view of New Negro laughter as a subjective expression of sincere happiness, instead fashioning an ironic laughter at the tragedy of subjection where laughter is a tool for enacting political struggle and presented the beacon of an alternative future.

For scholars of African American literature, the satires of black modernist writers are exciting because they show how critiques of black institutions shaped black culture, and extend the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance into the 1930s and beyond. As Sonnet Retman has argued, "The self-critical capacity of black modernist satire not only expands the period, but also forces us to think about how the period changes."[241] By focusing on laughter instead of satire, my investigation encompasses

both the serious and the humorous elements of self-criticism, while also moving beyond intragroup dynamics of satire to show the way that laughter was used to fight against white supremacist discourses and ideologies. This chapter concludes the genealogy of laughing at white supremacy and shows how the grim laughter of Hughes and Schuyler references and transforms Du Bois' bitter laughter and Larsen's ticklish laughter. Black writers and cultural producers went from struggling to create bitter laughter in the 1910's to using laughter to maintain anger in the 1930's. Laughter's proleptic function also changes across there period, from the beginning where laughter is used to symbolize the joy at the end of struggle to the 1930's where laughter is used to symbolize victory over one's foes. In this conceptual arc, Larsen's laughter during the Harlem Renaissance is a bridge between the "objective laughter" of Old Negro comedy and the "subjective laughter" of sincere happiness of New Negro comedy. While expressing ambivalence and anxiety around this new mode of expression, Hughes and Schuyler's laughter shows that to the extent that laughter is sincere, it doesn't express happiness but instead anger and pain.

Indeed, some of the concerns about laughter that I raise in this chapter extend even further, to the present. The appeal to readers and workers to laugh at scenes of violence and oppression provides an alternative point of view to arguments that recent critics have made about the tactical uses of laughter in struggles waged by people who are marginalized because of their identities. Take Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy" as an example. The killjoy is a figure that Ahmed manifests and describes in her book *Living a Feminist Life* and, not without laughter, killjoys laugh early and often with other feminists "in recognition of the shared absurdity of this world; or just in recognition of this world."

But the hallmark of the feminist killjoy is that they do not laugh at sexist jokes, the object of their oppression. As Ahmed writes, “Of course, we refuse to laugh at sexist jokes. We refuse to laugh when jokes are not funny.”[242] This clearly resonates with Du Bois’ effort to teach black audiences not to laugh at racist humor, yet starting with Johnson’s essay “Satire as a Weapon” in 1920, black writers recognized the power of deriding their opponents with laughter, and sometimes having no alternative but to laugh at the absurdity of American racism. In particular, we see with both Hughes and Schuyler techniques of laughing off white supremacy that invite black workers to join in laughter with their oppressors, even when they are the butt of the joke. Far from being concessionary, Hughes and Schuyler show the militancy of this approach in the momentary identification with one’s opponent, the subsequent disidentification and its accompanying tragicomic recognition, which they used for differing political ends.

Another contemporary theory of laughter, Lauren Berlant’s “*humorless* comedy” has a kinship with the feminist killjoy, at least in its interest in trying to pinpoint the different actors who have the power to make others laugh in a given situation.[243] In “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” Berlant identified a genre of comedies that produce comic situations, but fail to produce laughter.[244] Extending this genre as far back as “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Berlant reads the rise of humorlessness as a symptom of the failure of comedy to live up to its promise of repairing misery with laughter. Humorless characters are those who audiences identify with, especially in their struggles to create laughter, but whose repeated failure emphasizes the absence of laughter. Though she treats humorlessness as a heuristic, Berlant also identifies humorlessness in political correctness and struggles for sovereignty, which often

strategically employ a humorless attitude to assert a particular vision of the world when that vision is crucial for survival.

I want to suggest that laughing off white supremacy is the inverse of "*humorless* comedy," pitting laughter as an affective response to tragic situations in which the "pity and fear" aroused by a tragedy is replaced by a laughter in support of a collective, not an individual, affirmation of a self. In relation to tragedy, black writers realized that laughter could be used to hold on to angry emotions instead of dissipating them, and they made this angry laughter the centerpiece of their politico-aesthetic agenda. The idea of laughing off white supremacy is the assertion of grim laughter into the most grim situations, which has strategic uses. On one hand, this technique is subversive, and could be grouped with Bakhtinian theories of laughter as subversion, but this is not the crux of their *raison d'etre*. Instead, the grim laughter at white supremacy represents racialized social problems with laughter and uses this to create a tragicomic sentiment that offers grounds for intersubjective connection. In their uses of laughter, black modernist writers attempt to use laughter to establish common grounds, shift social norms, and provide a tactical advantage in situations of open political hostility, including racialized class warfare. Laughing off white supremacy demonstrates how for black authors, laughter did not represent a retreat from political engagement in the 1930s, but the renewal of a much longer struggle for freedom.

Conclusion: Beyond Good and Evil Laughter, But Not Yet

When I began this project five years ago, two sets of claims animated contemporary debates about the politics of laughter in the U.S.. One school of thought argued that laughter could be used as a progressive force for change as evidenced by a protest in March 2017 when Desiree Fairooz, 61, was arrested for laughing during the Senate confirmation hearing of former Attorney General Jeff Sessions as part of a coordinate action by Code Pink.[245] At the other end of the political spectrum, the de-famed alt-Right pundit Milo Yiannopolous toured the U.S. and encouraged college conservatives to laugh at censorship and political correctness, observing that "the sound of laughter is something the progressive Left now hates because they can't control it."[246] What these two claims had in common was the recognition that laughter was politically dangerous and that both the U.S. Left and Right had clear designs to put laughter to use. However, what was emerging and thus not entirely clear at the time was the seriousness with which the alt-right has pursued a cultural strategy for radicalizing white youth by getting the "LOLZ."[247] This strategy began in the leadup to the 2016 election and continues to reverberate through Donald Trump's laughter at the survivors of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.[248] Indeed, despite his departure from the White House for almost a year, a new comedic play called *The 47th* explores the possibility of Trump winning the U.S. Presidential election in 2024, and perhaps due to the Right's claim on laughter, the play has been largely met with horror by audiences.[249]

We were already living through what some critics called a golden age of satire, but since 2017 the laughs have kept coming in political spaces even in spite of the

affective drain for many of the Trump presidency followed by the COVID-19 pandemic.[250] The contrast between the perceived declining state of the world and laughter which now seems more ubiquitous than ever—especially online—has led some critics like James Caron to make powerful formulations about the existence of the comic public sphere and the renewed role of satire as a method of combating the rhetoric of anti-truth with laughter.[251] With the association between laughter and the burgeoning alt-Right, it has also become nearly impossible to argue that laughter is inherently subversive or resistant to dominant cultural norms. As Viveca S. Greene argues, to confront the threat of alt-right and white supremacist laughter in the current climate, we must "abandon the pretense that satire works only towards progressive ends. Instead, we need to attend to how the extreme right has appropriated satire to infiltrate the ballot box and the box office, to wage war on progressive values on social media and college campuses, and to incite brutal killings in a Pittsburgh synagogue and a Charleston church."[252] Greene's observation about the workings of white supremacist satire and laughter are a necessary call to action, drawing our attention to the importance of reading and interrogating laughter instead of simply laughing it off.

Indeed, laughter's complex nature and its availability for different political uses was a truism that modern black writers and activists knew well but which, for a time, was eclipsed by a desire among critics to demonstrate modes of cultural resistance.[253] Against the political backdrop of the present that I have sketched, critics have much to gain from examining the cultural and political strategies that black writers and activists developed starting over 100 years ago, which I have called *laughing off white supremacy*. Beginning with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Crisis*, black writers

developed strategies to combat white supremacist laughter in periodicals and in other public arenas. These strategies often involved the refusal to laugh at racist humor or rhetoric, a present-day phenomenon that I show has a rich history including debates about the ethics of refusing to laugh and the relationship between such refusals and efforts to take collective action. Yet, perhaps the most salient discovery I make in relation to present day debates is the laughter that Du Bois and others developed that laughed back at white supremacy, including laughter at horrific acts of racial violence. I in no way intend to suggest that there is a comic element to such violence, nor that such violence should in any way be accepted or condoned. But Du Bois and others identified an aesthetic problem with the strategy of sentimentalizing racial violence, which could foster inaction among moderates or could be taken as a sign of weakness by white supremacists themselves. Instead they responded with bitter laughter, an approach that they hoped would teach their readers to hold onto their hostility instead of allowing it to dissipate, and which could be channeled into successful forms of action. Amidst the political turmoil of the 1930's, Langston Hughes and George Schuyler built on Du Bois' strategy and took this laughter further, developing an aggressive laugh at horrific acts of violence that drew on laughter as both a psychological and physiological aid for action. Schuyler, a former socialist turned John Burch society member, is an unlikely candidate for providing insights, but his work is vital in understanding our present. The novels from Schuyler that I read demonstrate his ability to laugh at racial violence and to create serious reflection on the ethics of action in order to avoid replicating white supremacist thought. Such satire defies a unitary interpretation but nevertheless embeds a serious

message in the LOLZ, a technique that present-day alt-right satirists are putting to great use against Progressives.[254]

But perhaps most importantly, “Laughing Off White Supremacy” shows how authors used laughter to articulate ideas about the future—including the end of white supremacy, freedom from oppression, and the beginning of truly free subjective black expression—in their present because of laughter’s ability to signify and create the embodied experience of joy. In her analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s work, Lindsey Stewart argues for a concept she calls “*the politics of black joy*” which is both “a refusal of the neo-abolitionist mandate that we emphasize sorrow in representations of Black life,” and “bringing southern Black joy into the public sphere.”[255] Stewart’s work aims to expand beyond debates about which acts constitute black resistance, using *the politics of black joy* to recognize the existence of emotions like joy, and to create space for these emotions in critical discourses. My own project uses the history of laughing at white supremacy to tell the story of the twin invitation by black authors to laugh at tragedy and to laugh at freedom and to use both as cultural strategies for achieving their political aims. This is perhaps what we need right now—to respond to tragedy and to express our joy with laughter—and by doing so, to deepen our political commitments and to envision a world where everyone is free and black joy can flourish.

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[1] See W.E.B. Du Bois, et al., *Report of the Debate Conducted by the Chicago Forum*: *Shall the Negro be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality? Affirmative: W.E. Burghardt DuBois. Negative: Lothrop Stoddard.*
[2] "5,000 Cheer W.E.B. Du Bois, Laugh at Lothrop Stoddard," in *The Afro-American* (March 1929).
[3] See Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, A.A. Knopf, 1940, 238.
[4] In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes describes the jazz aesthetic as follows: "But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beat of the Negro soul–the tom-tom of revolt against whiteness in a white world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed with a smile." See Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692-93.

[5] See Ralph Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, Modern Library, 1995, 649.
[6]See Ian Frazier, "When W.E.B. Du Bois Made a Laughingstock of a White Supremacist," in *The New Yorker* 95.24 (August 26, 2019): 36.
[7] In the past ten years there has been an explosion of work on black periodical studies. See Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, *Early African American Print Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014; George Hutchinson and John K. Young, *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850*, University of Michigan Press, 2013; Eric Gardner and Jocelyn Moody, "Introduction: Black Periodical Studies," in *American Periodicals: A Journal of History and Criticism*, 2 (2015): 105-111; Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne, eds. *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, University of Wisconsin, 2019. Similar efforts have been made to recover the complexity of the black public sphere. See Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," in *Communication Theory* 12.4 (November 2002): 446-468; Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62.1 (2005): 67-92; Elizabeth Reich, "Remembering the Men: Black Audience Propaganda and the Reconstruction of the Black Public Sphere" in *Militant Visions: Black Soldiers, Internationalism, and the Transformation of American Cinema*, Rutgers, 2016, 83-120; Jane Rhodes, "Woman Suffrage and the New Negro in the Black Public Sphere," in *Front Pages, Front Lines: Media and the Fight for Women's Suffrage*, Kroeger, 2020, 98-114.
[8] See Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, University of Indiana, 1984, 45.
[9] In his book *Laughter and Ridicule*, Michael Billig develops the notion of "unlaughter" as one possible response to being the object of ridicule. Unlaughter means more than simply not laughing, it is the conscious refusal to laugh or "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded." See Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, 2005, 192.
[10] Parvulescu argues for considering laughter separate from the objects being laughed at: "Laughter is to be considered in terms of who or what laughs and not in terms of the object laughed at. Laughter is not a response, at least not an unproblematic response, certainly not a mere effect…it becomes clear that thinking about the laughing subject tells us about laughter, but also that thinking about laughter tells us about subjectivity more generally. Laughter is an opening in which a self unfolds." See Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a* Passion, MIT, 2010, 5.
[11] See Frances McDonald, *Posthumorism: The Modernist Affect of Laughter*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
[12] In an extended reading of Damasio's experiment, Leys writes: "The point for Damasio is not to define laughter or sadness in terms of cognitively defined objects or beliefs about the world but as intentionless states such that my ability to give a reason for my feeling something must be based on an illusion, in that what I feel is just a matter of my physiological condition. For Damasio the basic emotions are inherently objectless in the sense that they are bodily responses, like an itch; I laugh when I am tickled, but I am not laughing at you (or at your joke). This is a materialist theory that suspends considerations of meaning or intentionality in order to produce an account of the affects as inherently organic (indeed inherently mechanical) in nature. See Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique" in *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (Spring 2011): 463.
[13] See Paul Beatty, *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor*, Bloomsbury, 2006: 4.
[14] See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke, 2011; Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*: *Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Harvard, 2012; see also Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, University of Minnesota, 2018.
[15] In my work, I distinguish between black laughter and black humor, but the two are closely related. As Werner Sollers puts it, "The absurdity of the rules that governed the worlds of slavery and Jim Crow invited numerous African American jokes that were recorded long before existentialism." See Werner Sollers, "Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition," The 1949th Stated Meeting, held in collaboration with the Chicago Humanities Festival at Northwestern University School of Law (November 14, 2009); on black humor and surrealism, see Alan Pratt, ed. *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, Garland, 1993; on black humor and African American humor, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*: *Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1977.

[16] Lott also points out that there were numerous ways in which the project to "tame the 'black' threat" failed. He writes: "Blackface representations were something like compromise formations of white self-policing, opening the color line to effacement in the very moment of its construction." See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford University Press, 1993, 154. For other characterizations of the way that blackface minstrelsy distorted black laughter and other black forms, see Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*, Oxford University Press, 1977; and Nathaniel Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, 2007.
[17]See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Oxford University Press, 2008; Danielle Fuentes Morgan, *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Illinois Press, 2020; see also Danielle Heard, *Buggy Jiving: Comic Strategies of the Black Avant-Garde*, Cornell University PhD Dissertation, 2010.
[18]For interesting recent discussion on the connection between affect and character, see Lisa Mendelman, *Modern Sentimentalism: Affect, Irony, and Female Authorship in Interwar* America, Oxford University Press, 2020; Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011; Alex Wolloch, *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, Princeton University Press, 2003.
[19]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics,* University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 164.
[20] Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, University of California Press, 1999, 55.
[21] See Agnes Repplier, *In Pursuit of Laughter*, Houghton Mifflin, 1936.
[22]In *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Daniel Wickberg argues that laughing it off was a modern invention, part of the growing social demand for a sense of humor, which came as a response to the increasing inflexibility of a rationalized, bureaucratic society. Wickberg argues that laughing it off was virtually synonymous with the sense of humor, which was used to transform individuals: "The self, contracting and expanding, laughing it off, easing tensions, lubricating the machinery of constant social contact, standing outside of itself, making constant adjustment in terms of how others might see it, applying itself to the business of mitigation of conflict, using itself to achieve ends through the concrete social situations of daily experience: this was the self of a bureaucratic society in which everyday life, with its routines, constraints, and rationalized discipline, was the primary level of reality." See Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Cornell University Press, 2015, 119.
[23]See Stanley Cavell, *The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, 1981.
[24] See Henri Bergson in Wiley Sypher, *Comedy*, Doubleday, 2008, 64.
[25] Ibid, 86.
[26] See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1992, 15.
[27] See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism,* 51.
[28] See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1998.
[29] Smethurst argues that given the conditions of social alienation and fragmentation that African American writers faced made black writers the first American modernists. See James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, University of North Carolina Press, 2011.
[30] Justice Nieland, "Editor's Introduction: Modernism's Laughter" in *Modernist Cultures* 15.2 (2006).
[31] See Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism, in *Disciplining Modernisms*, Palgrave, 1999.
[32]Several important contributions to this debate include Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, University of Chicago Press, 1987; Darryl Dickson-Carr, "African Americans and the Making of Modernity" in *American Literary History* 25.3 (2013): 672-682; Adam Mckible and Suzanne Churchill, eds. *In Conversation: The Harlem Renaissance and the New Modernist Studies*, a special issue of *Modernism/modernity, Vol. 20.3* (2013); K. Merinda Simmons and Ames Crank, *Race and New Modernism*, Bloomsbury, 2019.
[33]See Michael Bibby," "The Disinterested and the Fine: New Negro Renaissance Poetry and the Racial Formation of Modernist Studies" in *Modernism/Modernity* 20.3 (2013).

[34] See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: The History of African American Comedy*, Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.
[35] See Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, University of Missouri Press, 2001; Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*, University of South Carolina Press, 2015. On black audiences and modernism, see Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*, University of California Press, 2005. In it, Stewart argues against the idea that black audiences completely identified with early cinematic representations of black characters and instead that movies were "a space for modernist Black performance, and as a field for the continuous interpretation of the Black's subject's highly contested public roles, rights, and responsibilities." See Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 113.
[36]Bert Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," *American Magazine* 85 (January-June 1918): 33.
[37]On the link between Williams' theory of laughter and discussions of slapstick comedy, see Alan Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 12.
[38] In a remarkable passage, Williams writes: "Troubles are only funny when you pin them to one particular individual. And that individual, the fellow who is the goat, must be the man who is singing the song or telling the story. Then the audience can picture him in their mind's eye and see him in the thick of his misfortunes, fielding flatirons with his head, carrying large bulldogs by the seat of his pants, and picking the bare bones of the chicken while his wife's relations eat the breast, and so forth." See Williams, "On the Comic Side of Trouble," 33.
[39] See Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, Duke University Press, 2006.
[40] See Editors, "Do You Laugh at the Misfortunes of Others?" *American Magazine* 85 (January-June 1918), 33.
[41] See Mark Weeks, "Beyond a Joke: Nietzsche and the Birth of 'Super Laughter,'" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 27 (Spring 2004): 1-17.
[42] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin, 1977, 128.
[43] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 211.
[44] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 27-28. "Perhaps even laughter still has a future—when the proposition 'The species is everything, an individual is always nothing' has become part of humanity and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility is accessible to everyone at all times. Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only 'gay science' will remain. At present, things are quite different; at present, the comedy of existence has not yet 'become conscious' of itself; at present we still live in the age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions."
[45] See Pete Gunter, "Nietzschean Laughter" in *The Sewanee Review* 76.3 (1968): 9.
[46] Nietzsche's writing in *The Genealogy of Morals* further locates the enlightened feeling that he describes in serious thought: "*joyful wisdom*, is a payment; a payment for a protracted, brave, laborious, and burrowing seriousness." See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, Macmillan, 1924, 11.
[47] In *Beyond Good and Evil*, the laughter of "joyful wisdom" looks forward, offering a speculative leap from the present: "perhaps it's that, when nothing else from today has a future, our *laughter* is the one thing that does!" See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 114.
[48] Jessie Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," *The Crisis* (April 1923), 12.
[49] Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, Touchstone, 1992, 3.
[50] See Irving Hunt, *Investing in Stereotypes: Comic Second-Sight in Twentieth Century African American Literature*, Columbia University PhD Dissertation, 2014.
[51] William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature" in *The New Negro: Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, Touchstone, 1997, 29.
[52] Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," *The New Negro: Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, Touchstone, 1997, 161.
[53] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Carrizal," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 12.4 (August 1916): 163.
[54] On the pressures of magazines publishing humor, see Mark Morrison, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920*, University of Wisconsin, 2001; Karen Leick, "Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press" in *PMLA* 123.1 (2008): 125-139; Brooks Hefner, *Words on the Street: The American Language of Vernacular Modernism*, University of

Virginia, 2017; Christopher Chworimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide,* University of California, 2018.

[55] See Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yolk" in *Shadow & Act*, Vintage, 1964; Leroi Jones, *Blues People*, Harper, 1999; Nathaniel Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance*, Oxford, 2007; Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in the 19th Century*, Oxford, 1977; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford, 1993.

[56]On the dangers of repeating the narrative of grotesque black bodies by representing lynching, see Eric King Watts, *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and the Politics of the New Negro Movement*, University of North Carolina, 2012; Anne E. Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*, Indiana, 2005. On lynching and abjection, see Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of a Lynching," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 3.3 (January 1993): 445-467 and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia, 1982. For recent commentary on the continuation of this problem, see Benjamin Balthusar, "Racial Violence in Black and White" in *The Boston Review*, July 13, 2016 (accessed on January 19, 2021).

[57] On the evolution of anti-lynching photography, see Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Gaze: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle,* University of North Carolina Press, 2011. See also Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, Rutgers University Press, 2004; Kenneth Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935,* University of North Carolina Press, 2006; Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photos*, University of California Press, 2007; and Amy Wood, Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 189–1940 Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

[58]Amanda K. Frisken, "A Song Without Words": Anti-Lynching Imagery in the African American Press, 1889–1898" in *Journal of African American History*, 97.3 (Summer 2012): 240-269.

[59] See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Random House (1995): xiv.

[60] In his introduction to a special issue of *Public Culture* celebrating the 100th anniversary of the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Robert Gooding-Williams describes the politics of Du Bois' work as "a politics of expressive self-realization." Taking Du Bois' own term "self-realization," Gooding-Williams understands the conditions of African American politics that would counter Jim Crow as uplifting the black masses and by battling prejudice and backwards norms and by articulating the ethos of the black folk. When I refer to the politics of self-determination, I am referring to this two-pronged program for self-realization, which attempted to move the political-aesthetic category of the black folk into the black masses. This is explored at length in his book *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. See Robert Gooding-Williams, "Du Bois, Politics, Aesthetics: An Introduction" in *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005): 203-215.

[61]Examples abound. Carpio's analysis of the Charles Chestnutt story "Dave's Neckliss" is an excellent example of how 19th century African American writers spun stories of lynchings that vacillated between comedic, satirical, and tragic. See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Oxford, 2008, 61.

[62] Du Bois' pragmatic approach to propaganda has until recently gone under-explored. The essential analysis of this is Ross Parnock's article "The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, and Politics," in *American Literary History* 7.3 (Fall 1994): 500-524. A more recent and welcome correction to this trend is Garth Pauley's chapter "W.E.B. Du Bois and *The Crisis* of Women's Suffrage." See Kirschke and Sinitiere, *Protest and Propaganda*, University of Missouri Press, 2014. For more on Du Bois and his relationship to philosophical pragmatism, see Nancy Ladd Muller, "Du Boisian Pragmatism and 'The Problem of the Twentieth Century'" in *Critique of Anthropology* 12:3 (1992): 319-337; Paul C. Taylor, "What's the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?" *Metaphilosophy*, 35.½ (January 2004): 99-114; Eddie S. Glaude, *In A Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

[63] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Gall of Bitterness," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 3.4 (February 1912): 153.

[64] The full verse reads: "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." See "Acts 8:20-23" in *The Holy Bible English Standard Version*, Crossway Bibles, 2001.

[65] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Gall of Bitterness," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 3.4 (February 1912): 153.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Nancy Ladd Muller calls this "Du Boisian pragmatism," defined as "if and when someone arrived at the truth she or he would see the injustice of racism, and a social change would take place." See Nancy Ladd Muller, "Du Boisian Pragmatism and 'The Problem of the Twentieth Century,'" 319-337.
[68] See *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 3.3 (January 1912).
[69] See Leslie Pickney Hill, "Vision of a Lyncher," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 3.3 (January 1912): 121.
[70]Charles F. Dole, "A Question of Policy," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 8.1 (May 1914): 24.
[71] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Philosophy of Mr. Dole," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 8.1 (May 1914): 24-26.
[72] See Noga Arikha, *Passion and Tempers: A History of the Humours*, Harper Collins, 2007: 136. For an early theory of how bitterness could be the cure for a bitter feeling, see Galen *On Hippocrates' 'On the Nature of Man'* translated by W.J. Lewis:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgajpd/medicina%20antiqua/tr_GNatHom.html
[73] See Ben Highmore, "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke, 2010: 129.
[74] See Ben Highmore, "Bitter After Taste," 135. See Paul C. Taylor, "What's the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?", 99-114.
[75] See Justin Anthony-Lewis, *Circle of Thorns: Hieronymous Bosch and Being Human*, Continuum, 2008: 70.
[76] See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, Harvard UP, 2007: 4.
[77]See Anna Katherina Schaeffer, *Exhaustion*, Columbia UP, 2016.
[78] See James Alexander, "The Psychology of Bitterness," in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* 41 (1960): 514-520.
[79] See Max Rotter, "Embitterment and personality disorder," in *Embitterment*, Springer 2011: 177-186.
[80] See "The Embittered Mind: Dimensions of Embitterment and Validation of the Concept" in *Journal of Individual Differences* 37 (2016): 213-222.
[81] See Rotter, "Embitterment and personality disorder," 2011.
[82] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Yale UP (2015): 70.
[83] See Phillip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*, Princeton UP, 2002.
[84] See William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality" in *Essays in Pragmatism*, Hafner, 1968.
[85] On Du Bois' translation of these words, see Dolan Hubbard, *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*, University of Missouri, 2003.
[86] Dorie McCullough Lawson ed., *Posterity: Letters of Great Americans to Their Children*, Doubleday, 2004.
[87] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Smiles," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 14.1 (May 1917): 28.
[88] This article anticipates the discourses of ethnic humor that were prevalent throughout the 80's and 90's, much of which--especially the sociology of ethnic humor--still has relevance to debates about laughter today. For example, Joseph Bodkin and Joseph Dorinson's article "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," describes how the humor of stereotypes often arise in situations where society struggles to integrate immigrant populations, and how these jokes often will offer a backhanded compliment to the targeted group if read in a certain way. Bodkin's work describes the process by which targeted groups assimilate the humor of the dominant group, leading to humor that appears self-hating, as in the prevalence of anti-Jewish jokes in Jewish communities. See Joseph Bodkin, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival" in *American Quarterly* 37.1 (Spring 1985): 81-97.
[89] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Smiles," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 14.1 (May 1917): 28.
[90] Ibid.
[91] See Du Bois, "The Humor of Negroes," in *Mark Twain Quarterly* 5.3 (Fall 1942): 12.
[92] See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hogarth, 1960.
[93] See Du Bois, "The Humor of Negroes," 12.
[94] Ibid.
[95] W.E.B. Du Bois, "In Black," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 20.6 (October 1920): 263.
[96] See Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, University of California Press, 2005.

[97] W.E.B. Du Bois, "In Black," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 20.6 (October 1920): 263.
[98] One cannot talk about these images or the relationship between image/text in *The Crisis* without Anne Elizabeth Carroll's groundbreaking work on these texts in her book *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*. In it, Carroll describes a dialectic that Du Bois develops between protest and affirmation in his image/texts and in his layouts for issues of *The Crisis*. As she writes, this dialectic was necessary because of the bind that Du Bois was in in justifying his representations of lynching and racial violence: "to persuasively demonstrate the horrible treatment of African Americans, [*The Crisis*] had to demonstrate their dehumanization and their disempowerment, and that demonstration, in turn, risked perpetuating that status. It was only with the addition of affirmative texts that the magazine was able to protest American racism but still empower African Americans." See Anne E. Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*, Indiana UP (2005): 37.
[99] For recent work on *The Crisis* and its covers, see Kirschke and Sinitiere, *Protest and Propaganda*, University of Missouri Press, 2014.
[100] Lorenzo Harris, "American Logic," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 6.2 (May 1913): 80.
[101] For an extended discussion of "The Funny Page" and other cartoons see Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory*, Indiana, 2007.
[102] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Logic," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 6.2 (May 1913): 81.
[103] Ibid, 81.
[104] Walter White, "The Burning of Jim McIlherron," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 16.1 (May 1918): 17.
[105] Ibid, 19.
[106] Ibid, 20
[107] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Terrorists," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 3.5 (March 1912): 192.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid, 193.
[111] See David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography 1868-1963*, MacMillan, 2009: 281.
[112] Ibid 194.
[113] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Lynching," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 6.6 (October 1913): 283.
[114] Ibid.
[115] W.E.B. Du Bois, "True Brownies," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 18.6 (October 1919): 285.
[116] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Is the South Awakening?" *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 7.6 (April 1914): 280.
[117] Ibid, 283.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Burden," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 9.2 (December 1914): 95.
[121] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Short Story Competition," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 4.4 (August 1912):189.
[122] Ibid.
[123] W.E.B. Du Bois, "A Philosophy for 1913," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 5.3 (January 1913):127.
[124] William Stanley Braithwaite, "Scintilla" and "Laughing It Out," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 5.3 (April 1915): 309.
[125] Edward Ide, "Laughing It Out," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 14.4 (August 1917): 171.
[126] Ibid.
[127] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 16.3 (July 1918): 111.
[128] On Du Bois and "Close Ranks," see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York, 1993); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight of Equality and the American Century*, 1919-1963, Henry Holt and Co., 2000.
[129]Arguing that Du Bois had earlier embraced the figure of the black soldier to forge patriotic identity that masked racial difference, see Mark W. van Wienen *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War*, Cambridge, 1997: 132
[130] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Carrizal," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 12.4 (June 1916): 163.

[131] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Black Soldiers," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 12.4 (January 1916): 183-184.
[132] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Silly South," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 17.3 (January 1918): 131-132.
[133] Ibid.
[134] W.E. B. Du Bois, "For What?" *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 17.6 (April 1918): 168.
[135] See W.E.B. Du Bois, "Passing" in *The Crisis* 36 (July 1929), 234, 248-50.
[136] See Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, Harvard University Press, 1993, 10.
[137] "Passing" as a social practice has historically had multiple meanings, but the most readily understood is, according to Werner Sollers, "passing for white in the sense of crossing over the color line from the black to the white side." See Werner Sollers, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1997, 250. On different senses of passing including passing for straight, see Amy Robinson, "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (Summer 1994): 715-736.
[138] The figure of the race woman refers to the 19th and early 20th century practice of self-identified African American women serving as ambassadors for racial politics and in Harlem Renaissance literature is often set up in opposition with the figure of the race traitor. See Rebecca Nisetich, "Reading Race in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Rhinelander Case," *African American Review* 46.2/3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 345-361.
[139] Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Penguin, 2003): 56. Hereafter cited in the text.
[140] In psychoanalysis, ambivalence signifies two opposing views of an object simultaneously. Freud believed that the feeling of ambivalence occurred in relation to intimate objects, which often serve as the containers for contradictory emotions like love and hate, and that it was symptom of pathological conditions like "obsessional neurosis" and melancholia. Recent critics have provided de-pathologizing accounts of ambivalence, and in doing so, made the concept central to contemporary discussions of affect and affect theory. According to Lauren Berlant, the feeling of ambivalence is the defining affect of works of sentimental literature like *Passing* because the sentimental novels itself seeks to vent women's complaints to bind them to the conditions that give rise to complaints in the first place. Berlant writes that sentimental literature tends to "blame flawed men and bad ideologies for women's suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place"; as more recent critics have argued, the feeling of ambivalence was historically gendered by psychoanalysts and practitioners of New Psychology, who associated it with women's struggle between "love and ambition." Ambivalence is also a term that recurs in the criticism of *Passing*, from Deborah E. McDowell's argument that Larsen tracks the ambivalence of female sexuality along the virgin/whore dichotomy to George Hutchinson's sweeping, biographical claim that Larsen herself felt "ambivalence toward African Americans" and "'confusion' about race." Judith Butler may have made the grandest claim about *Passing* and ambivalence when she wrote, "ambivalence wracks the motion of the narrative."[140] See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo,* Routledge, 2004, 34-35; Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in Modern American Culture*, Duke, 2008, 2. On the rise of ambivalence and the development of New Psychology and other popular writing about the emotions, see Lisa Mendelman, "Modern Sentimentalism: Feeling, Femininity, and Female Authorship in Interwar America," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015; See Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction" in *Quicksand and Passing*, Rutgers, 1986, ix-xvi, xxiii-xxxv; George Hutchinson, "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race," *American Literary History* 9.2 (Summer 1997): 329-349; Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge" in *Bodies that Matter*: *On the Discursive Limits of "Sex*,*"* Routledge, 1993, 167-185.
[141] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Passing" in *The Crisis* 36 (July 1929), 234, 248-50.
[142] Ibid.
[143] "ticklish, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, July 2018. W.E.B.. 19 November 2018.
[144] Perhaps the most famous example in recent memory is Slavoj Zizek's book *The Ticklish Subject* (2000), which plays on the phrase "ticklish subject" to characterize the Cartesian subject as simultaneously absent and present, absent in the sense that western political philosophers have moved beyond Descartes's notion of the subject as metaphysical grounding for political action, and present in the sense that the Cartesian subject haunts academia because "Cartesian subjectivity continues to be

acknowledged by all academic powers as a powerful and still active intellectual tradition." Notwithstanding these philosophical debates, the ticklish subject of passing poses a similar problem within the dichotomy of the color line and the possibilities for political action. See Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verse, 1999, 1.

[145] Tickling resembles another racial feeling, what Anne Anlin Cheng has called "racial melancholy." Racial melancholy, or the feeling of perpetual loss associated with double consciousness—the notion, as Cheng writes, that "*you carry the foreigner inside*"—is a metaphor that she uses to conceptualize the affective formation of racialization in America. See Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, Princeton University Press, 2000, 60.

[146] As Raymond Williams writes in his well-known essay, structures of feeling are "social experiences *in solution*," and they exert "palpable pressures and set effective limits on action."[146] As opposed to more ambient, ephemeral or diffuse theories of affect, I return to Williams' notion of structure because I am interested in describing points of entanglement and tension in the relationships involved in the passing encounter, and investigating how the feelings that characters experience both structure and are structured by these intimate relations mediated through passing. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, 1977, 132.

[147] In this article I examine one such narrated passing encounter, but similar situations can be found in James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* New York, 1912; Walter White, *Flight,* New York, 1928; Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There is Confusion*, New York, 1924, *Plum Bun*, New York, 1928, and *Comedy: American Style,* New York, 1933; and Larsen's own *Quicksand*, New York, 1928.

[148] By calling this an emergent politics I am again invoking Raymond Williams' terminology, this time from his essay "Dominant, Residual, Emergent," where he characterizes emergent to mean, "the new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [sic] continually being created." See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 123.

[149] On unlaughter, see Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 192; Moira Smith, "Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance," *Journal of American Folklore* 22.484 (Spring 2009): 148-171.

[150] See *The Independent*, 70 (March 2, 1911): 478-479.

[151] See "Melting Pot" in *The Chicago Defender* (October 16, 1915).

[152] See Langston Hughes, "Jokes on Our White Folks" in *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender*, University of Illinois Press, 1995, 97.

[153] Ibid, 82.

[154] Ibid, 85.

[155] See Langston Hughes, "Passing for White, Passing for Colored, Passing for Negroes Plus," in *The Chicago Defender* (October 11, 1952).

[156] Despite this triangular relationship, criticism of passing has tended to focus on the relationship between the passer and the dupe, and this has put disproportionate emphasis on arguments about the techniques involved in passing and the politics that they represent. While my argument takes into account the whole "triangle theater," I pay particular attention to the structure and dynamics that unfold between the passer (Clare) and the in-group member (Irene). Attention to this relationship reveals that the success of the passing performance requires the complicity of the in-group member. Amy Robinson, "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (Summer 1994): 723.

[157] See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hogarth, 1960, 100.

[158] On tickling as surprise and deception, see Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy with an Adaptation of The Poetics and a Translation of the 'Tractatus Coislinianus*,*'* Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922, 163.

[159] On Darwin's theory of tickling, see Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, John Murray, 1872.

[160] See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,* 201.

[161] See George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, J. Burns, 1875, 29.

[162] Arthur Koestler argued "tickling a child will call out a wriggling and squirming response. But the child will laugh only—and this is the crux of the matter—if an additional condition is fulfilled: it must perceive the tickling as a mock attack, a caress in a mildly aggressive disguise." Robert Provine, a contemporary critic of laughter, suggests that this mock tickle, or the "'I'm going to get you' game" is the most ancient joke. See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, Hutchinson & Co., 1964, 80-81; Robert Provine, *Curious Behavior: Yawning, Laughing, Hiccupping, and Beyond*, Belknap Press, 2012, 55.

[163] See JC Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter,* Harcourt, 1924, 43-44.
[164] See Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter*, 45.
[165] Freud's work mentions tickling by name only briefly. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he differentiates between tickling and thumb-sucking, and in doing so makes a distinction between sex and masturbation. Both tickling and thumb-sucking involve a "rhythmic motion," and yet one is inherently social and the other is confined to the self. In *Hysteria Case Studies*, Freud also discovered a link between hysterical pain and the physical response to tickling. With one patient, Fraulein von R., he notes that the only way to reconcile the extremity of her reaction to being pinched was that he had discovered her ticklish spot: "In the case of Fraulein von R., however, if one pressed or pinched the hyperalgesic skin and muscles of her legs, her face assumed a peculiar expression, which was one of pleasure rather than pain. She cried out—and I could not help thinking that it was as though she was having a voluptuous tickling sensation—her face flushed, she threw back her head and shut her eyes and her body bent backwards. None of this was very exaggerated but it was distinctly noticeable, and it could only be reconciled with the view that her disorder was hysterical, and that the stimulation had touched upon a hysterogenic zone." The final mention of tickling in Freud is in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. At a pivotal moment in the book, just before he attempts to theorize the comic, he rejects "tickle theory" or the idea that comic pleasure results from "the oscillation of attention backwards and forwards between contrasting ideas." Yet, he quickly qualifies his rejection, writing, "A mechanisms of pleasure like this would seem incomprehensible to us; but we may point out in a comparison between contrasts a difference in expenditure occurs which, if it is not used for some other purpose, becomes capable of discharge and may thus become a source of pleasure." Freud's theory of comic pleasure does not offer a wholesale rejection of the "tickle theory" of laughter, and instead, it actually produces a new theory of ticklish pleasure in which the movement between different states is what produces pleasure. See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Hogarth, 1953): 183; Josef Breur and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, Hogarth Press, 1955, 137; Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hogarth, 1960, 188.
[166] See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Routledge, 2004, 32.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, Harvard, 1993, 10-11.
[169] Ibid*,* 11.
[170] Ibid, 10.
[171] Ibid, 39. For more on the binds of the perverse contract, see Rene Kaes, *Linking, Alliances, and Shared Space: Groups and the Psychoanalyst*, Routledge, 2007.
[172] According to Cheryl Wall, "Clare's survival depends literally on her ability to keep up appearances. She must look like the white society matron she pretends to be. But her looks, clothes, and facile conversation are the envy of the other female characters." See Cheryl Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1/2 (Spring-Summer 1986): 99-111.
[173] For Lauren Berlant, the genre of sentimental fiction, of which *Passing* is a part, is about "the management of ambivalence, and not the destruction of pleasure and power." See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in Modern American Culture*, Duke, 2008, 5.
[174] Anxiety about racial detection has been a feature of critical interest in *Passing*. In "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation," Claudia Tate argued that race "is more a device to sustain suspense" than a thematic concern of Larsen's novel. Recent critics, however, have begun to explore the ambivalent responses to racial detection by both Irene and Clare, challenging the assertion that the purpose of race is its dramatic effect, and pointing to the neogothic aesthetics of this encounter. See Claudia Tate, "Passing: A Problem of Interpretation," *Black American Literature Forum* 14.4 (Winter 1980): 142-146; Johanna M. Wagner, "In the Place of Clare Kendry: A Gothic Reading of Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing,*" *Callaloo* 34.1 (Winter, 2011): 143-157.
[175] Critics have long understood irony to be an important mode of representation in *Passing*. Mary Mabel Youman's "Passing: A Study in Irony" identified the central irony of the novel as the rejection of Irene's "sterile, middle class lifestyle," which is also the perspective through which the plot of the novel is told. Jonathan Little later argues that "Larsen uses irony to explode the conventions of the passing-for-white plot and to help her explore the complex psychological dynamics of denial, transference, and self-

justification." See Mary Mabel Youman, "Passing: A Study in Irony," *CLA Journal* 18.2 (December 1974): 235-241; Jonathan Little, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Irony and the Critics," African American Review 26.1 (Spring 1992): 173-182.

[176] Rafael Walker theorizes that *Passing* represents the oscillations of desire between Clare and Irene as they pass between white and black worlds on both sides of the color line. Using Walker's terms, perhaps Clare's ability to make Irene laugh allows her to maintain control over Irene's desire—that is, of course, until this fails. See Rafael Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble With Desire in *Quicksand* and *Passing*," *MELUS* 41.1 (Spring 2016): 165-192.

[177] In *Passing,* color is variously associated with Clare's status as an exotic "mulatta icon perceived through Irene's gaze," and with "the luxurious and visually evocative images that afford a unique glimpse into the Afro-modernist world of the Harlem Renaissance." This dialectical construction of desire on both sides of the color line is apt to miss the way that Larsen uses color to communicate the transmission of feelings between her two mulatta protagonists. On *Passing* and color, see Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, "A Plea for Color: Nella Larsen's Iconography of the Mulatta," *American Literature* 76.4 (December 2004): 833-869.

[178] For a paradigmatic reading of this joke, see Sara Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned Into a Nigger: Passing Through Hybridity," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.2.

[179] See Ralph Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, Modern Library, 1995.

[180] As Pierre Bourdieu famously observed, "the concessions of politeness always contain political concessions." See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Dialectic of Objectification and Embodiment" in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977.

[181] Among many examples of claims about *Passing's* challenge to the politics of racial uplift, this particular claim stands out as paradigmatic: "Clare's complexly reconstructed identity is fundamentally inconsistent and incompatible with the essentializing assumptions of her culture. Larsen has created a character, a mulatta, who affirms a complex contingent, and multiplicitous postmodernist notion of identity in a modernist world that would nullify her very existence." See Mae G. Henderson, *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora*, Oxford, 2014.

[182] See Brian Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinities: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*,, Altamira, 2006, 70.

[183] Expanding on the apolitical status of the feeling of sardony, Stringer writes: "*Sardony* is emphatically not irony, not an element of tragedy. Where *irony* (a mismatch between expectations and eventuality) can be directly answered with politics, *sardony* (subjection to meaningless repetitions) cannot. Larsen's new word thus maintains the idea of repetitious compulsion, but refuses both the pathos and the moral discourse conventionally associated with the traumatic." See Dorothy Stringer, *Not Even Past: Historical Trauma and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten*, Fordham, 2009.

[184] Claudia Tate: "The conventional tragic mulatto is a character who "passes" and reveals pangs of anguish resulting from forsaking his or her black identity. Clare reveals no such feelings; in fact, her psychology is inscrutable. Moreover, Clare does not seem to be seeking out Blacks in order to regain a sense of racial pride and solidarity. She is merely looking for excitement, and Irene's active social life provides her with precisely that." See Claudia Tate, "Passing: A Problem of Interpretation," *Black American Literature Forum* 14.4 (Winter 1980): 142-146.

[185] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 179.

[186] Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Color Line*, Duke, 2000, 47.

[187] Ibid, 49.

[188] On racial articulations and silences as tools of self-creation, see Joshua L. Miller, *Accented American: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*, Oxford, 2011; on silence as a strategic refusal of the demands of African American self-expression, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard, 2004; on small talk as protest, see Matthew Krumholtz, "Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson: Small Talk, Racial Passing, and the Novel of Manners," *Novel* 51.1 (May 2018).

[189] Joshua L. Miller, *Accented America*, 211.

[190]Although her argument deals with the visual signifiers of race, Ahmed foregrounds language politics when she argues that Irene's laughter is transgressive and destabilizes systems of racial classification. See Sara Ahmed, "She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned Into a Nigger: Passing Through Hybridity," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.2.

[191] Langston Hughes, "Humor and the Negro Press" in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, University of Missouri Press, 2002, 356.
[192] Langston Hughes, "The Negro" in Jacob Burck, *Hunger and Revolt Cartoons*, The Daily Worker, 1935, 141.
[193] Ibid.
[194] On the relationship between laughter and tragedy, see Matthew Dillon, "Tragic Laughter," in *The Classical World* 84.5 (May-June 1991): 345-355.
[195] See Jessie Fauset, "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," *The Crisis* (April 1923): 12.
[196] See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, University of California, 1999, 46.
[197] See Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 44.
[198] On joyful wisdom, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 114.
[199] See Langston Hughes, "A Note on Humor" in *The Book of Negro Humor*, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1966, vii. On the tradition of thinking about laughter in terms of wish fulfillment. See for example *The Psychology of Wish Fulfilment*: "it is natural to suppose that many of the things which have been denied us should at times beckon to us. But since they are *banned* they must beckon in devious ways. These sometime grim specters both of the present and of the past can not break through the barriers of our staid and sober waking moments, so they exhibit themselves, at least to the initiated, in shadowy form in reverie, and in more substantial form in the slips we make in conversation and in writing, and in the things we laugh at." See James Watson, "The Psychology of Wish Fulfilment," *Scientific Monthly* 3 (1916): 479-484. This is the fundamental principle of Freud's 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which defines "joke-work" as an aspect of "dream-work" that is used to symbolically attain things that are socially repressed. See Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hogarth, 1960.
[200] See Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1993, 61-62.
[201] See Langston Hughes, *Hunger and Revolt*, 141.
[202] On laughter as an aid to knowledge, see Michel Foucault, "Preface," *The Order of Things*, Vintage, 1970. For a recent account of the phenomenon of laughing together with simultaneous identification/disidentification see William Cheng "Taking Back The Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails" in *Critical Inquiry*, 43.2 (Winter 2017): 528-549.
[203] William F. Dunne, "Strikes and Labor Leaders" in Jacob Burck, *Hunger and Revolt Cartoons*, The Daily Worker, 41.
[204] See Michael Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag: Langston Hughes on Scottsboro," in *College Literature* 22.3 (October 1995): 30-49. Also see Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Great Depression Generation*, University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
[205] See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 6.
[206] In *The Big Sea*, Hughes recalled a conversation with Wallace Thurman in which he compared Thurman's bitter laughter to his own. As he writes, he could not reach the same level of tragic feeling as Thurman, because every time he reached the precipice of really bad feelings, the blues would overtake him, and he would remember the voice of an old blind beggar singing: "*When you see me laughin',/ I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'*." See Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, A.A. Knopf, 1940, 238.
[207] On criticism of Hughes from Anderson and others on the Left, see Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes and His Critics on the Left," *The Langston Hughes Review*, 5.2 (Fall 1986) 34-40; Josep M. Armengol, "Black-White Relations, In Red," *Melus* 43.1 (Spring 2018): 115-133.
[208] Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, Vintage, 1990, 110.
[209] On Hughes' involvement in the cultural front, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Verso, 2011, 218. One of the few works that engages with Hughes' popular front comedies is Brian Dolinar's *The Black Cultural Front*. Dolinar tracks the development of Hughes' humor during the 1930s and shows how it is related to his acclaimed Simple stories. This work, however, does not address the development of Hughes' laughter. See Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Great Depression Generation*, University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

[210] Langston Hughes, "Humor and the Negro Press" in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, University of Missouri Press, 2002, 356.
[211] See Langston Hughes, "Laughter in Madrid," *Nation* 146 (January 29, 1938): 123-124.
[212] See Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1993, 346.
[213] *National News* (10 March 1932) in *Dark Laughter: the Satiric Art of Oliver Harrington* edited by M. Thomas Inge, University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
[214] See M. Thomas Inge, *Dark Laughter*, xxvii-xxviii.
[215] Ollie Harrington, *The People's Voice*, 14 Nov. 1942.
[216] See George Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis, "Shafts and Darts," *Messenger* 7, 1925, 263.
[217] See Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, ed. Seamus Cooney, Black Sparrow Press, 1987, 89.
[218] See Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance*, Yale University Press, 2008, 65.
[219] This idea is not so different from Walter Benjamin's alignment of the aestheticization of politics with fascism. See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Belknap Press, 2008.
[220] Greenberg's sense of modern satire here is juxtaposed with Stephen Weisenburger's critique of modern satire, which he views as antithetical to consensus building. See Stephen Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, University of Georgia Press, 1995.
[221] See Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*, University of South Carolina Press, 2015.
[222] See Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H.L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, 56-57.
[223] See James Weldon Johnson, "Views and Reviews," *New York Age*, 20 July 1918.
[224] Johnson's reading of Mencken evokes the classic Juvenalian mode of satire. In his definition of satire, M. H. Abrams writes, "it differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside of the work itself." In the case of laughing at lynchers, Northrop Frye's definition of satire as "militant irony" also fits. Frye understood satire as a species of irony in which the satirist takes a militant attitude toward a moral standard (or its violation). In his monograph *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism*, Matthew Stratton describes the entanglement of this militant approach to irony and the reports that satire is dead, which as he shows are exaggerated to express anxiety about changing social norms. See M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary* Terms, Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1971, 153; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, 1957, 223-224; Matthew Stratton, *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism*, Fordham University Press, 2014, 102.
[225] James Weldon Johnson, "Satire as a Weapon," *New York Age*, 14 October 1922.
[226] George Schuyler, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940*, Martino Publishing, 2015, 5.
[227] See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920, 74.
[228] See Sonnet Retman, "*Black No* More: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism," *PMLA* 123.5 (October 2008): 1448-1464.
[229] See Sonnet Retman, "*Black No More*: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism," 1458.
[230] On black satirists motivated by reforming black institutions, see Darryl Dickson-Carr: "New Negro satirists behaved largely as other satirists do: they criticized, through humor and invective—that is, biting insult—the organizations and individuals seeking black modernity with insufficient humility, intelligence, and perspicacity." Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Spoofing the Modern*, 18.
[231] See Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, 46.
[232] Henry Louis Gates Jr. provided one of the most enduring readings of Schuyler's nom de plume when he described it as a literalization of his divided political commitments: "Schuyler would play out his ambivalent feelings about the 'responsible' politics for black America by literalizing Du Bois's famous metaphor of black double-consciousness and divide himself in two: conservative, colored GS Schuyler and militant, black Samuel I. Brooks." Also see Ann Rayson: "Schuyler was less interested in consistency of his position than he was in stirring up arguments. He made sure that he maintained his reputation as the controversial columnist on the scene in black journalism." See Henry Louis Gates Jr., "A Fragmented Man: George Schuyler and the Claims of Race" *New York Times*, 20 September 1992; Ann Rayson,

"George Schuyler: Paradox among 'Assimilationist' Writers" *Black American Literature Forum*, 12.3 (Autumn 1978): 102-106. On different readings of this dual-personality, see John C. Gruesser, "George Schuyler, Samuel I. Brooks, and Max Disher," *African American Review* 27.4 (1993): 679-686.

[233] According to Jeffrey B. Ferguson: "By appealing to the rising tide of black nationalist feeling in the 1930s, he thought that he could rally the black American masses against fascism and imperialism at the same time. Because he saw all of the Western powers, including the United States, going in the direction of centralization and dictatorship, he thought that the darker nations of the world might provide hope for all humanity by opposing them. Simultaneously, and some would say 'paradoxically,' he hoped that by asserting themselves as a group, both nationally and internationally, blacks would make themselves more attractive to whites as political allies and as potential marriage partners." See Jeffrey Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance*, 21.

[234] See Mark C. Thompson, "The God of Love: Fascism in George S. Schuyler's *Black Empire*" in *CLA Journal* 48.2 (2004): 183-199 and his book *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars*, University of Virginia, 2007.

[235] See Alexander M. Bain, "*Shocks Americana*! George Schuyler Serializes Black Internationalism," *American Literary History* 19.4 (Winter 2007): 937-963; Martha Patterson, "Fascist Parody and Wish Fulfillment: George Schuyler's Periodical Fictions of the 1930s," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 4.1 (2013): 76-99; Yogita Goyal, "Black Nationalist Hokum: George Schuyler's Transnational Critique," *African American Review* 47.1 (Spring 2014): 21-36.

[236] Brooks E. Heffner, "Signifying Genre: George S. Schuyler and the Vagaries of Pulp," *Modernism/Modernity* 26.3 (September 2019): 485.

[237] George Schuyler letter to P.L. Prattis, April 4, 1937.

[238] What has come to be known as the superiority theory of laughter is summed up by Thomas Hobbes as follows: "sudden glory, is the passion that maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER, and it is either caused by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they applaud themselves." However, the superiority theory encountered challenges by most notably Francis Hutcheson, who argued that the feeling of superiority can also bring about tears. On superiority theory of laughter, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Cambridge University Press, 1991; Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon "The Fable of the Bees,"* Glasgow, 1750; for a recent summary on superiority theory, see John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, SUNY Press, 1986.

[239] See Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692-93.

[240] See George Schuyler, "Negro Art Hokum" *The Nation*, 16 June 1926, 663.

[241] Sonnet Retman, "Langston Hughes' 'Rejuvenation Through Joy': Passing, Racial Performance, and the Marketplace," *African American Review* 45.4 (Winter 2012): 593-602.

[242] See Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, 2017, 245.

[243] Berlant explored the kinship between her theory and Ahmed's at length in a recent interview with *The New Inquiry*. See Lauren Berlant, "Can't Take a Joke: An Interview with Lauren Berlant," *The New Inquiry* 22 March 2019, https://thenewinquiry.com/cant-take-a-joke/, accessed 12 April 2022.

[244] See Lauren Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43.2 (Winter 2017): 305-340.

[245] Maggie Hennefeld, "From the Salem Witch Trials to Desiree Fairooz: On the Criminalization of Female Laughter," *Ms. Magazine* (July 21, 2017): http://msmagazine.com/blog/2017/07/21/criminalization-female-laughter-salem-witch-trials-desiree-fairooz/

[246] News Net, "Milo: Laughter is Our Most Powerful Political Weapon!" Youtube (March 10, 2017): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmXL1XBfVFs

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