

Conclusion

The close of this book is fundamentally tied to a closing moment in my work writ large. I remember telling friends—at a leaving party days before I flew to Philadelphia to begin a graduate program in musicology—that I wanted to write a book on laughter called *Laughing Matters*. That title, as I found out in a university library across the Pond shortly after, had long been claimed by another pun-loving scholar. But the ambition to write about laughter endured past this initial disappointment. Even as I was writing my PhD on a more sensible topic, I read and gathered insights about laughter. By the time I managed to get an academic job, I was ready to leave my doctoral thesis behind and write a whole new book—my tenure book—on laughter. I started out by writing about 1890s laughing songs—and remember exactly where in Berkeley I was when I muttered to myself that laughter and phonography were at heart the same thing. This led to an investigation of laughter and phonography as gendering and racializing techniques and also as complementary techniques of reproduction. The process of writing this book was—unlike what I was told by mentors and colleagues—one of the best things that has happened to me. Not easy, but rewarding, consuming, infuriating, and joyous all at once. Part of the intensity came from realizing as I wrote that the journey between the two covers of the monograph would also be the journey to the end of my time as both a musicologist and an academic in a US institution. These decisions I made consciously and carefully over the course of writing this book, and, for better and for worse, I think *Risible* reflects that thought process in ways that may be helpful to others inside and outside my field of origin: music studies. I will briefly consider some of those ways below—though I know that what others end up finding useful about a piece of writing is (so) seldom aligned with the author's guesses.

One of the themes of this book is that when we speak of laughter we are automatically entering an ideological landscape from which no amount of critique can fully extract us. Indeed, the ideology lies precisely in the fantasy of being able

to prize from a laugh its ultimate reason, the kernel of its authenticity, the fully human being behind it. We all enact that ideology when we assert that *this*, not *that*, is a genuine laugh; this, not that, is a sign of amusement (and not, say, a physiological response to tickling); this, not that, is the hearty laughter that will restore our health; this, not that, is a human (and not a primate or a horse or a machine) laughing. I think that these kinds of statements have a value, in that they comfort us by performing distinctions that are, in fact, impossible to make outright. They show the dubiousness of the phenomenon that is laughter by doing what any reasonable person would with a doubt: try to resolve it one way or another. But when it comes to laughter, it is ultimately the doubt—not its resolution—that endures. And in this book I have told the story of the doubt that is laughter, have tried to behold the doubt before rushing to its resolution. Even so, I suspect that in my everyday life I will continue to parse laughter for the certainties it cannot give me. That is okay. One can have multiple minds, doubt and decide at once, wish oneself outside one's episteme while helping oneself and others to inhabit it peacefully. I don't think we always need to believe the stories we tell ourselves in order for them to work on us. Still, it seems important to remember that laughter is and has been valued—particularly as risibility, the capacity for laughter that makes one human—precisely for being doubtful, before it became attached to the whole enterprise of determining what, exactly, causes a particular laugh. Laughter is the incarnation of a doubt about what happens to our human faculty of speech when we laugh, about what kind of creature makes the sounds that laughter entails, about whether we need laughter to help with supposedly natural processes, about whether laughter is proper to certain people more than others, about whether laughter can be produced on demand and whether it should be paid for if so, and about whether we become machines—sound-reproducing machines—when we laugh. These doubts are precious and have been preserved, through the discourse and act of laughter, for a long time. The history of the risible—of those strange creatures able to laugh—is the history of how these doubts both buttress and sabotage, to my mind, all issues regarding the nature of comedy, wit, and psychological reasons for a laugh. To paraphrase the passage by Bataille I cited in chapter 1, we insist on knowing why we laugh—despite the ever-dissatisfactory answers provided in the history of Western discourse—precisely because laughter is how the doubt as to what we are has been preserved and passed on. If doubt is a frustrated will to knowledge, laughter is the bait of that knowledge and the snap of the uncertainty that entraps us as we reach for it.

As for disciplinary stakes: this is a book about music and sound in which music appears very little; in itself, this is not so remarkable. Musicologists of my generation are often unsentimental about the category of music, so much so as to write themselves out of it altogether. This has allowed us to be sentimental about a bunch of other things instead and to approach music from a vantage point of ascetic denial, a willfulness to dip amateurishly into areas of which we know not

enough in order to avoid the things we are supposed to do. I am very glad to have belonged to this generation of disidentifying musicologists, because I have been allowed such radical freedom in determining my object of study, and this has suited me well. I sense, though—partly from talking to my graduate students—that an incoming generation of musicologists will now need to reconceive their attention to music. I wonder, sometimes, if they will feel paradoxically hemmed in by the *laissez-faire* attitude of my generation on the one side and a traditionalist approach to musical close reading that doesn't apply to them anymore on the other. I would like to offer some of my insights into questions about the ontology and epistemology of music and sound, in the hope that this will be of assistance to others after me and not simply a confirmation of my generation's particular orientation toward music scholarship. I can start by holding myself accountable to a few of the grand promises I made in the introduction—most notably, the contention that music and sound studies have something extraordinary to offer to our political understanding of laughter as a sonic and physical phenomenon and that, in turn, this new understanding highlights some key moments in the history of mass-reproduced voices and other sounds. What, then, do music and sound studies have to offer to the intellectual and political history of laughter? And what does laughter have to offer to sound studies? For one thing, I hope to have made a convincing case for how the constitution of the sonic should be addressed through intellectual and political history. It is not the case that because laughter (or indeed anything capable of being heard) is audible or has an audible component, music and sound studies ought to have a stake in it. If music and sound studies is to have a robust intellectual underpinning, its point of departure should be questioning whether and how anything was parsed as a sound, as an event whose key information was made to reside primarily in the realm of the audible. Such a move implies identifying (rather than blindly enacting) a bias toward the audible as a site of meaning and truth: it means pinpointing the moment in which a particular thought or unthought became parceled and known as sound and the specific manner in which this act of parceling and even reification operated. The most interesting question that sound studies has asked has been, in my mind, precisely this: how did something come to be a sound for us?

My answer here has been something like this: Phonography was the condition of possibility for the sound *ha ha ha* not only to exist at a physical remove from its source and context (like all phonographed sounds) but to be recognizable as a laughter separate and separable from any particular cause. Yet what laughter as sound did for phonography is even more remarkable. Laughter's sonic outline—a series of discrete vocables that can be parsed as either a broken-up long signal or the repetition and proliferation of discrete short impulses—made phonography into an entire ontology of the voice, of labor, and of reproduction. Phonography—the earliest form of mechanized sound reproduction—was worked out in the late nineteenth century, and thus it carried ideological concerns of that

era, which it folded into the sound of laughter. To speak of phonography means to speak of worries about the enhancement and exploitation of biological reproduction, especially human sexual reproduction; the emergence of global processes of racialization and the ways in which they were negotiated in different colonial and imperial contexts; and the possibility of commerce of an unprecedented amount of commodities at an unprecedented geographic scale. Because laughter was already a sound coded, in Western discourse, as strangely human and connected to reproductive functions, it was the means for these problems to become attached to, nameable by, and containable in recorded sound. Laughter—as a discrete phenomenon away from comedy—was constituted by sound reproduction. But without laughter, there would be no epistemology of sound reproduction as such.

I realize this is a rather circular, looped answer. As I stated in the introduction, the loop is deliberate: that is, laughter as sound exists only because phonography actualized the potential severing of laughter from reason (and from the human conceived as having reason), and in turn, it was laughter that allowed early, globally circulated phonographic sound to be received and understood as such. This is indeed why, when we enter into the discourse of laughter as sound, we are leaning into our very own, twentieth-century phonographic bias, but we are at least doing so with a degree of self-consciousness that is closer to emancipation than any manifest rupture or injunction to hear the right way. I see this extraordinary, sophisticated enacting of the link of laughter and phonography (what Antonio Gramsci would have called an immanent philosophy) in George Washington Johnson's simultaneous offering and cutting withdrawal of his own racialized voice in "The Laughing Song," in Berardo Cantalamessa's thieved choleric laughter in Naples, in Nicola Maldacea's use of laughter to emulate a skipping record. None of these people were trying to make political or philosophical statements, but their use of laughter, so odd to us now, has much to teach us. Despite Kyle Devine's recent call to reevaluate gramophone technology at a technological and environmental level, I still worry that phonography is written up, sometimes, as the clunky, undemocratic, extractive predecessor to either more user-friendly analog technology (vinyl or tape) or digital technology, with its appearance of free and easy circulation and appropriation.¹ We seem to be eager to separate ourselves from the phonographic regime (as Andrea Bohlman and Peter McMurray's work on tape intimates) so as to be more emancipated from the early twentieth century tout court.² As we grapple with the increasingly reactionary third decade of the twenty-first century, I offer a humbler, less declarative approach to our past, one less concerned with ascribing progressivism to some sound technologies over others. Respect your phonographic episteme, laughter says, and the people who inhabited it—sometimes more than a century ago—with as much plasticity, subtleness, and sophistication as you, if not more.

And now for music—or the lack of it. I do think there is a version of this book that could have been written as an examination of similar functions of the category of music: music as that which is both human and not; music as a gendered aid to health, reproduction, and reproductive labor; music as a technology complementary and sometimes coextensive with phonography; music as a racializing but also redeeming force for those considered less than articulate within certain forms of colonial and imperial government; music as a source of paranoia about live versus prerecorded in certain media forms. Many of these are topics handsomely accounted for in existing scholarship. But it would have been a far more dispersive series of case studies, given that the category of music is not as stubbornly accounted for as a historical product of discourse—laughter is, all in all, a much smaller vector in the history of Western thought. What this smaller vector allowed me to do was to question and track the process by which something—in this case, laughter—became parsed as sound, and the consequences of that parsing. But also, and most important, laughter’s discourse is indeed similar to the discourse around music, if much more negatively charged: laughter, unlike music, cannot overcome language but can only mark its loss; laughter, unlike music, points to the similarity of humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, but mostly in discomforting ways; if laughter can obviate the need for reproductive labor, it can just as easily undo and disrupt reproduction. With music—musicologists know this—the negative, the power to undo, to kill, to end, and to break, generally has to be treated as a shock, an exception, an aberration, even an object of fascination, something produced under exceptional circumstances, such as protest, war, or torture. Whenever music is considered as a force to withhold and undo, it is all too often as a means of affirming or reinforcing a better liberal subject, of making us better attuned to our identity and place in the world. Laughter, on the other hand, carries its negativity, but lightly, not as an exception. Laughter brings out a quotidian sort of negativity, an ordinary sense of maladjustment. It is the quietly imploding proper of our species, the daily journey to the loss of human form, the reproductive aid that loudly glitches, the presence and absence of a Black voice on the phonograph, the audible sickness of expanding capital, and the crowd of cackling ghosts echoing through our TV sets. It has been put to use where music’s consolatory power would not serve, at times and in places where ordinary doubt had to be stored and sustained, managed without resolution. There is, I believe, much to be learned from the sound of such times and places.