INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
Another book of laughter and misunderstandings: A field guide to chuckles, smiles and guffaws

Callahan, William Arthur, Ph.D.
University of Hawaii, 1992
ANOTHER BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS
A FIELD GUIDE TO CHUCKLES, SMILES AND GUFFAWS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE
DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
POLITICAL SCIENCE
MAY 1992

By

William Arthur Callahan

Dissertation Committee:

Michael J. Shapiro, Chairperson
Kathy E. Ferguson
Henry S. Kariel
Deane E. Neubauer
Steven Goldberg
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee for supporting such an unorthodox dissertation, or should I say "stab at a dissertation." Mike Shapiro and Kathy Ferguson each gave me great help throughout the process, and I especially thank them for that. Many people in addition to my committee added to the dissertation with their critical comments: Roger Ames, Betty Buck, Sumalee Bumroongsook, Wimal Dissanayake, Milena Dolezelova, Linda Hutcheon, Pat Masters, Craig Mulling, Steve Olive, Larry Smith, Tu Wei-ming, Yang Yu-wei, Geoff White, and Hayden White.

The Institute of Culture and Communication at the East-West Center supported me throughout the Ph.D. program, right up to the week that I defended the dissertation. I also learned much from my advisors at the ICC, Wimal Dissanayake and Betty Buck. It was at the ICC that I started a conversation with Walwipha of Thammasat University -- this conversation soon became a letter, then an essay, a proposal, then an article, and when I couldn't get the article published, it became a dissertation.

Friends and family did their part too. I want to especially thank Sumalee for critically listening to my stories, some of which found their way into this dissertation, some of which wandered their way in and out again, and some of which remain to be written down.
Abstract

Philosophy and psychology have added much to the study of humor by addressing the questions of what laughter is and why we laugh. Yet often these questions separate a concept of humor and a spirit of comedy from the practice of laughter. This more metaphysical approach can easily lead to the reduction of laughter to an ideology of humor where many forms of laughter are restrictively measured in terms of their morality. Laughter has to be PURE, GOOD and RATIONAL to be real.

This dissertation assumes a more social and literary stance towards the bodily practice of laughter. Laughter is a multi-coded utterance; it is involved in both projects of oppression and projects of resistance. Rather than examining the "what" and "why" questions, the focus of the dissertation is "how" laughter is produced, and then how its meaning functions in political space.

Structural methods are used to locate laughter in social space, tracing out who is laughing, where they are laughing, and at what time. Post-structural methods are employed to examine how laughter is not only rational, but grows out of misunderstandings; moreover, it is also used to resist the social strictures of rationality. Laughter is political in a basic sense in that it is involved with the notion and practice of managing social relationships in "community" - - it not only engages in community and identity construction, but also resists those communities and deconstructs them. The explosive power of laughter helps us question the present and the status quo, and it especially helps us to question the construct of "us." Laughter
is intertwined with difference. Laughter is powerful because it is a
productive practice, often opening up a politics of possibility for
further laughing and crying. As one community is questioned, a new
set of relations develops -- the politics comes out in tracing how
these relationships interact.

The dissertation addresses both the productive and repressive
residences of laughter. The boundaries across which laughter is
heard are multiple; the analysis not only engages the geographic
barrier of the Pacific Ocean, but also the disciplinary borders of the
humanities and social sciences. It utilizes the literary and social texts
of China and the West in a comparative arena: frameworks of
Western critical theory are used to examine the funny stories of
China and Chinese cultural concepts are employed to question
Western theory's universals and explain familiar American humor in
different ways.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................................... iii

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction: laughter and mis/understanding .............................................................................................. 1

Part I: Some Normal Laughing ..................................................................................................................... 37

Chapter 1: A Report on Laughter .................................................................................................................. 38
   Section I: Special Issues ............................................................................................................................. 38
   Section II: Normal Laughter and Heterotopia ............................................................................................ 59

Chapter 2: The Canon and its Dissidents:
   Laughter and Politics in the Zhuang zi ....................................................................................................... 75
   Section I: A Genealogy of Mysticism & Utopia ....................................................................................... 77
   Section II: Laughter and Politics .............................................................................................................. 109
   Section III: Dissidence ............................................................................................................................. 140

Part II: Explosive & Implosive Laughter ...................................................................................................... 150

Chapter 3: Laughter, Empowerment, Resistance ......................................................................................... 151

Chapter 4: Court Jesters, Johnny Carson and the Myth of Political Humor ................................................... 184

Chapter 5: laughter, anger, desire .................................................................................................................. 235
   Section I: desiring laughter/laughing desire .............................................................................................. 235
   Section II: ironies and stories ..................................................................................................................... 251

Afterword: "Irony: ya can't live with it; ya can't live without it" .................................................................... 270

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................................... 285
Introduction

laughter and mis/understanding

There has been an echo of laughter in the quadrangle lately. In the past few years humor has once again entered on the academic stage as a topic worthy of serious consideration: there have been numerous "special issues" of academic and professional journals which address this topic, and many conferences have had panels on this matter.¹ The subject of this dissertation then is yet another reconsideration of the story, but with an important twist. I wish to address laughter -- not humor which some might theorize about, and often romanticize about, in search of truths, essences, principles which can be discovered once stripped bare of obscuring layers of representation. No, this project is about laughter as a practice that people engage in.

The focus, then, is on laughter in its many incarnations, especially in laughter which is not necessarily related to anything "funny." Laughter can be said to come in multiple forms, one of which is unquestioning and tends to reinforce the discourses and institutions which construct the present (e.g. common sexist and ethnic jokes): a monovocal sort of laughter, and another sort of

¹Just a sampling of these include special issues from journals as diverse as Philosophy East and West, Alternatives, and Women's Studies. It cropped up on academic conference panels in the late 1980s: the Association of Asian Studies Conference, Society of International Educational Training and Research (SIETAR) Convention, a psychology conference, and many more. In the early 1990s it is found often at medical conventions.
laughter which can be said to be polyvocal in its irony. Polyvocal laughter is constituted by a clash of codes, by a mis/understanding of the present which problematizes its discourses. Indeed, let us examine the dynamic between laughter and mis/understanding, and how such chuckles can lay bare certain power relations: polyvocal laughter can be used as a technology of resistance just as monovocal laughter is used as a means of oppression. With these chuckles, then, perhaps postmodernism can be used for positive action: to write new mythologies through laughter.

Setting

..... this endeavor finds itself caught up in the issues of mapping out postmodernism and making it a more effective strategy in politics. Yet it is difficult to try to describe what postmodernism is, not only because it is many things, but also because in describing it one prescribes it -- limits it. Communication necessitates an arrest of meaning. Some say that postmodernism is less about theories than about strategies and tactics of inquiry (that is why they call themselves "genealogists" rather than "post-structuralists"); for them it is best to look at analyses of practices -- the artifacts of postmodernism -- rather than searching for theoretical statements. Following this antecedent, one would read texts such as Discipline and Punish, Madness and Civilization, The History of Sexuality, etc. to see how genealogy approaches history differently, rather than starting with The Order of Things or Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition. Still there are some main points, some guiding metaphors which are helpful. What follows is just one of
many ways of looking at the postulated tensions between modernisms and postmodernisms.\(^2\)

Simply put, Modernism is looking to uncover some base REALITY, some fundamental Truth in philosophical terms, a fundamental Class in political-economic terms, or a fundamental notion of Woman in feminist terms -- what is said to be Natural. Yet it is more complex than this knee-jerk sort of realism. More generally the modernist tries to solve the "problem of representation," arguing that representations are misleading, mystifying, inauthentic, and so on. In this quest for Truth, modernists then ask "why" questions seeking to get around representation to uncover some fundamental REASON.

They might look to apples as a metaphor where the fruit as an imperfect discourse of appearance obscures and shields the Reality of the core -- the core which contains the (Aristotelian) seeds of knowledge and understanding. It is the modernist's task, then, to eat down to the core to seek ultimate seeds of Truth and Understanding.

Rather than looking for depth, and core truths, postmodernists shift the fruit/vegetable metaphor from an apple of knowledge (and the Christian original sin,) to an onion (a shift from sweetness to

\(^2\)The secondary literature abounds on the defining of postmodernism. Indeed, it has become a new genre of social and literary criticism, asking the question as the postmodern pioneer Charles Jencks did so long ago "What is Postmodernism?" The more I write, the more I resist the modernism/postmodernism dyad. For example, when I was asked to give a lecture on "Postmodernism and Laughter" at Thammasat University, I decided to resist this will to define. I simply told three stories about meaning and semiotics. But this creates difficulties -- folks came for academics not for anecdotes. At the end of the three stories -- which some admitted enjoying -- the question for most remained, "what, then, is postmodernism?"
spice?) In peeling an onion, the story goes, layers of skin fall off, but when it is done one is not left with a hard core, but just with a pile of skins. There is a multiplication of meaning rather than a reduction to essences. Postmodernists are drawn to meanings inscribed on the surface; to the discursive economies of the skin rather than the soul which contains deep, usually metaphysical Ideas. Attention to the skin explains why there has been an explosion of scholarly attention to popular culture at the expense of canonical texts lately.

Jettisoning the "why" question's search for a core, genealogists are left with "how" questions, the semiological questions of how meaning is constructed through the juxtaposition of signs. Seeing meaning as constructed rather than discovered, postmodernism seeks to de-naturalize, historicize and problematize things which rule the present and are taken for granted; for example, Foucault's consideration of the modern subject though his work on incarceration, insanity, and sexuality.

This brings up the point of why choose the tactics of genealogy and its uncertainty over the solid grounding of Modernism. It is not a question of whether Modernism of postmodernism is true or not, but which one is a more useful tool for particular projects, or a useful technique for explaining why there are some projects, and not others. Philosophers have been digging for primordial truths for at least two millenia and have yet to strike gold. This leads one to consider, as Nietzsche did, whether they are asking the wrong question. Whether it makes more sense to see the world as having an underlying order, or to problematize such ordering as a kind of practice that people are
engaged in. Modernists seek to right wrongs, where genealogists see us as continually rewriting them -- in ever more elaborate ways.

This is where postmodernism is criticized as being neoconservative. Since there is no solid Ground for Truth to rest on, critics say that there is no possibility for liberation, or for hope. This criticism grows out of a shift in metaphors of politics and community. In both the Marxist and Liberal Democratic traditions community is largely taken for granted, and the political issues involve defining that community and dividing up the scarce resources within it. But with postmodernism, politics is not just about the dividing up of scarce resources, but explores and explains the production of representations in our consumer society. A consideration of power is shifted from a primary relation with capital to the power/knowledge dynamic. The politics of identity becomes an issue which is wrapped up in knowledge practices and representation. In the information age, rather than scarcity being our main political concern, management of multiplicity becomes an important issue -- the liberal pie which had to be divided between contending interest groups has been multiplied into 108 cable tv channels. Citizens and workers struggle to get more political and economic capital; consumers struggle to choose between the various representations which overwhelmingly constitute politics and economics.

3At a recent philosopher's conference some participants were up in arms about the possible horrors they saw contained in the "relativism" of postmodernism -- an approach which lacked a solid and singular notion of Truth, Justice and Morality. I could only think of how these capitalized ideals had supported the recent historical horrors of Nazism, Stalinism and Reaganism which all stem from absolutist missions.
Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* provides a short example of the power/knowledge dynamic and the politics of representation. Though the setting is one of poverty, race and the racial strife represented in the film grow out of struggles to assert contesting identities. Buggin' Out decides to boycott Sal's Famous Pizza because there are no "brothers on the wall," only pictures of Italian American entertainers. A counter-identity and community for African Americans is then forcefully represented through the language practices of music, naming and street-talk; at one point, the audience is overpowered when a simple listing of Black musicians which is seemingly endless is uttered by Love Daddy over the radio. Multiple representations constitute the identity. Yet this identity is shattered when Sal smashes Radio Rahim's boom box which has been blaring "Fight the Power" with a baseball bat -- the cultural politics of Joe DiMaggio versus Public Enemy. The institutional power of the state supports Sal's representations, and the police end up killing Radio Rahim in an effort to restrain him and the African American identity. The racial issue is constituted in knowledge and identity; the arena is language not economics, though the political-economic action of boycotts grows out of the politics of identity. The politics of identity involves both construction and deconstruction -- the film ends with quotations by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X -- laughter too signifies violence as well as reconciliation.

Once one gives up the search for TRUTH and a grounded base identity as lost cause and refigures truths and identities as historical
productions, rhetoric becomes important. Rather than asking what things are in-and-of-themselves, you take the postmodern turn of asking how things are done, where things are done (and more radically, how they can be done differently, in different spaces.)

Though rhetoric addresses the questions of how things are said and done, it is involved in at least two quite different, and often opposing, practices. I imagine their interplay in terms of a postmodern pitchfork, and it is laughter that can serve to both join and hone these two often contesting points. First the two points.

One can argue that those who look to postmodernism can be herded into two groups: narrative postmoderns and poststructuralist postmoderns. Here I look at them in relation to rhetoric. Narrative postmoderns, exemplified by Richard Rorty, use rhetoric as "the art of persuasion," where one tries to convince the interlocuter to join the posited "we." Rorty uses the model of conversation for human interaction, and sees solidarity as his goal rather than truth. His rhetoric appeals to the familiar, and to a large extent deals with the present and contemporary issues. William Connally analyzes Rorty well when he points out that while Rorty

---

4It should be noted that one can deconstruct deconstructionism as a movement which started most recently with Nietzsche. He was responding to Western philosophy's obsession with the abstract -- particularly since Descartes who capitalized Epistemology. This abstraction prescribes a sense of Unity that people such as Foucault and Derrida contest in their deconstruction. Edward Said, particularly in *After the Last Sky*, argues in the other direction. Palestinians already have multiple identities, and are using similar approaches to search for a coherency which will facilitate action.

5Here I appeal to language in a broad metaphorical sense -- e.g. at the philosopher's conference I was struck by the rhetoric of baldness, how a lack of hair or grey hair aided the force of presentations -- this also speaks to the gendered situation of the discipline.
problematizes and ironizes the private, he ossifies the public. There is no question of politics in Rorty, he is comfortable in his (conservative) "liberal postmodernism" -- it is a "we" that he takes for granted.  

Though dealing with the present may be a radical and useful vocation for a philosopher, the other fork of postmodernism seeks to problematize the present and such a neat division of it into public and private spaces. Rhetoric in this sense denaturalizes language practices, refiguring them to feel the power of language. Boundaries of propriety are crossed, with their crisp lines being blurred underfoot: there are impertinent metaphors and impious speech. The strategy of rhetoric here is not one of familiarity and closeness, but one of distance.

Wrapped up in this argument is postmodernism's suspicion of claims to objectivity: every discourse comes from a source, from a space and perspective whose activities and desires are scripted by the discourses in which it is imbedded -- this is similar to Marx's argument that people are always talking on the basis of their socio-economic class. Postmodern approaches are not limited to examining

---

6 Rorty is bound up here in the politics of representation. In The Trial, Franz Kafka writes a brilliant passage about Joseph K. trying to fire his lawyer, his representation to the Court, and take over his own case [231]:

"Well at least that's a plan we can discuss," said the lawyer after a long pause. "It's not a plan, it's a fact," said K. "Maybe," said the lawyer, "but we mustn't be in too much of a hurry." He used the word "we" as if he had no intention of letting K. detach himself...

I thought of Rorty when I read this last sentence.

7 I will come back to how the individual and the social are figured in and by discourse below in the discussion on laughter.
class relations, but look to things more in the multiplicity of gender, ethnicity, residence, age and so on as well as class. So Foucault looks back in history to see how practices that we now take for granted were constructed historically for certain discursive groups, for example, "human rights" and "the rule of law" grew out of the dispute over sovereignty between monarchs and the aristocracy in Europe -- it was created by kings to circumvent the aristocracy. The point here is not that human rights are bad, but that they are not Natural -- that they restrict meaning as well as creating it -- and there are other ways of figuring "rights." Native Hawaiian activists such as Hayden Burgess have posited that notions of "community rights" serve their needs better against the encroachment of neo-colonial modernity.

Genealogists write the history of the present by looking at it from a distance. The problem with this is that it necessarily excludes, and is often very dry and sober -- not very convincing, and at times alienating. I argue that laughter is the dynamic that can bring these two aspects of rhetoric together. Laughter exists in a special space, what Foucault calls a 'heterotopia', "in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." [1988:24]

Humor in its productive sense is distancing as it is often inscribes meaning with hyperbole, impertinent metaphor, appealing to the absurd and chaos in many different ways. While pure academics and haute culture often strive to reflect reality and seek understanding, laughter dances around misunderstanding; it is produced in the refraction, the bending and twisting, of existing
discourses. When Zhang Xianliang -- a contemporary Chinese writer using traditional techniques -- plays with language specifically in the naming of his characters, serious social issues are brought to our attention. By naming his characters not according to the dominant patriarchal family metaphor, but according to tragicomic situations that they find themselves in, e.g. "the big-footed female philosopher," or "the guy who killed cattle by overfeeding them" Zhang calls into question the dominant mode of selfhood. He sheds a stream of light on the problem of the patriarchal family structure which, judging by films that are being produced in Beijing, is still a central issue in Chinese society.

In this sense, humor is convincing because it does not despair at the abyss of incommensurability, but instead often celebrates misunderstanding. Laughter is contagious. This is dangerous to those who want to make their posited Understanding hegemonic -- there are numerous references in European poetry and prose tracing the origin of laughter to the Devil. In the same way the classical Chinese philosopher Zhuang zi is threatening to Confucians because of his laughter and play -- Zhuang zi's fun is subversive because he plays with toys other than those his society affords him -- he plays with Dukes and sages like Confucius while fishing on the Han River. And that is one of the practices that laughter is involved in -- contesting dominant modes of power and expression, but in a slippery way so as to preserve one's options in ironic tension. It is useful for those on the margins as well as those of us caught in the thick of Modernity.
THEMES: laughter and mis/understanding

Perhaps there has been some false advertising in setting the stage of analysis. Though it addresses laughter, it is doubtful that this research and writing will be funny. And there is always the question of whether it should be funny.

Stylistics is an important issue in the study of laughter. I have been caught between a will to seriousness, to have the research taken seriously, and a nagging anxiety that a serious study of laughter is missing the point, or not getting the joke. But there are options between a rigorous scientific study that risks trampling over the differences that laughter produces and a stance of a stand-up comic who jokes about politics just for fun. As I argue in this dissertation, laughter and fun in struggle are very political in that while having fun in resisting oppression, we begin to reorganize our political relations in more productive ways -- we do not have to wait until after the revolution to start living, and invite Mao to a tea party.

To engage in both seriously fun politics and laughingly serious humor, I often assume the mode a story-telling. This genre has its own set of problems and possibilities contained in its embracing the fact/fiction boundary. Garrison Keillor expresses the multiplicity well in this quotation from the American Radio Show: "I could tell you the truth out here, or I can tell lies. It makes no difference to me. If you like fiction, I can do that. But this story is true..." Storytelling is playful, but it is important; each story in this dissertation serves a purpose,
each has a moral which might be lost in a more traditional style.

Thinking back to how this project got started can shed some light on this serious/fun distinction in relation to the interpretation of laughter. I was sensitized to the intricacies of laughter in reading Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman*, a tale of the labor reform camps of the Cultural Revolution period. By all accounts it is a difficult book, and very slow reading -- so every character stands out, and one that keep recurring at a rate of more than once a page by the end of the novel is *xiao*. *Xiao* stands for "laugh" and "smile." It was strange to find such a "happy" character in such a tragic novel. Yet when one looks at how the character was deployed in the text, different meanings are produced: according well with the Chinese word for "comedy" which begins with *hua*-slippery. In addition to the expected jubilant laughter, there are coy smiles, eternal smiles, bitter laughs, smirks, sneers, horrible laughter, empty laughter, ambivalent laughter [31]: "Originally we should have cried but, then however we laughed. This result, was it from a weakening of the human spirit, or from a strengthening?"9

---

8This is a sticky book right from the start -- *Half of Man is Woman*, as Martha Avery translates the title does not quite get it. Literally it is something like "What is man's, half is woman," but that only serves to confuse the issue more. Milena Dolezelova suggests that the title addresses the two main characters, a man and a woman, neither of whom is whole. I pause on this detail because reading Chinese serves to highlight the interpretive practices that continually engage us -- regardless of the language.

9One could argue that tears function rhetorically in an analogous way to laughter -- they can be used as a rhetorical weapon to both bolster and domesticate an argument, or shift the focus from one locus to another -- all depending upon how they are used. Crying is perhaps even more frowned upon than laughing in certain arenas because it has come to be heavily gendered, a feminine/emotional thing to do
This contradicts the popular notion that all laughter is good which has recently [1989] received academic justification in such works as Philosophy East and West's "Special Issue on Philosophy and Humor." It contests the notion that laughter equals happiness, as Richard Rorty has argued in another essay.¹⁰

This dissertation in a twist of the above mentioned work aims to analyze the multiplicity of laughter as it is deployed in social and literary constructions. Or more simply, it is taken for granted that one laughs when things are funny, but what else can the practice of laughter signify? Hence the question asked is not "what" laughter is; my job is to trace the discursive economies of "how" "where" and "when" laughter is produced. The purpose is not to discard traditional notions of laughter and humor, but to maintain some dynamic between the various sorts of laughter to recognize the politics involved.

¹⁰A happy-go-lucky approach to humor in this Special Issue is best exemplified in passages from the introductory article by Thomas P. Kasulis [241]: "Humor, on the other hand, is a vacation from the everyday.... humor can let in not only the fresh air, but also the light, helping us to see in a new way ourselves, our communities, our world."

Though he would be uncomfortable with the heliotropes, Richard Rorty is on a similar tact in "Philosophy, Literature and Inter-Cultural Comparison: Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens." He is switching away from the greatest Good for the greatest number "to the greatest happiness of the greatest number." [16] He argues that what Kundera calls the "comic spirit" and laughter lead to this greatest happiness. Yet he does not see how laughter is polyvocal, and that happiness is a constructed discourse, just like everything else.

Charles Shultz, the creator of "Peanuts," provides an interesting gloss on this when he says: "Happiness isn't very funny. It's wonderful but it's not funny." [People 89.10.30:84]
To foreground these politics, I am most interested in the relation between laughter and mis/understanding: the chuckles, smiles and guffaws that spring from a clash of discourses, from laughing that is refracted off of established social codes. Laughter is political in that it is a disruptive tool of disorder that can be aimed in many directions -- both to empower or to oppress based on its placement in social/linguistic space: again, racist jokes reinforce the present; ironic statements call it into question.

Some of the politics of laughter and its relation to mis/understanding are brought out in *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. In this story of intrigues in a Italian abbey during the Inquisition two important themes course through the text: the struggles of orthodoxy/heterodoxy and sobriety/laughter. Laughter is feared by some as a threat to the order of the Order, to the position of the orthodoxy: straight speech. Those who believe that there are other ways of speaking -- an etymological translation of "heterodoxy" -- which include laughing are branded as "heretics" -- etymologically: those able to choose. Yet they are burned at the stake for this empowerment.

Back in the twentieth century, Understanding often plays the policing role that Orthodoxy did in medieval Europe -- we cannot forget that Science can be traced to the Inquisition. [Foucault 1978:64] It is commonly taken for granted that, like a sense of humor, Understanding is good, something that we should all strive for. Peace and Understanding are often linked together, with the Understanding that if one only Understood one's enemies, there would be no conflict and people could all live in harmony. Yet it is a
question of whose understanding and harmony we are caught up in. As such, it is instructive to twist the optic to problematize and historicize Understanding, to demonstrate how the single-ordered discourse of Understanding does not allow for difference, and finally see how mis/understandings can be productive and useful, rather than errors that desperately need correction.

**Understanding**

The word "Understanding" is most notably deployed recently in the theoretical texts of Hermeneutics. This Interpretive School, like the Postmoderns, has made the shift from epistemology to ontology in switching the focus from searches for Truth to a quest for Understanding. Knowledge practices in hermeneutics are more social in that where they are, and how they are is an issue: knowledge is by "by" and "for" persons. As Hans-Georg Gadamer argues Understanding, and more importantly self-understanding, is necessary for a successful interaction among people.11

Yet the constables of Hermeneutics are still mobilized in that the practice is again bound up in a Hegelian dialectic of self/other which tends to domesticate the Exotic by reading it in terms of the Familiar. The practice of defining the Other in terms of the Self, of constituting the Exotic in terms of the Familiar is best played out in

---

11 Hans-Georg Gadamer argues the case for Understanding in his major work *Truth and Method*. A more succinct presentation is found in "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" which is found in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. For a critical view of Hermeneutics, Michael J. Shapiro's article "Metaphor in the Social Sciences" listed in the bibliography is instructive.
Hermeneutic's interest in translation and its view of language and conversation.

The etymology of the word "Hermeneutics" is guiding in its constitution of translation: it is drawn from Hermes -- the messenger of the gods. Language, like a vessel, carries a commodity called Meaning which can be separated from language if need be. In translation -- either from one language to another, or from one era to another -- this meta-linguistic Meaning is transported from one language to another. (Imagine Hermes prancing across the sky wearing a Federal Express t-shirt clutching Meaning in his hand.) This Meta-language of meaning is a master language which allows for complete translation and total Understanding. Nothing is left out; the correct Meaning can be recovered if only the distance between the two texts can be bridged.

Another guiding metaphor for the Hermeneuticist is that of a "conversation." A shared logos is taken for granted in such a conversation, and the conversation between texts ends, an interpretation is made, when the two texts are merged into a higher order of Understanding. Thus the task of a Hermeneuticist is to narrow the distance between exotic texts and their own canon, narrow the distance between antiquity and the present to allow for this merging.¹²

Yet this master language and synthesis of texts in conversation also serves to police out difference and reify the present. The power

¹²As Gadamer puts it: "tradition had become estranged from the present as a result of such factors as temporal distance, the fixity of writing, and the sheer inertia of permanence." [1977:19]
of Understanding was demonstrated best for me when a classmate and I were talking to one of our professors. When at the end of a heated discussion we still contradicted him, he shook his head and said, "Oh, I thought you understood!" Our answer was, "we understand you; we just don't agree." We all laughed heartily. We are all friends, so the politics of this story are muted: yet Understanding still means agreement, and to Understand is to in some measure control.

With Understanding, difference is reduced to unity because it is imbedded in a single-ordered discourse of the way things are, and if they are not so, then the way they should be. Most of the oppressions of racism, hetero-sexism, imperialism, are based on excluding those people who are not what is taken to be the standard against which all is judged. In her book *Sister Outsider* Audre Lorde brings this "mythical norm" to light both structurally and poetically [116]: "In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside in this society."
The standard in the United States, and hence many other places, is defined by those white North Atlantic heterosexual males who have been in power.¹³

¹³A passage from the New Testament which is both constructive of and appealed to by this norm is instructive in bringing out the political power. God is Understanding, Understanding is God:

> Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who so resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they will receive. For
These certain people and institutions tell themselves that they find themselves in power because they Understand, and then they are bequeathed with the credentials to grant others the mantle of Understanding. Yet the social is constituted by a control -- an Understanding -- of the exchange of signs: those who wear the mantle of Understanding are also those who control language into which all else must be translated. The following passage from Eco's *The Name of the Rose* exemplifies how screaming difference is muted and controlled by master languages [398]:

The two were dragged off, one silent and destroyed, almost feverish, the other weeping and kicking and screaming like an animal being led to the shambles. But neither Bernard nor the archers nor I myself could understand what she was saying in her peasant tongue. For all her shouting, she was as if mute. There are words that give power, others that make us all more derelict, and to this category belong the vulgar words of the simple, to whom the Lord has not granted the boon of self-expression in the universal tongue of knowledge and power.

government, a terror to crime, has no terrors for good behaviour. You wish to have no fear of authorities? Then continue to do right and you will have their approval, for they are God's agents working for your good. But if you are doing wrong, then you will have cause to fear them; it is not for nothing that they hold the power of the sword, for they are God's agents of punishment, for retribution on the offender. That is why you are obliged to submit. It is an obligation imposed not merely by fear of retribution but by conscience. That is also why you pay taxes. The authorities are in God's service and to these duties they devote their energies. [Romans 13:1-6]

Further on in this essay I will argue that "authority" and "government" can be replaced by such words as "culture" or "code."
Difference is reduced to Unity. Translation is total and totalizing: the village girl is sentenced to burn as a witch because she does not speak Latin. Likewise, in the United States blacks have to speak the language of whites to survive; women have to speak men's language; women of color are by necessity polyglots.¹⁴

mis/understanding

Rather than look to spaces where Understanding might not be so singular and brutal, and hence rehabilitate the practice, let us make an ontological twist to valorize mis/understanding. This is an odd turn. Most people try to avoid mis/understandings, and express horror when hit in the face with them, as with Milan Kundera's character Ludvig does in The Joke when he discovers that his life has been scripted by a misUnderstood postcard message: a joke that received no laughter, but resulted with his dismissal from the Party, the University, and precipitated his entrance into a penal brigade:

...what good would it do when the whole story of my life was conceived by error: the accident, the absurdity of the bad joke on the postcard? And to my horror I realized that things conceived by error were every bit as

¹⁴The passage from The Name of the Rose serves as an example of a text pregnant with possibilities for what anthropologists call "thick description" -- Eco has already started out theorizing through examples, and exemplifying with theory for us. In addition to the points about translation and muteness, this passage also can be read in terms of the hierarchies of male/female, ecclesiastic/lay, human/animal, reason/emotion, clean/dirty, aristocratic/vulgar within the hierarchy of universal/local which are played out in how the monk -- there were two dragged off -- and the peasant girl are in completely different positions even though they were discovered together. Thick description does not seek to define or account for texts, but to tell one possible story about them, as Clifford Geertz says in his classic article "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," it is "saying something about something."
This passage shows the inadequacy of describing the world according to reason, where existence is regulated by truth and misunderstanding is error and lying. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is located in a similar residence as a "rational man." The Priest tries to break down these walls with a parable which allows multiple interpretations [268]: "The right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other." Yet as a rational man K. can only reply, "It turns lying into a universal principle." [276]

Yet is lying, as such, necessarily heinous? Or is a discourse which depends on a single-ordered Truth more heinous? Contemporary theorists address this irony in different ways. Roland Barthes flatly states "What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth." [1972:12] Yet Umberto Eco draws power from the irony of fact and fiction. In his *Theory of Semiotics* he writes [7]: "Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie." Following Eco, I would like to study the exchange of signs operative in constituting social discourses and see how lies (and thus truths) are produced, rather than search to uncover Truth values. Rather than lamenting at the abyss of incommensurability, I would like to consider the fecundity of mis/understanding, especially as it produces laughter at the intersection of languages.
But here one should be cautious; in valorizing mis/understanding I am not proposing a simple reversal of privilege from Understanding to mis/understanding. Rather the project is to reorganize political space to allow for both: to multiply and de-categorize understanding with mis/understanding, to make it more of an on-going negotiation in the sense of "coming to an understanding."

In his work on the anxiety of poetic influence, Harold Bloom provides an example of how seemingly negative terms can be revalued. He writes of "misreading." Rather than being bound by correct meanings, Bloom argues that interpretation, and thus influence, proceed through acts of creative correction which are actually and necessarily misinterpretations. [1973:30] Hence rather than being policed by Truth claims which are restrictive in their singularity, "misreadings" are productive in their necessary multiplicity; they are useful in that they are historicized: "misreadings" are always possessed and resident.

Here, what is taken for granted is not an underlying unity and order of Language, but a multiplicity of languages, and the stylistics that are constituted by them. Instead of translating meanings, I am interested in a more literary approach of interpretation as possibility, interpretation which is attentive to the form that language takes, as well as the content of its meaning.

With this shift of interest from text to context, the literary theory of M.M. Bakhtin becomes useful. Bakhtin historicizes utterances and so contests the notion of a single "Language" -- either as an underlying Chomskyan Language, or as a central Language in the sense of World English -- into which all things are translated.
Heterodoxy rather than Orthodoxy. In focusing on heteroglossia, the polyphony of the text, he multiplies discourse into languages [1981:291]:

...languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.... It might even seem that the word "language" loses all meaning in this process -- for apparently there is no single plane on which these "languages" might be juxtaposed to one another.\textsuperscript{15}

Viewing texts, both literary and social, in terms of a multiplicity of languages that cannot be reduced to any meta-language, refigures the way that one relates to them, and analyzes them. Bakhtin writes about this shift in terms of stylistics: style is removed from Language to languages.

Another passage, related to the one cited above from Eco's \textit{The Name of the Rose} is helpful here. It discusses the language of the other person who was dragged away, a monk named Salvatore. The narrator Adso considers Salvatore's personal chimera of language, and how difficult it is to Understand it [47-48]:

... I could never understand then, which language he spoke. It was not Latin, in which the lettered men of the monastery expressed themselves, it was not the vulgar tongue of those parts, or any other I had ever heard.... When I learned later about his adventurous life and about the various places where he lived, putting down roots in none of them, I realized Salvatore spoke all

\textsuperscript{15}I am not only interested the juxtaposition of languages such as English, French, Chinese and Thai, but also in the professional languages, regional languages, class languages that compose national languages. We take it for granted that we will Understand someone with the same native language, though I have found that the differences between the California dialect and the Wisconsin dialect are often greater for me than those between English and Chinese.
languages and no language... the language of primeval confusion.... And yet, one way or another, I did understand what Salvatore meant, and so did the others.

Salvatore's language is a mix (a bastardization) of many languages. Its status does not depend upon its geographical or societal position, but is located in its efficacy. It has no ground, yet is not utopic, like the Hermeneutic Language; it is better described as a language of heterotopia.

Following this characterization of utterances, the focus of analysis is not on the Unity of Language or Laughter and its unmediated intensionality, but on how the many languages are negotiated in a text: on the discursive economies of Salvatore's adventures. Analysis centers on excavating these languages, not to see how they are mixed together to form one new meta-language, but to see how they are juxtaposed in a dynamic system of languages. [Bakhtin 1981:416]

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization -- this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. [1981:263]

Bakhtin looks to contexts both within texts and between texts: among genre he argues that the novel allows for maximum polyvocality, and thus the most interesting and political dynamics.\(^{16}\) In this

polyvocality, no single voice is hegemonic -- languages are mixed in such a way that one knows one will never get "the whole story." One of the characteristics of an intensely polyvocal novel is that it undermines itself: characters build up understandings of the world and other characters which are better named mis/understandings -- operative, productive, sometimes happy sometimes sad, often funny mis/understandings. 17

In popular culture, the institution of marriage is a common theme of such a mixing of languages. Mis/understanding is produced, and is productive of, the multiplicity of languages that Bakhtin writes about. Yet, let us move from the seemingly Gadamer-inspired malaise of Gabriel Garcia Marquez:

> It was against all scientific reason for two people who hardly knew each other, with no ties at all between them, with different characters, different upbringings, and even different genders to suddenly find themselves committed to living together, to sleeping in the same bed, to sharing two destinies that perhaps were fated to go in opposite directions. He would say: "The problem with marriage is

---

17 An exemplary case of this polyvocality in mis/understanding is found in novels such as Stendhal's *Red and Black* where Julien's adventures are constituted in his bouncing off of social codes over which he has little understanding or control. In *The Joke* Kundera writes of the tragicomic features of mis/understanding. It is an intensely polyvocal novel in that even though, or especially since, it is written in the first person, there are four different "I's" distributed over seven sections. Each mis/understanding undermines the next, yet this comedy is tragic in that one of the characters -- Lucie -- does not have a voice, she is only talked about, feels the violence of her identity being constituted and reconstituted in such a way that it ignores her own experience. Even though there are many voices, this polyvocality always leaves something out.
that it ends every night after making love, and must be rebuilt every morning before breakfast." [1988:209]
At the age of forty, half in earnest and half in jest, he had said in class: "All I need in life is someone who understands me." [247]
to the hope and humor of Thomas Berger and Milan Kundera. People can act within mis/understanding as well as within understanding, sometimes better:
Olga was a great comfort to me, and one of the reasons why she was is that she never learned too much English, and I of course couldn't speak a word of Swede. Not being able to talk much to each other we got along just fine, and never exchanged a cross word. [Berger:175]

Jan and Edwige never understood each other, yet they always agreed. Each interpreted the other's words in his own way, and they lived in perfect harmony, the perfect solidarity of perfect mutual misunderstanding. He was well aware of it and almost took pleasure in it. [Kundera 1980:227]

Though they demonstrate the move toward revaluing mis/understanding well, these passages raise still other issues. They illustrate the difference in the utility of Understanding and mis/understanding, yet they are very obviously gendered: it is men who are speaking in a phallogocentric way yearning for unity, for perfection. [Irigaray:23-32] Though it has not yet been mentioned, the formulation of mis/understanding appeals to feminist theory, particularly feminist notions of identity -- a multiplicity of identity characterized well by "women of color"18 -- and feminist knowledge

---

18Donna Harraway [1985] argues this point well, and I will come back to it in Chapter 5. Milan Kundera also has a curious passage [1982:24-25]: "Who was the real me? I can only repeat: I was a man of many faces....
practices where knowing is a social activity and understanding is negotiated.\textsuperscript{19}

In many respects the Understanding/misunderstanding dyad is a patriarchal construction. Writing in terms of "mis/understanding," the ironic slash seeks to shift the focus so that people can have both difference and action: to have the multiplicity that mis/understanding entails and the political massing afforded by understanding.\textsuperscript{20} Here neither unity nor understanding is total or totalizing, but negotiated, as said: I would like to verbalize Understand in the sense of "coming to an understanding."

This passage from \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being} plays out some of the feminist aspects of mis/understanding in relations (though Karenin has a man's name, she is a female dog) [297-98]:

It is a completely selfless love: Tereza did not want anything of Karenin; she did not ever ask him to love her back. Nor had she ever asked him the questions that plague human couples: Does he love me? Does he love me more than I love him? Perhaps all the questions we ask of love, to measure, test, probe, and save it, have the additional effect of cutting it short. Perhaps the reason that we are unable to love is that we yearn to be loved,

\textsuperscript{19}The literature on this point is voluminous. Sandra Harding [1986] gives a good overview as well as arguing her own points. 

\textsuperscript{20}Denise Riley in the concluding chapter of \textit{"Am I that Name?"} addresses this ironic politics in terms of 'women.' She argues that 'women' are caught between contesting the category 'women' which both says too little and too much, and the political capital that such a category affords in our sociologically defined society. Rather than a simple reversal from valorizing 'men' to valorizing 'women' which takes the category of 'women' for granted, Riley looks to ironic politics. The irony is found in not settling in either camp, but in a juggling action that allows for both identities and the denial of identities.
that is, we demand something (love) from our partner instead of delivering ourselves up to him demand-free and asking for nothing but his company. And something else: Tereza accepted Karenin for what he was; she did not try to make him over in her image; she agreed from the outset with his dog's life, did not wish to deprive him of it, did not envy him his secret intrigues. The reason she trained him was not to transform him (as a husband tries to reform his wife and a wife her husband), but to provide him with the elementary language that enabled them to communicate and live together.

Selfless love is rejoicing in mis/understanding, and leads us to another yet to be named subtext in this project. Though valuing mis/understanding is at most an undercurrent in North Atlantic philosophy, it is a persistent nag at Chinese philosophical texts.

Mis/understanding is imbedded in the contradictions that characterize the Daoist tradition of Chinese thought. *Wu-wei* -- Acting Non-action; *wu-yu* -- objectless desire; *wu-zhi* -- mis/understanding. These "*wu*-forms" have confused commentators for over two millenia: a productive embodiment of mis/understanding. A postmodern approach of attention to difference, to the margins, to the shadows has provoked a reconsideration of these difficult terms.\(^1\)

Yet the term in question here -- *wu-zhi* mis/understanding -- is hardly considered. A.C. Graham points out that the negative *wu* is the complement of *you* -- to have. So *wu-zhi* means to not have

---

\(^1\)There is resonance throughout postmodern literature, for instance: "The poetry lies not in action but in the interruption of action." [Kundera 1988:161] "To be a Palestinian often entails mastery without domination, pleasure without injury to others." [Said 1985:164] Roland Barthes talks of forgetfulness, digression, unlearning in his Inaugural Lecture, and quotes from the *Dao De Jing* elsewhere. [1982:478;454]
Understanding, to lack Understanding. It is not an epistemological
elegation so much as an ontological absence which can lead to other
presences.

Wu-zhi is an elusive term, actually an empty term, which can
reflect and refract many meanings at once. I will not directly
analyze this term in the dissertation, but only suggest it, and see how
it dances with mis/understanding and juggles with laughter in
certain artifacts of "Chinese Culture." Chinese philosophy and
literature are used not to suggest an exotic example, an Other in the
East-West equation, but merely to suggest a different way of
laughing and managing laughter.

laughter
Laughter is a tool which in many spaces grows out of (and into)
mis/understanding. In a sense, Kant in his Critique of Judgement
agrees: "In everything that is supposed to excite a lively and
convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which
Understanding, therefore, can have no satisfaction)." [in Cottom:33]
Yet morality sometimes clouds judgement. Laughter is not
inherently bad or good, but like Bakhtin's heteroglossia its meaning
is produced according to the context of the clashing of social
discourses. Depending on the positioning of social discourses, and
how they are transgressed, laughter can be involved in either
empowerment or oppression.

In the United States people, when they reach a certain age, are
expected to be able to walk in a standard way -- unless they are
excluded from this constituency for reasons of health, etc. When
someone slips in a puddle, others sometimes laugh. There has been a clash of discourses; the person who slipped did not understand the discourse of walking, they misunderstood the puddle. The upshot is what I will call monovocal laughter; there is one code, one way of understanding that is hegemonic: it laughs to reinforce itself. It is conservative laughter in that it does not question the present, but only ridicules the idiosyncracies of the agency of some wayward individual who becomes the clown or the fool. A more radical optic on this event would shift the focus from the idiosyncracies, the exceptions, to the social codes that constitute these individuals, the discourses that script our existence and action.22 Why didn't the sidewalk have better drainage, or a surface that allowed for more friction? Or why should one be required to walk in a certain way?23

Yet there is a more radical form of laughter which calls the present into question by historicizing social codes. These snickers are polyvocal in that they multiply the possibilities and open up resistance, perhaps allowing for new doors to open -- doors through which one can skip, dance, or trip rather than just march. As

---

22 Foucault and Norbert Elias [1978] discuss how discourses such as sexuality and table manners produce “individuals.” Knowledge as a practice is not something that individuals produce as Gadamer would argue, but that discourses produce individuals.

23 In "Practices of Space," Michel de Certeau writes politically of walking as the pedestrian utterances of the city where ambulatory rhetoric is used to both undermine and reinforce social codes. On the other hand, Henri Bergson in his classic treatment of laughter -- which uses stumbling and falling to exemplify social laughter -- addresses it in a different way: laughter is for social control. Like for the hermeneuticists, for him the whole is more important than the parts, so the parts must be pared off if they stick out. "Now it is the business of laughter to repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with." [174] To Bergson resistance is rigidity: rigidity to social/institutional control.
Kundera puts it: "The real geniuses of the comic are not those who make us laugh the hardest but those who reveal some unknown realm of the comic." [1988:126] Foucault's work politicizes this: "the problem is not so much that of defining a political 'position' (which is to choose from a pre-existing set of possibilities) but to imagine and to bring into being new schemas of politicisation." [1980:190]

Polyvocal laughter is involved in the politics of possibility, not the politics of authority and institutions.

A passage from *The Long Ships, a Saga of the Viking Age* by Frans G. Bengtsson illustrates the questioning of social codes involved in polyvocal laughter. Bengtsson is a master at manipulating the stylistics of the novel; in this passage the chapter title "How Brother Willibald taught King Sven a Maxim from the Scriptures," which through captioning reaffirms social codes operative in the Church and King Sven's court, is juxtaposed with the actions between Willibald and Sven [241]:

Brother Willibald bent down, picked up a stone, and flung it with all his might.

"Love thy neighbor!" he grunted as it left his hand. The stone struck King Sven full on the mouth with a loud smack. With a howl of agony, he crumpled on the horse's mane and slithered to the ground.

"That is what I call a good priest," said Rapp.

Brother Willibald quotes the Scriptures in an impious way; he transgresses his own remonstrations as a doctor against the violence of the Vikings. In commending Willibald, Rapp is transgressing the anti-Christian attitude characteristic of Vikings. With these clashes that multiply meaning Bengtsson produces laughter in my reading.
Social codes are not only questioned through transgression; polyvocal laughter is also produced in the on-going mis/understandings which dance around the borders of discourses. Thomas Berger utilizes the stylistics of genre and language to produce laughter through the mis/understandings that Jack Crabb encounters on the borders between the social languages of white settlers and Plains Indians in *Little Big Man*. What is most important in this respect about this novel, and even more in the film version, is that for the most part Indians speak their own language -- they are not constituted as in standard "westerns" as an inferior Other through accented speech and ungrammatical utterances.\(^{24}\)

Laughter when used as a tool in certain spaces, can explode the edifice of Understanding into uneven piles of mis/understanding; just as in *The Name of the Rose* where the search for Aristotle's lost treatise on laughter destroyed the Grand Library: the treasury where Understanding was hoarded and guarded. After the fire there were fragments of knowledge left in the piles of charred book stumps.

Or as another figures laughter:
The explosion of laughter at something really funny is a form of subversive act. Our world is full of what seem to be rigid categories, set down by minds, parents, society, governments. A good joke releases the tension of our having to submit to these categories; and suggests to us that these categories are perhaps not all that necessary after all. [Timmerman:24]

---

\(^{24}\)David Seals [1991] gives a convincing critical view of "pro-Indian" artifacts such as *Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves*. He argues that they are part of a "New Custerism" in that both still prescribe "indians" in terms of whites' often violent struggles for meaning and territory. So I take my own hopeful pronouncements with suspicion and a dash of salt.
Laughter is a disordering technique, and it is not surprising that the recurrent European myth of its origin centers around the first disordering move: Lucifer's challenge to God. Laughter is the Devil's work according to the blind monk in *The Name of the Rose*, and it must be controlled, strangled. A story of the German Romantic period (1804) describes the mythic origin of laughter simply: "Laughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared under the mask of joy, so they [the people] readily accepted it." [Bakhtin 1968:38]

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera plays with the ambiguity of laughter in its origin:

Things deprived of their putative meaning, the place assigned them in the ostensible order of things... make us laugh. Initially, therefore, laughter is the province of the Devil.... The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified. It was in the middle of a feast with a lot of people around, and one after the other they joined in the Devil's laughter. It was terribly contagious. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of His works. He knew he had to act fast, but felt weak and defenseless. And unable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactics against him. He opened his mouth and let out a wobbly breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register... and endowed it with the opposite meaning. Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up to the

25 The fear of laughter is widespread ranging in time, space, from classical to popular culture. Plato's Socrates must censor laughter in the *Republic* because it challenges the authority of rulers and the gods: "Then we must not allow it if a poet shows men of mark mastered by laughter, still less the gods." [185] In "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" Judge Doom becomes irate when his weasels laugh. Roger has the right attitude when he says, "Laughter is a very important thing. Sometimes it's the only weapon we have."
meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good and sensible everything on earth was.

This passage is rich with images of the irony of laughter. In the same space laughter can be read in contradictory ways: it is a tool which anyone can use. As the passage concludes:

[the angel's] Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels have gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the Devil's) have the same name. People nowadays do not even realize that one and the same external phenomena embraces two completely contradictory attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them. [62]

The Devil's critical laughter is not pure; it is imbedded in the power that it opposes along the lines of Foucault's oft cited discussion of power and resistance [1978:94]:

Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.

Or as Eco writes in *The Name of the Rose*: Sin is like tar; when you grasp at it, it sticks to you. Yet because laughter is usually imbedded in a multiple discourse, its poly-vocality will perhaps undermine totalization with time.

What I argue for is a more deliberate political use of laughter for mis/understanding. Yet, as an experience at a poetry reading attests, this is a difficult position to take. The poems in question were depressing; this "Chinese Writer in Exile" recognized the poems' deflating qualities, and explained that it was the way that he
expressed his anger -- he was reading poems he had written in the six months following the June 4th 1989 massacre.

Especially after hearing a poem entitled "Misunderstanding -- wu-jie," it occurred to me to ask if the Writers in Exile ever considered using laughter as a means of textual resistance. Apparently not. The poet even went so far as to say that "well, Chinese people just aren't that funny." (At which everyone, including the Chinese, laughed.) And his statement is true in the sense that the Student's Movement was characterized by an intense earnestness that left little room for laughter, for they were "young students" searching for recognition from a very old Politburo.

Yet as Garrison Keillor writes in a more hopeful tone: "even in the most difficult areas there are 'underground rivers of comedy.'" [Varon:18] And perhaps these rivers will erode the hegemonic ground that such oppressions stand on.

Contents

This dissertation examines how laughter is used, and abused, in a few select spaces in China and the West. The boundaries across which laughter is heard are multiple; the analysis not only engages the geographic barrier of the Pacific Ocean, but also the disciplinary borders of the humanities and social sciences. To argue various points we will venture into popular culture as well as canonical texts.²⁶

²⁶When I talk-story and argue at length I encounter certain discursive problems, put best by Jose E. Limon when he asked "How much is enough so as to persuade and not bore or overwhelm?" [472]
Rather than dealing with the straight thick lines which usually constitute borders, this dissertation is organized around the image of playing on merry-go-round rather than a journey on a road. As a semiotics dissertation, the meaning comes out of the context of the text, it does not proceed linearly, but like laughter such straight discursive lines are disrupted and twisted -- refracted into the semiotic spin of the merry-go-round. I address the politics of laughter in terms of a cluster of concepts and practices that are related to it in hopes of engaging in a productive mis/understanding.

In chapter one, a heavy distinction between humor and laughter in both Chinese and Western philosophy is argued to show the problems of rational humor, yet once this boundary is drawn it is effaced to refigure humor into something positive and productive. Chapter two addresses how dissidence in Chinese literature employs disruptive laughter and a twisting of orthodox representations with stories that are funny both in that they produce laughter and that they are strange. Chapter three addresses laughter in the context of social and political struggles, and focuses on the explosive power of resistance that can attend laughter and fun. The merry-go-round spins around again to institutions and authority in chapter four where familiar political humor is deconstructed as serving the very institutions that it jokes about -- a historical consideration of jesters and their modern counterparts evidences this argument. Chapter five radicalizes laughter again; feminist theory, desire and irony are employed to foreground the politics of identity and resistance which come out in the laughter of women of color. The afterword spins the
analysis around again to consider the problems and promise of such ironic living in the late twentieth century.
Part I

Some Normal Laughter

For years we couldn't talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate. [another name for reason]

-- Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Chapter 1
A Report on Laughing

In this opening chapter I would like to consider some of the ways in which laughter has been analyzed thus far; I settle on the discourses of philosophy and anthropology. I would like to shift the figuration of "the problem of laughter" -- utilizing the critical power of laughter itself -- from asking why one laughs and what laughter is, to consider where and when laughter occurs and how it is used, and start to examine which power relations laughter is involved in.

Section I: Special Issues
When I picked up the "Special Issue: Philosophy and Humor" of Philosophy East & West, it was with a sense of excitement: a noted philosophy journal was addressing what has (again) come to be a hot topic in the academy. Philosophy as a discipline had something interesting to say about humor -- a welcome development which is attested to by the sheer volume of issues sold: the editor tells me that this special issue has been an all-time best seller.

Reading through the issue my excitement was justified; there are articles covering all aspects of philosophy and humor, with special reference to two of my own interests: Chinese philosophical literature and postmodernism. Christoph Harbsmeier's article in particular helps do some preliminary research in surveying the field of Chinese philosophy for humor, and David Hall addresses issues of postmodernism in his conclusion.
Yet when I came to the end of the issue, the last piece, a review of Lee Siegel's *Laughing Matters* by Edwin Gerow, I felt a bit uneasy. Gerow criticizes the tone of *Laughing Matters* as being flippant, i.e., not serious enough, while I not only enjoyed, but was instructed by Siegel's approach of dealing with the evasiveness of laughter. Though I do not agree with Siegel's placement of laughter and humor in a "universal predicament" or as a "universal experience", I like the way he goes about talking about laughter -- he does not try to nail it down, but opts to tell various stories which dance around the topic.¹ This comparison of Gerow's and Siegel's texts sparked a desire in me to find out more about ways of talking about laughter -- and not talking about laughter.

Here, I would like to follow Siegel in telling various stories, I try to do this in a somewhat lyrical fashion as a way of evading the ratios that seems to characterize the special issue. I also want to hint at the power that laughter contains, a power that can be aimed in many directions. Be forewarned that the stories may not be pretty, or even funny, because the social space in which I place laughter is a very dirty place, and full of what Gerow calls "autobiographical indulgences"...

---

¹Henri Bergson's text *Laughter* also recognizes the challenges facing the study of laughter. He introduces his attitude and methodology with this passage [61]:

we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life
When I re-read the "Special Issue: Philosophy and Humor," images of an experience of many months ago came back to me. I was caught in a cycle of dreams. A story began, progressed, but broke off before we were finished; it then started again from the beginning to replay itself in this way over and over again. It was not a nightmare: I was not startled out of my sleep in terror. No, it was merely uncomfortable, getting more unpleasant as it repeated itself. I could feel that I was in a dream cycle, tossing and turning, but could not get out of it until the bright light of dawn streaming through my thin curtains woke me up.

This issue of the Philosophy East and West strikes me as the same malady affecting the various authors. The articles are confronting the unpleasantness of the discourse of Western philosophy; they are painfully aware of the problems of "rationality," and of the discipline of Philosophy as it stands; they are uncomfortable with this situation, but they keep returning to that which they seek to question: the ghost of Descartes haunts the very text.²

The Special Issue is an uneasy text, a series of articles full of twists and contortions. In short, they are in search of humor, sad that Philosophy appears to be missing out on the fun. But, I would argue,

---
²A good quotation to demonstrate this comes from Joel Kupperman's article "Not in So Many Words: Chuang tzu's Strategies of Communication" [313]: "Chuang Chou's [Zhuang zi's] problem, when first looked at, may seem rather Cartesian." Kupperman, on second glance, endeavors to solve Zhuang zi's problems with Descartes. David Hall holds out until the fourth line of his article before mentioning Descartes. Though Janice Porteous does not mention Descartes by name, I will argue that his ghost haunts her text which reduces the body to the head.
the way they go about looking for humor undermines their project -- their endeavor is to kidnap humor and bring it back -- dead or alive. Though humor is recognized as not singular by positing an "Incongruity Theory" -- similar in some ways to the clash of codes discussed in the preface -- as the basis of analysis, the text's own approach is still poisoned with singularity and totalization -- the normative assumptions that reduce hegemony to an appeal to standards. This is evident in how some declare what they are not doing: "no room for a complete theory of philosophic humor" [316]; "to claim an entire understanding would be presumptuous." [318]

Hall points to such totalizing textual practices as sights where philosophers are objects of ridicule, where in the course of attempting to plumb the depths of being and meaning, the philosopher makes an ontological or methodological slip and falls on his [sic] face... Philosophy, then, becomes humorous by virtue of its everlastingly unsuccessful siege of the infinite, the sole motivation of which is to kidnap the truth and bring it home -- 'dead or alive.' [320]

This passage also serves as a convenient introduction to the ironic nature of this text: Hall's writing is exemplary in its oddness. There is hesitation; there is despair; there is resignation -- all in an article which is to conclude a special issue dealing with philosophy and humor. But Hall's "Dancing at the Crucifixion" is perhaps the most interesting article of the collection, because in struggling with the discourse of Philosophy as we have received it, Hall multi-codes the text and opens it up for humor, or at least the possibility for humor.
But alas, The Philosopher wins out. Hall moves to erase difference in the name of leveling against Superiority Theories, and opts for a pure humor to gain what is "intrinsically, constitutively valuable." [320] As Hall reasserts his quest: "I shall be engaged in the task of providing a purer instance of philosophic humor." [322]

There is no ambiguity, struggle, or negotiation in Humor -- in short no politics in Humor, nor Humor in politics.

The closest that the special issue comes to talk of politics -- the social setting of humor -- is when "communities" are discussed. Here communities are Good: "When we are with a group that is laughing, we want to laugh too..."; and it is Evil when humor is "used to ostracize or exclude." [240] The tenets of liberalism are at work here: we are all equal. As Hall argues: "Philosophic humor depends upon the coexistence of equally viable world orders" [320] as if we can all play the game of humor, or would want to even if so allowed.

This is where Thomas Hobbes's Superiority Theory and the Hostility Objection come in: laughter is dangerous when it is used as a method in struggle, because struggle introduces violence into this pure utopic system. But violence is already present in forms more consequential than the playful fist fights that John Morreall in "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought" condemns as heinous because they are for pleasure.³ [245]

The philosophers are trying to protect the rights of the individual from being excluded from the community; yet there is a

---

³Indeed, laughter is very complex: after breaking up a fist fight once, I found myself laughing uncontrollably, although it was hardly what most would code as "funny."
powerful argument that questions this self/society relation. Some say that it makes more sense to argue that it is the community that produces the individual:

...it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.

[Foucault 1978:215]

The focus on the individual and community in laughter is misleading; with these moralistic moves it is easy to erase struggle appealing to Superiority Theories and Hostility Objections to maintain the posited purity and unity of both laughter and the community.

Hence there is only the empty humor of future utopias; but it has been tried in the past: "...it was the [French] Revolution that held up the glass in which utopia could see its true features. These were the features not of happiness but of an inflexible order that was to prepare the way for happiness...." [Ozouf:12] Or as Milan Kundera writes of Czechoslovakia in The Joke [23]:

It was the first year after February 1948. A new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features -- they are imprinted upon my memory -- were rigid and grave. The odd thing was that the gravity of those features took the form of a smile, not a frown.

The Introduction to the Special Issue concludes: "...humor can let in not only the fresh air, but also the light, helping us to see in a new way ourselves, our communities, our world." [241]

With each re-reading, my discomfort with the Special Issue continued to grow, its roots spreading farther and farther out. I
began to wonder if such a philosophical approach to humor is instructive, if it is useful. In a Scientistic mode, which is very strong in some articles though weaker in others, this journal as a text is seeking to see what humor is-in-itself and then find some humor in philosophy books. Rather than adopting this deductive model, I would like to use Norwood Russell Hansen's formulation and appeal to a more retroductive stance; rather than being caught in a metaphor of inductive/deductive reasoning, I would like to tell one possible story, "to say something about something," (as Clifford Geertz might say.) As such, I find it more instructive and useful to look to where laughter is being generated and how it is being used: the spatiality and technology of laughter.

Yet I do not mean to discard the Special Issue. I would merely like to shift the focus a bit, for almost all the points that I argue can be found in one form or another in the Special Issue -- that is what has made this writing so interesting and difficult. But these passages are not at the "center," but pushed off into the "periphery," being mentioned in footnotes, asides, shifted to introductions and conclusions. So here I follow Charles Perrow's example -- "suppose

---

4Rather than looking at individual articles, here I want to look at this Special Issue as a text -- a text fraught with dispute on a number of issues, but still emanating from a nameable source with nameable tasks. I look to the discourse of presuppositions, to what is not questioned, or what they do not question in the questioning of themselves. Objection will surely be taken that I dump noted scholars such as Christoph Harbsmeier, a rigorous philologist, in the same tub as David Hall a postmodern Daoist, but similar themes seem to be informing their texts. And indeed, the organization of the Special Issue is that of a traditional text: there is a Presidential "Introduction," a review of the field in Western terms, a few intercultural (i.e. exotic) case studies and then an uneasy "conclusion."

5Christoph Harbsmeier is on to something when he writes [308]: "Until we learn to smile with the ancient Chinese, I am inclined to say, we
we took the periphery seriously and placed it at the center" [119] --
to look to what has been glossed over and domesticated for some
grander philosophic project, or to maintain the boundaries of some
grand philosophic project. We take it for granted that laughter
means that things are funny, but what else can it signify?

With this twist, my reconfiguration of laughter is in direct
contrast to some passages quoted above: I would like to flatly state
that laughter is often found in incompleteness, hovering around
borders that highlight multiplicity, and even can be a celebration of
misunderstanding. And most importantly, laughter is political in
that its multiplicity is not an innocent pluralism, but is caught in a
highly charged web of power relations. Laughter is produced in the
gaps, dancing around the sticky webs, sometimes in joy, sometimes
because someone is shooting at its feet -- sometimes because there is
nothing else to do.

Renato Rosaldo writes in the very messy context of Chicanos in
South Texas and California, spaces where the clean universalizing
process described above has worked itself out in the guns of Texas
Rangers. Here as in real estate, location is everything. The
multiplicity that is the nexus of oppression here is charged with the
violence of racism and patriarchy; but out of this dirty situation
Rosaldo's article "Politics, Patriarchs and Laughter" draws humor --

have not, truly, even begun to misunderstand them properly -- not to
speak of understanding them properly, which may in any case be quite
impossible." But he does not pursue the relation between laughter and
misunderstanding. This is his last sentence.
laughter playing on the borders of the messy multiplicity like little boys on railroad tracks.6

Laughter can be a form of resistance of one group, or "community," against another. As mentioned, the Philosophers seem blinded to group action by their Liberal positions -- according to the Superiority Theory all humor which is critical or "not nice," discredits laughter, and should be expunged by well mannered people. Where is the struggle which seems so characteristic of the daily news, the struggle that historically produced these liberal positions? The contention between groups necessitates participation, negotiation, shifting identities and allegiances which sometimes result in laughter. Rosaldo finds such "chuckles and wit as subversive," which in the context of rabid racism is necessary for survival. In short, though Humor may be moralized, Rosaldo goes beyond these judgements of Good and Evil, to concentrate on laughter's use in a struggle whose morality he is quite sure of.

Theories of Humor

I have been hopping around in my analysis, rushing from here to there in my sometimes pointed critique, but out of this sporatic

6Jose E. Limon's article "carne, carnales and the carnivalesque: Bakhtinian batos, disorder and narrative discourses" argues in a similar way and in a similar context to Rosaldo. Stressing the geography of jokes in South Texas, Limon writes [478]:

But, of course, these expressive scenes do not emerge in a such a vacuum; they appear and are embedded in a political economy and a hegemonic culture that produces marginalization and alienization such as prevails among this class of batos in south Texas.
criticism and bursts of laughter a sort of order, perhaps a
mis/understanding, seems to be congealing. How people talk about
issues is often instructive: here whether the topic is named humor or
laughing is telling. The Philosophers write in terms of humor, which
is not surprising for Humor is a nominal, an idea, a concept:
something that you think about or attribute to one's "comic spirit."

The way "humor" is managed in the Chinese language is
instructive. The concept is cut off from the local context and
meaning entirely: the word for "humor" is youmo -- a direct
transliteration of the word from English into Chinese. In 1923, Lin
Yutang invented this word\(^7\) to circumvent extant terms for humor
and laughter which he saw as corrupted into the "slapstick." [Kao:xxi]
Yet, "The literal meaning of these two characters (you means
"charming in seclusion"; mo means "silent") cannot by any stretch of
the imagination be associated with 'humor' even in its most subtle
sense." [Kao:xxi] This discursive event occurred during the New
Culture Movement, when Chinese intellectuals were discarding
seemingly "corrupt signs" of the Imperial Age to adapt many
Western "concepts" wholesale. Lin's oddly uncritical choice of these
two characters to delineate the space of "humor" in Chinese is
perhaps telling in that neither of them is very social.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\)This invention is for modern usage. My etymological dictionaries tell
me that this term, as a compound of the two characters, has appeared
before; its meaning in these examples is "soundlessly still.

\(^8\)My dictionary's definitions for the two characters are even more anti­
social than Kao's: some of the synonyms for you are "secluded, secret,
hidden, dark, gloomy, solitary, lonely, quiet, tranquil, deep, imprison, of
the netherworld. Mo means simply speechless and silent.
Following the formulation of terms in both Chinese and European languages, humor can be pure, and cut off from all binding (or constructing) linguistic, social and political relations. (When used verbally humor is quite different: when are political relations more clear than when someone is humoring you?) As Harbsmeier writes in his conclusion, the gaze is focused not just on the head, but on the mind: "But the point that I have tried to concentrate on is one not of ideology but of mentality, not of grammatical style but of intellectual and humorous sensibility." [307]

The text takes on a scientific approach of theorizing what humor is-in-itself, or what it is "in community," and then the authors go collect data which fits into this neat box, forgetting in a Nietzschean double-amnesia that it is they who constructed the box. In "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought" John Morreall searches the (Western) Canon for what the dead philosophers have to say on the subject, as if he was looking up "humor" in the index of an anthology.9

The analysis also settles around the concept of the joke, particularly in Harbsmeier and Kupperman's treatment of Chinese literature. It is odd that both take this move of deliminating humor to the joke, not only because the first four words of the special issue are "Humor is no joke," but more importantly since it is such an unsuccessful campaign into Chinese philosophical literature.

Though Harbsmeier's article "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy" once again demonstrates his familiarity with the

9Of course here I am being too harsh on Morreall -- it is actually he who wrote the anthology.
tradition and his remarkable facility with the classical texts, his case for humor in the form of jokes in Chinese philosophy can only be described as weak. Without discussing how he settled on this form - the joke -- in anything but negative terms, Harbsmeier makes a quick survey of the literature, shopping for the modern commodity that we call "jokes." It is certainly a seller's market, the commodity is surely in short supply. But to make matters worse, Harbsmeier goes to great pains to hammer his square holes into the round pegs -- he breaks the "comedian's first rule," and explains the jokes. He even goes so far as to draw logical chains so we can trace the transgressions that produce the laugh, or are supposed to produce the laugh. Making the move of charting laughter -- a social practice which, I argue, is found within multiplicity and misunderstanding -- on the reductive linear (dare I say, Cartesian) axes of symbolic logic struck me as so odd that I had to reconsider my reading of the entire article; perhaps the whole endeavor is a joke, so in another sense this is an exemplary essay -- although not "Chinese Humor" as promised; and at any rate it is an uneasy laugh.

Recalling the switch in guiding question words, I would argue that the problem here is not with Chinese literature, but in where humor is placed -- perhaps they are looking in the wrong place.

---

10 Chinese sources list many humorous stories and jokes among the classical literature. See Cheng Shijue, Wang Xiaoyi, Fang Cheng or Zuo Xuan for Chinese language examples, and Howard Levy and Tao Yin for English versions.

11 In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler actually draws the graph. [34] Though graphs can be interesting, the axes tend to naturalize the social codes represented as straight lines, making one forget that they are just another mode of rhetoric. It's hard to question a straight line -- Koestler tries to adapt to this by adding some curves, but it still is a line. [37]
Again Rosaldo's article is instructive and exemplary in that it switches around Harbsmeier's problematization to concentrate on "ideology" [which here means politics], and grammatical style. As I have already touched on the political situation of laughter for Rosaldo, here I will focus in on matters of style.

To twist Derrida's formulation, I would say that humor is found not so much in the text, as of the text. This shifts emphasis away from jokes, which are easily delimited and catalogued, to the fuzzier questions of the style and grammar of the text.

Humor here is not necessarily so obvious; the laughter is not necessarily fully voiced. Rosaldo takes the Chicano humor, the "understated, deadpan humor which can readily be missed" as an act of resistance: "...it is barbed." [86] This oblique humor refracts language in heteroglossia.

Galarza's work can be read with solemnity, as if it were written in a flat earnest manner. Yet the work is marked by heteroglossia, a ploy of English and Spanish, and by an understated, often self-deprecating deadpan humor through which his political vision becomes apparent. [76]

Rosaldo writes of how the Chicano authors he analyses are empowered on the borders of language: "In a trilingual text, wit as a political weapon opens the critique...." [74]

Here, the transgression constitutive of the humor is found not in a joke, but in how the text itself is constructed. As Rosaldo again argues, it is in bilinguality that Chicanos can find forms of discursive resistance:

The sense for incongruities, the whimsy informing his political vision, still is evident as Galarza deploys the
heteroglossia of a bilingual text to Mexicanize Anglo-American bosses. In being Mexicanized, these bosses are verbally assimilated to what they probably most abhor:

*Autoridades* and *patrones.*” [81]

This brand of humor, a counter-discourse of retextualization in Richard Terdiman's terms, is also found throughout the *Zhuang zi,* but Harbsmeier missed it because he was looking in the wrong place. One of the delightful characteristics of the *Zhuang zi* is that it has an uneasy list of characters. Coming near the conclusion of the Classical period in China, the text draws upon the cast of thinkers of the age. Indeed, it would be interesting to write a history of Chinese philosophy using the *Zhuang zi’s* interpretations of "the sages": Confucius, Mo zi, Yang Zhu, Lao zi, Hui Shi, Gong Sunlong, Shen Nong, the Yellow Emperor, and so on. There is a radical retextualization of these characters -- particularly in the case of Confucius and his named disciples who say things that we now would hesitate to code as "Confucian" -- indeed, saying things that would horrify later Confucians. (And viewing the antirealist attitude of Chinese philosophy, it's hard to say who is "right," or who the "true Confucius" is -- all we are left with are contesting texts, some of which have been adopted as orthodoxy in a political move by the Military Emperor of the Han Dynasty, and some of which are now coded as "mystical," and thus not political.)

But Harbsmeier cannot see this because he is looking inside the minds of the characters and authors, rather than looking to where they are speaking from. *Zhuang zi* makes this geographical move himself on the Bridge over the River Hao in a famous conversation with the Dialectical thinker Hui Shi: meaning is laughingly produced
when Zhuang zi reinterprets the multi-coded grammar of the term
an from "how do you know the fish are happy" to "from where do
you know the fish are happy." "From over the River Hao," Zhuang zi
answers.\(^{12}\)

I think that the most fruitful analysis of laughter in dissident
works like the Zhuang zi, and Chinese texts elsewhere, comes from
looking at the discursive economies involved. This could perhaps
account for why the counter-discourse of dissident texts such as the
Zhuang zi and certain encyclopedic texts provokes laughter in
resistance to the dry moralistic discourse in hegemonic texts such as
the Mencius. So rather than deferring to Descartes to explain Zhuang
zi's mental state and dreams as Kupperman does so facily in the
quotation at near beginning of this chapter, I find it more helpful to
look to such things as M.M. Bakhtin's treatment of humor in the
literature of Rabelais -- another seventeen century Frenchman.
Harbsmeier informs us that such a stylistic analysis in the Zhuang zi
"deserve[s] a detailed treatment." [303], and this is what I will do in
the next chapter.

Laughing or HA, HA, HA

Grammatically speaking, laughing, laughter, laugh, are complex
terms. This cluster is verbal in addition to being nominal -- it is
involved in action, in deeds, in practices. Laughter is a physical act;
though it comes out of the head, it is far from the mind. In The Book
of Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera dwells on the sound of laughter

\(^{12}\)John Seere does similar analyses of the grammar of irony in Plato's
texts.
-- rasping, exploding lower-throat gestures. Unnerving. Unsettling the patriarchs, and subverting machismo; mockingly disrupting "Primordial Society" in the Chicano context. Napoleon once used physicality to subvert tragedy into laughter: in an inconvenient interview with the Queen of Prussia where he saw the tragedy as distracting, Napoleon reports he solved his problem with a simple gesture: "to make her change her style, I requested her to take a seat. This is the best method for cutting short a tragic scene, for as soon as you are seated it all becomes comedy." [in Bergson:94]

Bakhtin in his exhaustive treatment of the place of laughing in Europe in *Rabelais and His World* argues that it is a materializing force. Unlike now, laughter in the Late Middle Ages was a lower-body genre -- it was also found, like the dao in *Zhuang zi*, in shit and piss, in defecation and copulation. [20] Unlike humor, laughter is not a pure thing. Its nexus is the belly. We should recall that the first definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary for "humor" are of bodily secretions and hormones. Morreall recognizes the bodily figuration of humor, but shows how it was seen in terms of vice, and thus suppressed as part of the Irresponsibility Objection. [255]

Here a recent article by Susan Stewart comes to mind. She compares the *Meese Commision Report on Pornography* with the writings of the Marquis de Sade: entitling the article "The Marquis de Meese." Stewart deals with the problem of representation, about the desire to get beyond representation of sex to sex itself -- which is the project of the Meese Report -- and how this cannot but keep reproducing desire. The Report is a pornographic best-seller.
If we substitute "humor" for "pornography" -- not such a far-fetched thing to do as Stewart argues that pornography parodies forms of rationality [185] -- a basic problem of the Special Issue comes to light. It takes humor as unproblematic, and proceeds in a Linnaean fashion to catalogue the humor that is out there.

Harbsmeier's article is a case in point. Yet the joke about this taxonomical method is that it is funny; laughter is reproduced here as sexual desire is reproduced in the Meese report because we do not know from whence it comes. The text parodies itself.

Harbsmeier alludes to bodily laughter in the beginning of his article in talking about the absence of "obscenities" in Chinese literature before the fall of the Han dynasty.

Leaving aside this problem of obscenities, I propose to limit myself to the problem of humor and mainly to some ancient Chinese texts which we have got used to calling loosely 'philosophical.' [290]

Again, perhaps the blinders imposed by this "loose naming" of philosophy are still too tight; Chinese literature abounds with eroticism and the body. One whole chapter -- "De Chong Fu" -- of the Zhuang zi is concerned with cripples, amputees and those who are otherwise disfigured. But they are not allowed to limp onto this textual turf.¹³

Janice Porteous treats the somatic aspects of laughter in her article "Humor and Social Life." Drawing on the disciplines of Primatology and Child Development, she tells the story of the evolution of humor concentrating on the face and the smile. So in

¹³Chapter 18 "Utmost Happiness" has a story in which characters with twisted and laughing names produce meaning on their bodies.
both method and case-study we are again haunted by the ghost of Descartes: all meaning is concentrated in the head, the seat of the mind and the soul. The single ordered discourse of rationality is pasted on humor as it evolves to perfection, or so we are told.

Identity

In this section I am interested in talking about how authors place themselves in a move to shift from the geography of laughter to the geography of writing about laughter; once you scrap the idea that there is objective scholarship, what motivates the text becomes more of a concern -- without making the psychologizing move of searching for "authorial intents." In other words, How can an author sign a text without trying to control it?

Again, I was struck with the style. Hall's article is the most interesting in text because he is so self-conscious about it. "I believe" dots his writing -- the pronoun "I" is found no less than 15 times on page 322 -- but at the end of the article one is still not sure what this "I" is, or how it functions.

Rosaldo, on the other hand, weaves himself into the text. The problems and problematization are introduced in terms of a story -- a story about the production of the text -- it is thick with theory in examples: "Perhaps my critique can begin with an anecdote. One spring afternoon...." [67] And the tentative nature of scholarship is highlighted again with this comic twist at the end of this 'story': "My interlocutor came to understand something of these differing
histories and told me this should have been made clear from the very beginning. Maybe next time, I replied." [68]14

Rosaldo is uneasy; he is struggling with the import of what he is writing, though not figuring himself as part of some abstract masses. The historical circumstances in which Rosaldo finds himself and out of which this article was written are discussed and are made apparent.

The genre of philosophic writing denies this; the setting is not found en el campo, or in the barrio, but out in space, Outer Space -- timeless, placeless space. The motivation for the philosophers is the very category of "THE PHILOSOPHER" and the dictates of "responsible philosophy." Authors give up any agency they might have to some muse of philosophy who moves them to do things which they would otherwise not do.15 Hall, after discussing pluralities, rather ironically remarks [322]:

14The style here differs from the Philosophers in that Rosaldo does not announce "jokes" or go to lengths to explain humor. Following J. P. Callahan's dictum that one should only claim to tell stories, because "it's not a joke until someone laughs at it," Rosaldo slips his "humorous" comments in subtly.

15The tactic of authenticating arguments by recourse to disciplinary boundaries is also used by "soft-scientists" such as Lewis Thomas whenever they run into "moral" or "cultural" contradictions that cannot be solved by their logic. More pertinent here, even Joseph Needham who has done brilliant work showing the cultural nature of science in China still falls back on the crutch of Science when challenged [233]:

"I would like to declare... that we have in no way lost faith in science as a component of the highest civilisation, and we believe that it has done incalculably more good than harm to human beings."

Rosaldo does not rely on Anthropology to justify his arguments. He just tells stories. His stories. HiStories.
I say could because, as a philosopher, I cannot rest with that incongruity. It is now my task as a responsible thinker to proceed with either one of two time-honored philosophic takes -- Construction or Critique. That is, in order to resolve the incongruity as a means of developing a consistent theory (for what is philosophy without the attempt at consistency?)....

This strikes me as the response of a jaded bureaucrat: "Sorry Lady, I don't make up the rules; I just work here." The points that Hall and others make about humor and incongruity are disregarded, or erased, not on the basis of some argument, but on the basis of being outside the time-honored "job description" of a philosopher. While it might be useful to appeal to philosophy or philosophers to code a new way of thinking (or account for an old one), I am disturbed at how Hall here uses the trope of the philosopher to shut off consideration, to slam and bolt the doors of analysis -- which makes one wonder why we are here at all....

Now I do not mean to set myself up here as another example of a "nonphilosopher" superiorly poking fun at silly misguided philosophers; in a similar way to the stated project of Rosaldo's article -- to question the use of Gilles Deleuze's formulation of minority literature -- here I question the formulation of philosophical humor in the Special Issue. It is not an issue of truth, completeness, or moral worth that is my basis here, but of what use a philosophic approach to humor has, and by the authors' own account it does not score well. It seems that a reason for this is not found in what was said, but how and where it was uttered -- and for whom. What are the discursive economies of laughter, and of this
text? Indeed, one of the major unspoken projects of this text seems to be to maintain the boundaries of the discipline of Philosophy, and reassert Philosophy in its pure form with immaculate humor in a pure community.

On the other hand, philosophers need to be poked fun at when they themselves assume a superior stance; and as Richard Rorty [1989] argues, they need to be poked at from outside the discipline - especially when their slips are showing so flagrantly. Both Rosaldo and the philosophers are unsure of themselves; but while Rosaldo is persuasive in his acceptance of uncertainty, some of the philosophers are generally alienating. Hopefully in the passages quoted from Rosaldo, I have conveyed the humble, self-conscious, self-deprecating -- although still with a barb -- tone of his text. Yet in Kasulis's introduction to the special issue there is a totalizing tone of the all-knowing, or here almost all-knowing, philosopher. The arrogance comes out in a passage commenting on the humor of a cartoon of a wrinkled academic surrounded by heavy volumes placed at the head of the issue [240]: "In laughing at this cartoon, I reveal something of my expectations as a member of a highly literate group."

It should be also noted here that laughter is not primarily a literary event, but comes out in oral culture as well -- our question word complex should in such cases shift to accommodate "when," for timing and temporality are central in storytelling.

pause...
So what's the punchline? In this section I have begun a remapping of this topic of humor into laughter, to try to demonstrate that giving a global, universal account of humor is not the goal, but that such a will to a "whole picture" is precisely what needs to be circumvented, discarded. I have been playing the jester. This writing has been deliberately disruptive, hopefully with a chuckle, to in some way derail the evolution of "mankind" or any other telos; it has been disjointed, even though one target of this essay is to address bodily joints such as the funny bone while hopping from text to work, work to text; dancing around issues and juggling discourses.

Yet this fun is not as innocent as it may seem; there is struggle in this political dance of laughs. And this politics is not limited to the bickering in government institutions, of elections and dictators. Here we are immersed in the politics of meaning construction and the struggle of discourses that guide our subjectivity -- the politics of modes of power characteristic of certain institutions which guide our lives. And the politics of possibilities in and around such structures.

Section II: Normal Laughter and Heterotopia
In this section I want to slow down a bit to (re)consider some of the arguments that I somewhat flippantly dismissed above. Here in a sense, I will switch from the pointed critique of a jester in a scholarly court to the dry laborious detail of a pedant\textsuperscript{16} -- a move that according to Enid Welsford, a noted scholar of court-fools, also took place in seventeenth century Germany where jesters were

\textsuperscript{16}Foucault writes that "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary." [1977:139]
supplanted by "pedants" as laughing-stocks of the court. Witness Voltaire.

As a "scholar" now, I want to develop the notion of the discursive economies of laughter by recounting more specifically its disrupting and solidarity producing aspects. I plan to do this through an examination of laughter in terms of normativity, and gaps in it, using exemplary texts from philosophy and anthropology. I make this shift from "community" and "solidarity" to "normativity" in an effort to further politicize the discursive terrain.

In the preface to this dissertation I suggested that laughing folk could be herded into at least two groups heading for corrals marked "monovocal," and "polyvocal." I argued further that monovocal laughter can be used in projects of oppression, to control action, things, people, resources.

Noted philosopher Henri Bergson is a case in point; in his turn of the century text Laughter -- which begins with the semiotics question "What does laughter mean?" [61] -- Bergson writes of laughter, comedy and humor as a means of social control. We, he argues, laugh at those peculiar individuals who are rigid to the forces of society. Laughter is a corrective force. The comic involves [73-74]:

- a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective.
In this monovocal laughing we reinforce the social codes, making them more rigid, rather than opening up society to a more "natural, plastic state" as Bergson argues.

Indeed, much of the academic work addressing laughter is preoccupied with this control function of laughter, even though laughter is often discussed in terms of escaping such control. Here, I want to see if laughter can be profitably described as a void, a breach, a suspension, or a disruption in relation to such a norm, as many of the theorists do, or whether one should avoid both the void and the norm; to not risk filling in a hole, packing in and smoothing out the whole, only to bury difference in the process. Rather, I hope to see the break in discourse caused by laughter not as a gap, but as a potential entrance into another optic, another site which could be very full, very rich -- not necessarily the empty, dark, mysterious void which is either a momentary aberration in a structure which must be returned to, or a black hole from which one can never escape.

Normativity is involved in the setting up of standards, the drawing of boundaries, and the guarding of them. I usually avoid discussing this topic, if only for the personal reasons that I am usually excluded -- for I don't want to refer to myself as abnormal -- or I am included in ways which I find distasteful, all too often as a spokes-MAN for groups which I hope I am only tangentially related to.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\)In other words, I refuse to answer questions like, "What do (white American) men think about...?"
Yet the study of processes of normalization is an important topic, since it is where many powers touch us and leave their marks on our body. Indeed, this is what has made the work of scholars such as Michel Foucault so interesting: a devotion to examining how "individuals" are created, through surveillance on their health practices, sexual practices, rational practices, "illicit" practices and so on.

Yet seen in a more positive light, much of the project of Modernity has been devoted to the establishment of norms which some find liberating: for example the normalization of science, and all of the (monetary) wealth that it produces. This involves a unification and centralization -- sometimes accompanied by a "democratic leveling" which can produce documents such as constitutions and bills of rights to which we can all appeal as a standard "rule by law" rather than the arbitrary rule of kings and autocrats.

Or more importantly perhaps, norms are established with language either by Qin Shi Huangdi's court (3rd century B.C.) in China, the Academie Francais, or recently in this country with attempts by U.S. English: all of whom would agree with Jurgen Habermas, that earnest apologist for Modernity, when he states of norms of preunderstanding and order [100]:

Every process of reaching an understanding takes place against the background of a culturally ingrained preunderstanding... A definition of a situation establishes an order.

This notion of norms, and how one might escape them (but not it), is bound up in many of the stories about humor, joking and laughter that I will recount in this section.
The first story involves arguments and articles from the "Special Issue: Philosophy and Humor" of *Philosophy East & West.* As we saw, in the introductory essay, Thomas P. Kasulis talks about humor as "a vacation from the everyday," dreary life of automated thoughts and actions; he sees it as a "nonthreatening way of opening up window in that closed room of our nervous system, letting in a little fresh air." [241] This serves as a light-hearted and crushingly depoliticized introduction to a document which appeals to an "Incongruity Theory of Humor" in its constitutive writings on laughter, humor and jokes.

This Incongruity Theory is summarized by the first article, John Morreall's "The Rejection of Humor in Western thought." It "locates the essence of amusement in our enjoyment of experiencing something which clashes with our conceptual systems, our understanding of 'how things are supposed to be.'" [243] Or as Immanuel Kant, who Morreall cites as the first (European) philosopher to theorize about humor states in this way writes:

> In everything that is supposed to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can have no satisfaction). Laughter is an emotion from the sudden transformation of a tense expectation into nothing. Precisely this transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable for the understanding, yet indirectly pleases it very forcefully for a moment. [in Cottom:33 or another version in Morreall:248-249]^{18}

---

^{18}In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud writes in a similar way utilizing the sense/nonsense distinction. He approvingly quotes Theodor Lipps [12]:
This wonderful passage from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* alludes to some points I wish to state and reiterate concerning laughter and Understanding, but that is not the focus here.

Nothingness; the void: that is what I wish to discuss. The Incongruity Theory posits that there is a norm of some sort, that "we" take for granted, and when that standard is transgressed some laugh, and through laughing enter into a void of meaning. Indeed, in this sense, though laughter is (naively) figured in terms of pleasure (and displeasure) it is taken in a negative light, a breach in Understanding which will hopefully close up soon.¹⁹

The scarcity of laughter in this context is produced because the multiplicity that laughter usually entails does not neatly fit within a quest for ultimate Truth and total Understanding -- the rather context-less space which characterizes philosophical discourse. Indeed, perhaps laughter is figured as a gap, a disruption when looked at from the continuity of an earnest frown. Laughter was written out of the picture by constituting it as nothingness.

Another group of scholars who have considered laughter at length are found in departments of anthropology where the norm appealed to is that of Culture rather than Understanding. These anthropological analyses are especially interesting because of their

---

¹⁹ Hegel reiterates this negative view in terms of irony. [see Glicksberg]
focus on the social aspects of laughter, particularly in the form of joking. This in some sense is the legacy of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who in the 1940s wrote articles about (or constituting) "joking relationships." He sees joking in terms of "permitted disrespect," reminiscent of the philosophers, seemingly ignoring the struggle involved in these relationships. At any rate, Radcliffe-Brown, according to Daniel Cottom, set the stage for any anthropological analysis of joking -- he became the norm in this field, to be agreed with or contested, but always mentioned, much like Freud for psychoanalysis.

A much more interesting consideration of joking is found in the works of Mary Douglas, who makes quick work of Radcliffe-Brown arguing that his "so-called joking relationships" come from "a very dessicated [theoretical] perspective." [1968:362] Douglas then goes on to discover patterns of culture, or more specifically the structures of social relationships characteristic of humor. She maps out jokes, drawing boundaries in making distinctions through questions such as "Now what is the difference between an insult and a joke?" [362] She figures jokes in terms of a "juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled." [365] There are the norms and the rebellions against the norms, and jokes are involved in contesting the norms. "The rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke disorganizes.... [it] destroys hierarchy and order." [369]

But this battle -- for one must recognize the violent and specifically military imagery deployed in this text -- is not won. Or if

\[20\] Likewise, the a distinction between obscenity and joking is utilized. [371].
it is, the war is lost to obscenity, which is the only thing that truly engages order in serious combat "threatening both the order of reason and the order of society." By contrast, joking is only temporary:

It represents a temporary suspension of the social structure, or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. [372]

Another anthropologist, Robert D. Pelton in *The Trickster in West Africa*, generally concurs with Douglas' conclusions. To him (or as he would phenomenologically say "to the West Africans") the trickster is a slippery character: altogether lawless, defying social logic and fooling with ordinary categories "yet managing always to draw order from ordure." [1]

All lawlessness becomes law, or reveals law, for Pelton has a more powerful view of the trickster than Douglas has for her jokes. He cites another, Kenneth Lash, to argue that incongruous humor can recompose, not simply expose: "A new norm, to supplant or to modify the original, is suggested; a new point of view is invited." [264]

Order and control are not contested, but only replaced. Yet Douglas would disagree, arguing that the joker is only a humble, poor brother of the true mystic, for his insights were given to him by accident. They do not combine to form a whole new vision of life, but remain disorganized as a result of the technique which produces them. [373]

Though this sort of analysis produces many insights and possible entrances into new orders, I still have problems with it. Such structural arguing necessitates the drawing of thick boundaries, and
the policing of borders. Indeed, it is a sign of the times, the 1960s and 70s when structuralism was at the cutting edge, that articles such as Douglas' were produced. It is the business of a symbolist to read cultures and draw norms -- or as Pelton does, redraw norms -- for edification and comparison. But the weaknesses of such an approach, or actually the totalizing power of that approach, seems overwhelming during this "Postmodern moment" with its attention to difference.

These norms can be totalizing and stifling, especially in Pelton's hermeneutic case where all details are read into "The Big Picture," not just one of many stories. For example, he reads the trickster, usually a very gendered and positioned figure in terms of "human nature": "the trickster discloses the radically human character of the whole cosmos... the holiness of everyday life." [256] This holiness is a wholeness that tramples over difference.

As Daniel Cottom writes, "The problem is that all such theories [of incongruity for joking] describe the deciding context in terms of cultural norms or conventions which repress the reality of political differences." [16] Writing in terms of norms, which are not "discovered," but "created," sets up an authority, a moral order, a whole to which one must either submit, or rebel against. Specifically commenting on Douglas' article, Cottom writes: "Within this interpretation, society is imagined as a homogeneous field of relations in its norms and its rebellion against norms.... Douglas fails to see that jokes call into question this idea of social consensus." [18] This would be what I like to call polyvocal laughter.
If the argument about norms is starting to sound familiar, perhaps it is because it is placed in a similar structure of binary opposition as Understanding and mis/understanding. And perhaps there was some slippage in the argument in the preface about slipping in a puddle -- which itself has become a norm of laughter analysis.\footnote{See Bergson's and Freud's texts for the same example.}

The problem with such binary divisions is -- to risk again intruding on Douglas' research -- that such a figuration is too clean, too pure. This becomes a major trip-up in research about laughter because it is not only unclean, but often unclean in a messy way, often referring to "shitting" and "fucking."

Various writers use various modes of writing to avoid getting caught up in such binary oppositions and the thick, rigid boundaries that they entail when writing about laughter. Daniel Cottom has an interesting commentary on "culture" as a social code, which has bearing here. \[28\]:

The culture that I am describing is not and can never be entirely present: independent, universal, innocent, neutral, transcendent, or anything of that sort. It is rather the imaginary law that has to exist, that is read into being, so a joke can have meaning. This culture is heterogeneous and always only imaginary.

Though it is imaginary, culture has rhetorical authority, and though "authority is always imaginary, but the power of authority is always real." \[40\] Yet because it is imaginary, and hence not natural, it can be re-imaged.
Cottom works to loosen up the boundaries of writing and analysis with this culture through parody in his various definitions of "a joke," and "joking." His definitions undermine any normativity that "definition-making" normally entails by their hesitation and continual re-defining. By defining something in multiple ways in the text, according to the different discursive economies involved, Cottom stylistically shows the instability of any one definition, the fuzziness of such borders. The de-capitalized notion of "culture" enabled him to make this discursive move. At the same time, he recognizes that, ordering and the border-drawing seem still to be activities that humans are continually engaged in.

Another tactic is used by Renato Rosaldo who resists the clean normalization of laughter by contextualizing his writing in the discursive economies of intensely racist space. As argued above, rather than drawing and maintaining borders, Rosaldo argues how certain Chicano authors survive by crossing and re-crossing borders - both geographical and linguistic, and certainly political. He writes of how the Chicano authors that he analyses are empowered on the borders of language: "In a trilingual text, wit as a political weapon opens the critique." [74] Laughter along the borders of languages is a form of discursive resistance; to recall Rosaldo's argument:

The sense for incongruities, the whimsy informing his political vision, still is evident as Galarza deploys the heteroglossia of a bilingual text to Mexicanize Anglo-American bosses. In being Mexicanize, these bosses are verbally assimilated to what they probably most abhor: *Authoridades* and *patrones*. [81]
As such, Rosaldo uses the discursive economies of a text to refigure borders as sights of resistance and border crossings as political events, rather than simply figuring power as domination.

To put this another way and expand upon it, I would like to appeal to Foucault's figuring of power, control, norms. He writes that power is such that it not only restricts us, but it creates us. Even in resistance to power, we are still caught in a net of power relations: nothing is ultimately pure or taboo.22

This is because power is multiple and productive, so one must try to figure relations in terms of this multiplicity. I tried to do this when I made the move of multiplying laughter in terms of mis/understanding -- to multiply the notion of norms into social codes which are not normative, but resident to certain times, places, social groups. This notion politicizes the situation, because the contention over which set of codes will be operative becomes an issue: politics here means possibility, ambiguity, struggle, not simply coercion in society or by government.

What I am looking for is a way to examine laughter in a productive way, rather as just a negative factor in relation to some overarching, and ultimately inescapable norm where one is reduced to normal or deviant, wholes or voids. It is telling that I could not think of any social or textual examples of laughter as a breach, a void: how do you write nothingness? Once the anarchist's bomb of laughter has disordered the discourse, I want to be able to have

---

22History of Sexuality, vol. 1
some inkling of what possibilities are contained in the dirty optic of the dust -- before it settles and is swept away.

As Foucault would put it, it is not a question of the Real world or of Utopia, but of heterotopias. Heterotopia -- another space. In his short, but dense, essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault introduces the concept of heterotopia which he juxtaposes against utopia to undermine any notion of "the Real World." Utopias "represent society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." [24] It is not hard to draw an analogy here between utopias, monovocal laughter, and "ritual joking."

Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." [24] Prisons are heterotopia, as are gardens, colonies, cemeteries, boats, brothels -- heterotopias are not clean, but are involved in struggle and politics.

I think that Foucault overstates his case here talking in terms of the ubiquity of heterotopia in every culture. I do not see the need to generalize on such a global scale and then list principles. Rather, I would like to suggest some conditions and characteristics of heterotopia. They are real spaces that question what they represent. They are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."

---

23He also briefly mentions it in The Order of Things.
[25] They are ironic spaces which have their own system of contending codes and power webs.

Rather than go on with dry theorizing, I would like to go to the well of Zhuang zi and attempt some thick description in terms of laughter: to use the concept of heterotopia to examine contesting modalities through which values are exchanged in laughter. In an article called "Wit, Humor and Satire in Early Chinese Literature," D.R. Knechtges argues that there is a paucity of humor in Ancient China because there was no orthodoxy to contest. Indeed, this is the case in the Warring States Period in which most of the classical Chinese texts were produced. In a sense it was a heterotopia of contesting fiefdoms which produced a plethora of texts known as the Hundred Schools. Indeed, there is not much laughter in the classical library -- it is largely limited to strange and unaccountable works such as the Zhuang zi.

One story from this text -- for the Zhuang zi is a bound volume of stories -- that comes to mind, in relation to heterotopia is that of Dao Zhi, the (in)famous Robber Zhi. In this story, Confucius hears about this bandit and his gang of thieves, yet is perplexed because Dao Zhi is the younger brother of a famous official who is an acquaintance of his. Confucius goes and asks Liu'xia Ji why his younger brother does not obey him, why he has not properly instructed his younger brother in the rites, as Culture and Tradition necessitate.

After receiving an unsatisfying answer -- which was actually a warning -- Confucius sets out to bring the criminal back into the fold, to instruct him in key concepts such as ren, sheng, yi, zhi, de --
roughly analogous for my purposes here to the Greek cultural norms of humanity, wisdom, justice, knowledge and virtue. In short, to rescue him from a cultural void and baptize him into society. To teach him the borders of the norm which he must not transgress if he is to be an official ruler.

Confucius goes to instruct Dao Zhi, as his elder brother should have, but Zhi quickly takes control of the conversation, and lectures Confucius about these same terms. Zhi is not caught in a void of meaning, a utopia (or distopia) of vice, but a heterotopia of Robbers. He is well aware of such borders, but has a much more fluid relation to them. In short, Zhi is not a robber, but an Outlaw; outside the hegemonic code, the norm.

The outlaws have the "Five virtues" resident in their real site. Yet Dao Zhi traces out their discursive economies -- as Nietzsche does in *The Genealogy of Morals* -- and shows how these terms have different meanings in his heterotopia because of the different context and different practice: "ren-humanity" is in how the spoils of banditry are divided up. (He's no Robin Hood.) He contests the feigned morality of monarchs, for they are robbers just like he, but in a different position. Rob a person and you are executed, steal a whole kingdom and you become king. (Much like Brecht's aphorism: "what is the crime of robbing a bank compared with that of owning one.") Dao Zhi is involved in a productive mis/understanding of terms.

Confused, but happy to be alive, Confucius scurries back to his followers. And to his text. For here I am not recounting the Confucian *Analects*, but the *Zhuang zi*'s retexualization of Confucius.
This is a heterotopic act in that the *Zhuang zi* takes liberties with historical personages -- just as I have with the extant text of the *Zhuang zi* in reading Chapters 10 and 29 into one hybrid story -- to make some points in an oblique way. Confucius is out of his cultural uni-verse when he journeys to see Dao Zhi through *Zhuang zi*'s text. Dao Zhi presents a different code, a not altogether new (and thus utopic) code, but a twist on the extant "norms." In so doing, this illusory code makes one question other codes.

One could get carried away in positing illusory codes and see this chapter as heterotopia, this dissertation as heterotopia, this university as heterotopia and so on until one figured "the world" not as a real world, but as heterotopia. Foucault encourages us to do this when he talks of heterotopia "creat[ing] a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory...." [27]

With this bastardization -- for one must recall that hybrids and mixes are what "bastards" are -- of Confucius, laughter is often produced. I see this laughter, not in terms of a negation of some real Confucius or "the Chinese tradition" -- for I sense that laughter is only figured as a disruption in an economy of norms -- but in terms of an opportunity to enter into a new space, a different space -- another heterotopia. A heterotopia where the politics will come out in the discursive economies of laughter, among other places.
Chapter 2
The Canon and its Dissidents:
Laughter and Politics in the Zhuang zi

This chapter addresses dissent within a tradition, and how such dissent is used for survival by both the dissidents and by the tradition. To gain some "critical distance" from this very contemporary problem, I will wander in both time and place to classical China, to consider the positioning of the Zhuang zi in relation to the now dominant Confucian tradition as an example of dissent and tradition.

The Zhuang zi is generally characterized in prefaces, introductions and summaries by two special attributes in the Chinese canon -- mysticism and humor. They are generally mentioned separately, but here we consider them in relation to each other -- deconstructing the mysticism and elaborating on the humor. A genealogical study of the history and placement of the Zhuang zi in the Chinese tradition deconstructs mysticism in section one, and a politico-literary analysis of the text as we have received it traces out the politics of laughter in section two. The (tradition of) dissidence of this laughter is examined in section three.

Simply put, I argue that (a) the mystical representations of the Zhuang zi are utopic and thus depoliticizing, and that (b) the laughter in the text introduces the possibilities for a Foucaultian heterotopia
of multiple societies and discourses. These two sets of issues are related in that this heterotopia is systematically suppressed through the traditional framing of the Zhuang zi. I hope to show the clash of tradition and dissent by examining how "Confucians" -- loosely termed -- have Understood, and thus restricted, the Zhuang zi as mystical; and then look in the mirror to show how the Zhuang zi mis/understands Confucius to produce laughs, political laughs about the funny and strange.

Indeed, it is important to stress that the interest is not so much in finding the real Zhuang zi, as in seeing how the Zhuang zi was used in the past and present for dissidence and how it can be used in the future -- perhaps as a resource for resistance by such groups as the "Chinese Writers in Exile." Section III addresses how techniques found in the Zhuang zi are used productively in contemporary critical writings.

1 The preceding chapter ends with a consideration of "heterotopia" via Michel Foucault's essay "Of Other Spaces." Whereas utopias "represent society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." [24] Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." [24] Hence heterotopia is a useful concept for considering how multiple representations are managed to produce certain meanings all around us.

2 Mis/understanding is a term that I introduce in the preface to the dissertation. It is argued that Understanding is often an oppressive reduction of meaning to a single definition. The politics of Understanding, then is agreeing with that definition. Mis/understanding, on the other hand, is a productive multiplication of meaning which gains its power not from a reduction to abstraction, but from the circumstances out of which it grows. The politics of mis/understanding involve how any one meaning is negotiated and produced.
Section I: A Genealogy of Mysticism & Utopia

It is now taken for granted that the Zhuang zi is a mystical text, and Zhuang zi himself is known as a "Wandering Muse."\(^3\) It is very hard to argue anything else -- indeed, a few years ago when a Chinese colleague read an essay of mine which offered a social interpretation of some of the stickier philosophic points in the Zhuang zi, his first response was "weixian -- it's dangerous." In this section, let us examine how any such social/policital interpretation of the Zhuang zi came to be figured as dangerous, and how this danger has been dissipated through mystical readings of the text.

The text surely can be read as mystical, but it is much more.\(^4\) Once one reads beyond the commentaries about how mystical the Zhuang zi is, the next point that scholars discuss is the complexity of the text. Secondary literature abounds in debates concerning the indefinite authorship and dating of the text, about the ordering of the text into its three sections each of which demonstrates different styles and topics. Yet rather than celebrating or even allowing for the complexity of the text, the scholarship traditionally has managed this opulence of images and signs by drawing lines of "forgery" and "authenticity" in an oppressive Understanding of the text.

\(^3\)Herbert A. Giles entitled one translation of the Zhuang zi Musings of a Chinese Mystic; it is an edited version of his complete translation which is called Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic. With this editing Zhuang zi becomes primarily a mystic with his "philosophy" demoted to the subtitle: Selections from the Philosophy of Chuang tzu. A.C. Graham is critical of such translations in "Chuang-tzu and the Rambling Mode."

\(^4\) See Victor Mair, Experimental Essays on the Chuang-tzu for a variety of interpretations.
As we have seen with Chapter 1, this drawing of distinctions is a way of managing people, ideas and the text; a method that is very familiar to contemporary politics. In a recent article, Arthur Miller writes about how Nelson Mandela is continually shoved into boxes, and how he tries to evade this often sterilizing categorization [Miller:151]:

I found him extraordinarily straightforward in his persistent refusal to pulverize his [Mandela's] history to suit current American tastes, crediting Communists for being the first whites to befriend his movement, sometimes at the risk of their lives. Likewise, he criticized Israel and in the same breath reminded us that the overwhelming majority of his earliest supporters had been Jews.

In short, he allows himself to remain complicated...

Appreciating the complexity of multiple readings and difference in the Zhuang zi brings out new possibilities for politics as well.5

Yet this chapter is not engaged in a maneuver of de-mystifying the Zhuang zi. That is the stated purpose of the various editions of the text with their attending commentaries. Rather, in this section we examine how the text has survived: how it was constructed and transmitted over two millenia in scores of different forms. One way to do this is to put the text aside for the moment and examine how it

5 It may seem odd to be relating Mandela to Zhuang zi, but they are both playing with a very powerful system, both from within and from without. Though they are both very controversial, at the same time they are both immensely popular in their own way. Mandela is a celebrated leader who was in prison for 30 years and Zhuang zi has been a celebrated part of Chinese culture for 2200 years, but has been mystified and incarcerated through interpretation. On the other hand, as Miller writes, "unanimous appreciation is bound to be suspect." [151] Likewise, I am suspicious of the writing of the Zhuang zi.
has been framed differently in different historical and social spaces by the various prefaces which introduce the text.

The Chinese tradition is a tradition of commentary; even Confucius states that he is not making up new ideas, but merely transmitting the rites of the Zhou dynasty. Hence, we are told traditionally that writers expressed their own thoughts through the symbolic power of another work already deemed "classic." Commentaries as manipulations of the text lay bare certain power/knowledge relationships; the prefaces, then, follow the other senses of the character **xu-preface**: they are a *managing, governing* and *ordering* of the text. Selected prefaces provide ample representations to deconstruct the representation of *Zhuang zi* as a mystical-utopic text.

There seems to be a genre of prefaces for texts such as the *Zhuang zi* with its own rules of composition. Most prefaces start with an account of a historical person after which the text is named. Indeed, much of the power of such interpretations results from the classical Chinese custom of naming the text after its author -- *Zhuang zi* refers to a person, the *Zhuang zi* refers to a text. A myth of this character -- also known as Zhuang Zhou -- is built up from sparse and fantastic facts, and then the debates about the authenticity of the text and its mysticism typically begin. Rather than beginning by looking for the origins of the text in a distant mythical figure in the

---

*Lun Yu* 7/1. For Chinese philosophical references, I use the Harvard-Yenching Concordance system where the first number refers to the chapter and the second to the passage. English translations, especially D.C. Lau's, roughly correspond with this organization.
land of utopia, and play into the hand of the issues of authority and mysticism, genealogical historiography starts with the texts and history closest at hand -- the comic book version of the classic -- and aims to dig its way back, peeling away onion skin\(^7\) after onion skin, to see what is left. It is now "common sense" to see the *Zhuang zi* as a mystical book of fables that are a delight to read, but what about the politics not just of the text, but of Chinese culture at work in how such "common sense" is culturally constructed and reproduced.

This genealogy alternates between literary and social spaces, venturing between popular culture and high culture to consider the different representations of the *Zhuang zi*. These prefaces, like onion skins, individually are thin and perhaps not very substantial, but by the time all the skins are on the table, I hope to have demonstrated the sheer weight of meaning constituted by these representations.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\) Onion skins here refers to a metaphor of interpretation deployed in the preface to this dissertation. Rather than eating down to the core, or soul, to discover the seeds of meaning in a text, here we have the Onion of representation. Each onion skin is a representation, interpretation peels the onion to examine the layers of meaning, and when interpretation is done, there is no core of essential meaning, but a pile of onion skins. Each representation, than, gets its meaning based on what is inscribed on the skin -- the text stands alone. Likewise, genealogical history starts from the present -- the outermost skin -- and traces its way back not to a core of meaning, but to a multiplication of images.

\(^8\) A scorecard of the selected authors and their dates -- publication dates for contemporary critics and life dates for the traditional scholars -- is perhaps warranted here:

- Cai Zhizhong [1987]
- Xia Yunyu [1987]
- Luo Longzhi [1987]
- Guo Licheng [1987]
- Wang Xiaoyi [1985]
- Zhang Xianliang [1985]
- Cheng Guying [1982, 1974]
- Wang Xianjian [1842-1918]
- Su Zidan Song Dynasty
Cai Zhizhong's Comic Book

This genealogical analysis begins with the comic book "Zhuang zi Shuo - The Sayings of Zhuang zi," because it is a best seller which exemplifies well the two characterizations of the Zhuang zi as mystical and funny; its social and economic positioning is also important: it is produced in Taibei, a city where Confucianism is still so much a part of the infrastructure that Confucian virtues are written on the street signs. Being first published in 1987, it is one of the latest editions of the Zhuang zi, and therefore a likely place to start a genealogy.

Cai Zhizhong as both editor and cartoonist has produced in "The sayings of Zhuang zi" a very rich and complex artifact which appeals to both popular and elite culture: the text is laid out in a classical style (a) with a plethora of prefaces both traditional and from the 1980s placed at the beginning; (b) the title of the book is folded across the side margin in a classical style [see figure 1]; (c) the classical Chinese text in these same margins, and a modern Chinese interpretation to accompany the comics. Indeed, the signs in this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheng Xuanying</td>
<td>[fl. 630]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Deming</td>
<td>[d. 627]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo Xiang</td>
<td>[d. 312]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiang Xiu</td>
<td>[c. 250]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sima Qian</td>
<td>[fl. 211 B.C.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xun zi</td>
<td>[c.298-c.238 B.C.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 "Within two years 'Zhuang zi' went into more than 70 reprints in Taiwan and 15 in Hong Kong and has to date sold over 175,000 copies. There is also a Japanese translation of this book." Cai: *The Sayings of Lao zi*, page 8.
comic book overflow the pages in a continual flood of meaning that is not only fascinating but highly entertaining.

The thick layering of representation also serves to naturalize Zhuang zi into a mystical master, and his text as a treasure of the mysterious which we need to penetrate. Roland Barthes' comments on naturalization are useful here [1977:165]:

myth consists in turning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural.'

Mysticism operates through a naturalization of the text, effacing the text's production by attributing it to some sage-hero by turning culture into Nature as Barthes argues.

The prefaces are generally involved in the building of the myth of Zhuang Zhou and the text which is hard to question.

_Zhuang zi Shuo_ has four contemporary prefaces to introduce the text to some "general reader." The most revealing one is by Cai Zhizhong who does much more than explain as the subtitle states, "Why I Wanted to Draw Zhuang zi Shuo." Cai also prefaces his creation of what has now become a huge and profitable industry of "Philosophers in Comics" which conveniently introduces classical culture to the busy reader [11]:

Everyone more of less knows that there is a book called the _Zhuang zi_ and that this book is from a person called Zhuang zi, yet how much do they learn from this philosopher: we look but do not see, our whole lives having never been able to spy into the sanctuary of Zhuang zi's thought.

The reason for this comes not from Zhuang zi, it is basically from the dread of reading the classical Chinese language. Yet with this "The sayings of Zhuang zi" comic
book, the reader need only spend half an hour to be able to understand the essence of the thought of Zhuang zi. I hope the readers enjoy this book, and study it seriously. Even more I hope that this "The sayings of Zhuang zi" comic book will be able to become the reader's key for passing through the grand gate of the classics, and walking into the cultural sanctuary of the treasure house of China's ancient classics -- to participate in discussing the dao-Way side by side with ancient sages and worthies.

Cai's preface is straightforward, capitalistic and programmatic -- he has his thirty minute philosopher market to please. Cai is trying to popularize Zhuang Zi to facilitate the "general reader's" entry into forbidden and thus mystical space of classical culture. He does this by romanticizing about a mystical character with lost knowledge -- even the title of the text -- "The Sayings of Zhuang zi" -- plays on the ambiguity in name of text and author to take this elusive figure for granted. It is also the last of the four prefaces. The three preceeding prefaces are more academic, and tend to play up the mystic modes more. They reproduce the depoliticizing discourse of mysticism which concentrates on "the universe" or on "the inner self" as opposed to what lies in between and perhaps constructs these extremes -- society and language.

For example, two other prefaces to Cai's text read Daoism in terms of religion: in one Zhuang zi is compared to Jesus (p. 7), and in another to the Buddha (p. 10) in an effort to excavate and interpolate his "profound and humorous words." Such mysticism is "most clear" in yet another preface which is entitled "Achieving freedom in a
state of comprehension" where Luo Longzhi lauds the mysteries of Zhuang zi in a poem of the universe and me [8]:

the universe is right in front of me
the universe and I are formed in a complex relation
The universe -- me

The poem continues to talk of chaos and the human condition in the universe, and of spontaneity, again leading the gaze away from history, language and society.

Once we get past the contemporary prefaces and into the text proper with cartoons and Chinese characters, still more prefaces appear in the margins. The marginal text starts with first historical reference and literary review of the Zhuang zi which comes from Sima Qian's (fl. 221 B.C.) Shi Ji -- Historical Records. Then there are three prefaces -- written by Guo Xiang (d. 312), Lu Deming (d. 627) and Cheng Xuanying (fl. 630) -- which are attached to the text of later editions of the Zhuang zi. What is interesting is that these four documents are a meeting point of popular and elite culture. They also course their way through the latter tradition of Zhuang zi scholarship being reproduced in one form or another in "authoritative editions" of the text.

But before switching to academic representations, I want to briefly examine how these traditional prefaces are deployed in the comic book. In the comic book, they are, along with the cartoons and the modern Chinese text, engaged in building the myth of the mystical man Zhuang Zhou. The prefaces are edited to highlight the personal history of the person credited with writing the Zhuang zi.
They all tell more or less the same story, intertextually citing the *Shi Ji* entry. Lu Deming’s (d. 627) passage is exemplary:

Zhuang zi’s surname was Zhuang and personal name was Zhou, (the Grand Historian [Sima Qian] writes: He was also called Zixiu). He was from the state of Liang and the county of Meng. He lived in the time of the Six States, and he was in charge of the laquer garden. Zhuang Zhou lived at the same time as King Huan of Wei, King Xuan of Ji, and King Wei of Chu, (Li Yi writes: He was contemporaneous with King Min of Ji.) The states of Ji and Chu tried to invite him to serve as minister, but he would not accept.

His contemporaries liked to travel about preaching their ideas, but Mr. Zhuang alone was accomplished at this occupation, achieving his self-fulfillment in a carefree way. He followed Lao zi’s points, writing a book of over 100,000 words in order to loiter in the spontaneous non-action of equalizing things\(^{10}\) and that is all. Most of this text consists of fables which return to the principle, yet the meaning transcends the language itself. [in Cai:17]

Prefaces such as this one begin by talking about the person, rather than about the text. In this way, the mystical sage figure is naturalized, and positioned in a spaceless utopia rather than a political heterotopia. The cartoons with their captions introduce Zhuang Zhou as person distressed with the violence of the Warring States period, and states that "Zhuang zi shifted his vision away from worldly matters... and cast his sight on the boundlessness of time and space (emptiness.)" [Cai:16, Goh:2] Zhuang Zhou is presented as a

\(^{10}\)This last clause contains technical terms and the first two chapter titles from the *Zhuang zi*
wandering fool, in direct contradistinction with the way Cai Zhizhong
draws Confucius as a handsome and elegant sage. [see figure 2]

There will be breaks between the representations as I have laid
them out in this chapter. Since genealogy serves to read back to
where this text came from, the sources multiply and diverge like the
branches and roots of a family tree in a proper genealogical fashion.
But I also do this since "seamless historical continuity" is such a
strong theme in Chinese Culture -- rather than looking at the
hegemonic culture, here we are drawn to the reflexive breaks -- the
dissidence -- in the tradition. There are certainly relations between
the various representations, but they are not necessarily involved in
a narrative of progress or progression. Indeed, although the present
is clearest to my eyes, the text that I look at gets blurrier as I trace
the characters back.

Wang's Authoritative Text

The next onion skin to be peeled off and examined was last
published in 1985 at the Zhonghua Publishing House in Beijing. It is
one of the largest, and certainly most important publishers of
academic books in China. The Zhuang zi Ji Yi -- Collected
Interpretations of the Zhuang zi is part of a larger publishing project

11 There is much more that I could say about how the Zhuang zi is reproduced
as a mystical text in the comic book, especially looking at which stories where
chosen to be drawn, and how they were drawn, and then translated into
modern Chinese, Japanese, and now English, starting with examining how the
comic book skips over the first two stories to settle on more convenient tales,
but here I am interested in prefaces.
to circulate authoritative editions of classical Chinese philosophical works with copious notes meant as "a book for both reading and reference for the general researcher." [1] (Notice the shift from Cai's general reader to the general researcher.)

It is a hefty text of four volumes and over 1000 pages. Yet like the half hour comic book, it starts out with a pack of prefaces including three of the historical prefaces that were contained in "Zhuang zi Shuo." Yet the first notable thing about this edition with its pack of prefaces is an absence. Wang Xiaoyu, the editor of the edition, did not put in his own preface. This is perhaps telling of the political situation in China in recent decades where classical Chinese philosophy is a very political matter.1 2

Though the Tang and Jin dynasty onion skins of Guo, Lu and Cheng have again left their imprint in Wang's edition of the Zhuang zi, they will have to wait their turn in the genealogical order. It is worth noting that the prefaces of Guo Xiang, Lu Deming and Cheng Xuanying are reproduced in their entirety here -- not edited as in Cai's comic book representation of the Zhuang zi.

Zhang's Novel
The next representation to be considered is that contained in Zhang Xianliang's Nanrende Yiban Shi Nuren - Half of Man is Woman, a novel that was published in Beijing in 1985 -- though it is not a preface, it contains a powerful representation of Zhuang zi. It is a

---

12The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution started in the Philosophy Department of Beijing University. One of the Mass Movements addressed "Criticizing Confucius" in order to criticize the ultra-leftist Lin Biao.
popular and controversial novel, being known as the first modern Chinese novel published in China since 1949 to directly address issues of sexuality. It is in the aftermath of one of these scenes that a character named Zhuang zi appears. Zhang, the main character, comes home one night to see his wife and her lover together, but rather than confronting them, he confronts himself sitting on a rock and looking up at the stars in a night sky. Various literary and philosophical figures -- Song Jiang$^{13}$, Othello, Mencius, Zhuang zi and Marx -- are summoned to aid him with his problem in a masterful juxtaposition of ancient and modern, Chinese, African and European images. Each of these advisors has their own strengths and weaknesses brought from their particular time and place constituting a heterotopia of the imagination; here it is interesting to see how Zhuang zi is represented, for utopia is everywhere in both the placement of the character and in what he advises.

After quoting a passage about suffering from Mencius, a Confucian also from the the third century B.C., Zhuang zi appears. Or actually, he does not appear, for unlike the other characters, Zhuang zi has no form, but is only sparkling sound. Zhuang zi replies to Zhang's woes by (mis)quoting a parable from the first chapter of the Zhuang zi the "Xiao Yao You." Zhang cannot even place Zhuang zi; he writes: "From the middle of space -- the great void -- a sonorous voice answered me." [143] Later Zhuang zi is placed "in the midst of the universe." [144]

$^{13}$Song Jiang is a hero from the classical novel The Water Margin. He is a "real man" a warrior who kills his brother's wife when she takes a lover.
Zhuang zi is invisible because just as in Cai's text he has left this world of acting in social relationships; he tells Zhang [143]: "If you want to be at peace, you must abandon yourself to the world. You must not fight it or try to control it." All politics is gone with this mystical melding into the Universe -- a spaceless space where profound abstractions displace action. Zhang responds [143]: "'Sir, your Way is truly profound,' I said. 'But for me it still is not very useful.... I only want to know what to do.' To this, Zhuang zi laughs.

But Zhang persists, again asking Zhuang zi [144]: "Sir, can you still teach me some concrete way to do all of this." Zhuang zi's reply from the midst of the universe ends the utopic conversation in this way [144]:

'I studied the ways of Heaven which are far from human affairs. If you wish to know the mechanics of human ways, you must seek instruction from a teacher familiar with that aspect (of the universe.)'

Zhuang zi's voice dispersed into space. A bright moon hung in the sky, making the shadows of tree branches dance, and everything returned to tranquility. Just then Marx strolled out from the moon.

Marx has form, while Zhuang zi in the representation of both the character and his advice lacks any form that has a relation to human affairs. It is expressed from the mystic whole of the universe, yet in a heirarchical relation: Zhuang zi is above Zhang, and Zhang uses traditional terms of respect for Zhuang zi, addressing him like a Confucian master. We will return to this strange dynamic between Zhuang zi and Confucianism in the consideration of Gou Xiang's preface.
Chen's Philosophies

This representation of the *Zhuang zi* is different from the rest. It does not fit in. Chen Guying is a controversial figure. He originally taught at National Taiwan University in Taipei. Now he teaches at Beijing University, and is forbidden from returning to Taiwan, even though he is a U.S. citizen. His *Zhuang zi Jinzhi Jinyi - Zhuang zi: A Modern Commentary and Translation* was reprinted by Zhonghua publishers in 1985, the same year that they reprinted the "authoritative edition." Actually it is a revised edition of one published in 1974 in Taiwan, so we have two prefaces to consider and juxtapose.\(^1\)

In the preface to the revised edition (1982), rather than talking about the character Zhuang zi or about the text, Chen begins by explaining his interest in the study of Zhuang zi's thought in a much looser configuration of the representations. He talks about the literary and philosophic influence Zhuang zi has exercised [1]:

In literature, ... Zhuang zi has been a fountain for later romantic writers. In philosophy, the *Zhuang zi* was directly involved in arousing the discussions of the School of the Mystics-*xuan xue* and Chan (Zen) Buddhism in Wei-Jin period.

Here Chen is referring to mysticism and religion, not political philosophy. But, as a participant in the aforementioned cultural debates and struggles in China, in the revised edition Chen makes a point of placing Zhuang zi and his thought politically. It is only in

---

\(^1\)It is worth noting that Chen calls his prefaces *qian yan* which is more like the etymology of the English word "foreword" in that *qian* means before and *yan* means word-language. The sense of ordering and managing that we have encountered in the *xu*-preface is not so apparent.
this space that Chen writes of the historical character Zhuang Zhou. This politicization is in terms of Marxist politics and class struggle, except at the end of this paragraph where Chen writes more generally [1]:

Without a doubt, Zhuang zi's thought had a deep and far reaching influence on social thought and humanist attitude of later people, not to mention the aspect about it which enlightens us about passivity and fortune.

Chen argues that there is perhaps more to the *Zhuang zi* than the image of a mystical and magical treatise that has been reproduced.

Over the space of eight years there is a strange shift from the first preface (1974) to the preface of the revised edition just considered. The earlier preface which was written in Taiwan is much more programmatic. The framing and politics of the text functions differently in the context of Taiwan. Chen numbers his paragraphs.

Point 1: Chen explains what he has done and what he is doing. With no mention of Zhuang Zhou, Chen makes a semiotic move in the preface to discuss the formation of the text with its commentaries. He argues that this construction has obscured the text [1]:

Because those in the past who have commented on this book have often been involved in both exchanging ideas and following the tradition, they have mixed up their ideas with others, and hence have not added much to the explanation of the text.

Chen then goes on to give a short history of the commentaries, stressing just how hard it is to separate them from each other -- they are incestuous. Yet Chen does not go so far as to point out how they are inseparable from the text itself -- he still wants "to get it right."
Point 2: In discussing the "modern translation," Chen mentions the three main commentaries, Guo Xiang, Cheng Xuanying, and Lu Deming.

Point 3: He uses the Wang Xiaoyu authoritative edition described above as his main source.

Point 5: In talking about the notes to this edition which he gathered from English, Japanese and "Mainland Chinese" sources in addition to the ones available to him in Taiwan, he makes a peculiar depoliticizing move [2]:

The notes of this book are limited to only explaining the meanings of words, this is in accordance with the needs of study and is not involved in the questions of political thought.

The political climate in Taiwan seems to have muted his politicization of his text, just as the climate in Beijing directed it into the tight bounds of Marxist issues of class struggle. Are such forces at work in the other editions? That in a nutshell is one of the questions of this genealogical section.

Tradition and the Text

This next set of onion skins is messy because here I assemble various representations in an effort to briefly create another representation which in some measure sums up what the "tradition" has to say about the Zhuang zi. Though it is useful, I am still suspicious of such nameless analysis, for it is the center of critique in this chapter.

Narratives are too smooth sometimes, so to express these important points while at the same time recognizing their limits, I
will flatly list them much in the fashion of a Chinese commentary which is notorious for its largely unargued and unreferenced style.

(a) The unification of the empire with the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C. was, to a large extent, a unification of language and thought as well as a unification of government institutions and territory.

(b) All Chinese scholarship since the end of the classical period (unification) has been involved in a powerful knowledge/power relation. The word shi is usually translated as "scholar-official," since government service and scholarship were intricately intertwined. This knowledge/power dynamic became institutionalized particularly when the Marshal Emperor of Han established Confucianism as the state ideology in 136 B.C. and set up an academy to expound upon it.

(c) The word now synonymous with Ph.D. in Chinese is bo-shi - the scholar-official with wide learning. This term comes from the Martial Emperor of Han's academy.

(d) The word jing which means classic works, also means "to manage, to regulate, to transact;" "to plan, to arrange;" "the warp of a fabric;" and "an invariable rule." Or as another encyclopedia simply lists it: "Confucian classic." The bo-shi studied the jing. The name of the edition of Zhuang zi that we now read was canonized by a Tang dynasty emperor as the Nan Hua Zhen Jing -- the authentic jing of Nan Hua -- Nan Hua is another name for Zhuang zi.

(e) There is no synonym for "Confucianism" in Chinese as there is for Daoism, Mohism, and most of the other Hundred Schools. When

15 The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature
they were named by Sima Qian in the second century B.C. he chose *ru jia* for what in English we now call Confucianism. *Ru jia* means the school of the learned, the scholars.

These points highlight that scholarship, and the prefaces that come out of it, is to a large extent Confucian scholarship. Heterotopia and Dissidence are very difficult. Yet the Zhuang zi survived. It was not squashed even though it contested the orthodoxy of the Confucian classics.

There is room for works such as the Zhuang zi in this tight Confucian system perhaps because the sociology of knowledge is different in China than in Europe. In traditional China, identity was more multiple. Knowledge and belief were more spacially acted out. Tradition tells us that scholar-officials were Confucians by day and Daoists at night; Confucians in office, and Daoists at home; Confucians in their "productive years" and Daoists in retirement. As A.C. Graham writes in the introduction to his partial translation of the *Zhuang zi* [3]:

> The book is the longest of the classics of Taoism, the philosophy which expresses the side of Chinese civilisation which is most spontaneous, intuitive, private, unconventional, the rival of Confucianism, which represents the moralistic, the official, the respectable.

While Confucius was revered and respected, Zhuang zi was loved and enjoyed.

---

16 At the time I didn't understand it when one of my professors accused me of being "Confucian" -- but I'm studying Daoism!, I replied. Yes, I was "studying" Daoism, while he was living it.

17 Watson: 12
To maintain the *Zhuang zi* in this cultural system lines were drawn between philosophy and literature; fact and fiction; seriousness and play. "One can read him primarily as a literary artist, as Confucians have done in China. However, one cannot get far in exploring his sensibility as a writer without finding one's bearings in his philosophy." [1981:4] As this passage from Graham shows, (echoed by Chen Guying), the *Zhuang zi* hovers over this line, in many ways showing the distinctions' limits. Yet it is instructive to see how translators and commentators pull out the Hermeneutic constable's whistles to enforce such distinctions.

The examples of *Zhuang zi* being positioned in literature abound; A. C. Graham provides an optimum sample for he conducts some of the most interesting research on the *Zhuang zi*, as well as publishing the most recent scholarly English translation. Graham puts it simply: "all the classics of philosophical Taoism... have won important places in the literary history of China."[25] In relation to the philosophy/literature border line he writes [26]:

...he [Zhuang zi] uses words not like a philosopher, but like a poet, sensitive to their richness, exploiting their ambiguities, letting conflicting meanings explode against each other in apparent contradiction.

The place of the *Zhuang zi* in the literary history of China is also attested to by the sheer volume of citations it has in reference works like the *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. It is mentioned in relation to classical writers, but the text's influence on later writers of all sorts is stressed -- not just the Romantics as Chen Guying states. Indeed, the word for fable *yuyan*, and the word for
fiction xiaoshuo both make their first appearance as compounds in the Zhuang zi.

There is a shift here from high culture to popular culture. It is in the literary figuration of the Zhuang zi that the humor comes out again -- it is figured as "at once humorous and deep."[Graham 1981:3] Looking back on the onion skins strewn out around me, this makes sense of Zhuang Zhou's laughs in Zhang and Cai's more popular and literary texts. But this humor is far from politics, it is integrated with the mystical: "irreverent humor and awe at the mystery and holiness of everything..." [Graham 1981:4]

Or as Burton Watson comments on the social placement of the Zhuang zi and Daoism [10]: "Taoism being basically apolitical, remained in the background."

The Zhuang zi, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, is now read selectively for literature, not so much for philosophy and certainly not politics. Certain chapters, such as Xiao Yao You, Qi Wu Lun and the Qiu Shui are concentrated on, chapters which highlight the mysticism and what Graham calls the "irrationality" of the text. It is primarily read as fiction for its fairy tales and fantastic language.

A Qing Dynasty Framing

For this last bunch of onion peels we return go back to specific documents and how these prefices have been reproduced in Wang Xiaoyu's authoritative text. The first preface is from the late Qing dynasty. Wang Xianjian's (1842-1918) preface is difficult to read; it

---

18 Just as popular culture is far from politics, xiaoshuo-fiction etymologically means "petty talk."
is full of obscure words and references to people and places in Chinese literary history and mythology. But placement of Zhuang Zhou in a mystical space like that of the comic book stands out clearly. The text is introduced as "considering the borderlessness of large and small and examining the beginnings and ends of Heaven and Earth." [1]

After these mystical moves, Wang begins to historicize the text, and in a convenient way introduces the other prefaces that we will consider.

This book has always stood out among following generations. In the Jin dynasty, it was molded by Xuan Xue, the school of the mystics, all the same, it did not solve the problems of Hu Jie minorities. In the Tang dynasty, it was canonized as a classic, but was not able to do anything about the catastrophes of An and Shi. [1]

With this explanation, Wang depoliticizes the text by linking it to politics. Although it stood out, it was just for fun -- it did not help people to address contemporary social and political problems. To argue this point Wang cites the two dynasties -- Jin and Tang -- that produced other important prefaces. The three prefaces from these two dynasties follow Wang in this edition, highlighting how certain historical times and social movements were more interested in the *Zhuang zi* than others. Although it has survived for 2200 years, it has not been a classic for all time as the prefaces to the comic book edition would lead us to believe.

Neo-Confucian *Zhuang zi*?
In the Song dynasty -- when there was a resurgence of Confucianism into the still dominant mode that in English is called Neo-Confucianism -- Su Zidan discards certain chapters of the *Zhuang zi* because they were critical of Confucius. This passage which was etched in stone at the Shrine to Zhuang zi lists them as the very same chapters which are important to the arguments concerning the political laughs of the *Zhuang zi* offered in section two.

I feel that Zhuang zi actually supported Confucius.... Zhuang zi's text in fact shows this, even though some chapters are not like this. Outwardly they attack Confucius, while actually they support him. Zhuang zi's clear words (*orthodoxy-zheng yan*) are few, resulting in both the ridicule and praise of Confucius which does not necessarily miss grasping the subtle points of his ideas. Zhuang zi discusses the artful workings of the Way of the Empire through [sages such as] Mo Di [Mo zi], Hu Gu Li, Peng Meng, Shen Dao, Tian Pian, Guan Yin, Lao Dan and his disciples all coming together to make a text. Even though Confucius does not participate in this, Zhuang zi's respect for him is great. Because of this, I suspect the forgery of the "Robber Zhi" and "Old Fisherman" chapters because they truly ridicule Confucius. Along with the "Abdicating King" and "Discourse on Swords" chapters they are vulgar and do not accord with the Way.19

Rather than reading the text of the *Zhuang zi* and making interpretations based on the arguments and stories, Su engages in a classic example of interpretation according to authorial intent. Su starts out with the premise that Zhuang zi supports Confucius and

---

19 I originally found this curious passage from Su Zidan's *Zhuang zi Citang Ji* -- the record on the Shrine to Zhuang zi -- in the introduction to the *Zhuang zi Reader* (page 9-10 for modern Chinese, page 49 for the original classical Chinese).
reads the text with that in mind. He boils down the complexity of the text in his reference to the paucity of straight words -- orthodoxy -- and looks for the hidden meaning that he in a Nietzschean fashion placed there. But it is a problematic search, for he has to edit out some of the most stylisitically and narratively interesting chapters.

Tang Authoritative Prefaces

Now it's time for the prefaces that we have all been waiting for, the three prefaces that keep getting refered to and reproduced. I am settling on the prefaces of Cheng Xuanying (fl. 630), Lu Deming (d. 627), and Guo Xiang (d. 312), not because the are necessarily the best, or the clearest, or even the most mystical. I settle on them because they are popular and influencial in the representation of the Zhuang zi.

Cheng Xuanying's and Lu Deming's prefaces are from the Tang dynasty, the "high point" of Chinese culture, according to many. It was an influencial time for the religious interpretations of Daoism. The Zhuang zi was canonized into the Nan Hua Zhen Jing by decree of the Xuancong Emperor of the Tang.

These two prefaces are interesting in that in addition to showing mysticism, they each also make semiotic moves of talking about how the text was constructed, and its meaning directed. The meaning was directed more politically by the Zhou Wu Emperor who encouraged a synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism in an effort to unify the empire in a power/knowledge dynamic. [Bokenkamp:147]

Cheng (fl. 630) begins his long and involved xu-managing of the text with a mystical litany [6]:
The Zhuang zi is the means through which to expound the deep root of Dao and De, to describe the subtle points of the profound mysteries, to elaborate on the smoothly peaceful non-action, to illuminate obscure and mysterious self-transformations, to grasp the nine schools of thought, to include everyone, to forgive those who go too far while getting beyond the text to its subtle meaning.

The next passage reproduces the biographical narrative of Zhuang Zhou and how he was disgusted with the chaos and violence of the Warring States period, and how his mystical writing was a reaction to a disillusionment with the social world.

Hence he wrote this treatise. His meaning is wide, yet great, his point is far-reaching, yet deep, none among the people has been able to transmit what it contains. How can these superficial people examine Zhuang zi!

Yet after Cheng makes these mystical moves, he switches to talk about the construction of the text. Here he is not using the metaphor of "construction" of a text, but is talking about the physical production of the book, and how that is productive of meaning [6]:

The chapters are an arrangement of the bamboo strips which give it meaning. The ancients cut the bamboo while it was still green to make the strips, and bound them together with straps of leather. The bamboo strips are bound together to make the chapters, just like how today sheets of chapter are bound together in a chuan--book. Therefore Yuan Kai writes: 'the importance of books comes from their plan, organization. Little affairs are merely a stack of bamboo strips.'

This passage tends to denaturalize the text. The preface goes on to critically examine the organization of the text into its three sections, concluding that "the Inner chapters then, talk about the root of
principle, the Outer chapters then discuss the tracks-signs of their affairs."

Rather than lamenting that the text has been edited, as do more modern scholars who are concerned with the zhen/wei - authentic/forgery distinction in an effort to find the "real Zhuang zi," Cheng applauds the sculpting of the text. Through a short narrative, he puts all the chapters in a "logical order," where each follows naturally for the previous one.

Although Cheng is involved in refreshingly critical analysis in his preface, he returns to the already powerful tradition of Guo Xiang's commentary in the last sentences: "I follow what Zi Xuan (Guo Xiang) has noted on the thirty chapters, arbitrarily making annotations and explications, altogether forming thirty sections-chuan."

Lu Deming's preface, which according to the title -- A Preface and Record of the Classic and its Commentaries -- is also a record of the language of the text, is quite short. It also comes from the Tang dynasty; Lu is listed as having died in 627 A.D. Lu's naturalization of the character of Zhuang Zhou was already reproduced in the discussion of the comic book edition "The Sayings of Zhuang zi." After noting the elusiveness of the Zhuang zi's "funny, brilliant and profound" language, Lu offers another history of the text, explaining how Guo Xiang organized and edited the text from previous larger editions.

---

20 An interesting thing about this passage is that in Lu Deming's (and traditional) lists Guo is credited with writing thirty-three chuan.
Many of the words are peculiar and absurd. Some seem like they come from the *Shan Hai Jing*, others are like the *Zhan Ming Shu*. Therefore the commentators, in order to make it meaningful, discard some parts while choosing others.

If I had to choose one quote to highlight the semiotic nature of the *Zhuang zi* and discard all the others, this would be it.

Lu ends his preface\(^2\)\(^1\) swearing his allegiance to Guo Xiang's commentary [4]:

Only Zi Xuan's (Guo Xiang) *Zhi - Comments* have a special grasp of the point of Mr. Zhuang, and thus was able to make available what is valuable for his time. Yi Xianmin and Li Hongfan wrote postfaces, and all their comments are in Gou's book. Now we take Guo as the authority (of the text.)

**Guo Xiang's Edition**

\(^2\)Appended to Lu's preface is a list of editions of the *Zhuang zi* ordered according to their commentators. I will reproduce it here to highlight how the text was managed differently in different times. There is a considerable variability in how the text was organized and thus managed. The titles are important here, for the first four editions cited are called *zhu* which in addition to meaning "annotation," and "commentary," means "to direct (the gaze, attention, etc.)" [4-5]:

- Cui Xuan: 10 chuan; 27 chapters, Inner: 7, Outer: 20 (Jin dynasty)
- Xiang Xiu: 20 chuan; 26 chapters, no Mixed Chapters, 3 Yin chuan (Jin dynasty)
- Sima Biao: 21 chuan; 52 chapters: Inner: 7, Outer: 28, Mixed: 14, Explanations: 3; Yin:3chuan (Jin dynasty)
- Guo Xiang: 33 chuan; 33 chapters, Inner: 7, Outer: 15, Mixed: 11, Yin: 3 chuan (Jin dynasty)
- Li Yi: 30 chuan; 30 chapters (35 chapters), Yin: 1 chuan (Jin dynasty)
- Meng Shi: 18 chuan, 52 chapters (biography not known)
- Wang Shuzhi: 3 chuan (Song State)
- Li Gui: Yin 1 chuan
- Xu Miao: Yin 3 chuan
Guo Xiang is central in the study of the text of the *Zhuang zi*, yet I am not sure whether the subtitle should read "the first text" or the "last text." It is the first text of the tradition since it is his edition of the *Zhuang zi* that we now read in its various forms. Yet since all the previous editions have been lost, including all the chapters that did not make it into Guo's edition, in another way it is the last text. Guo Xiang's text represents a focal point much like the trunk of a tree, below him is a multitude of hidden influences of the now lost editions, above him is a multitude of interpretations that have all branched off from his base.\(^{22}\) And, of course, there are weeds growing all around. It is important to consider Guo's preface, because it not only sets the stage for the text, but also is telling of what he cut out of the text.

Guo is the grand orderer of the *Zhuang zi*, and true to form, his preface begins by telling us of the "wild words which had not yet been archived." He continues,

> Even though these words were not assembled (into a text), they still had a respondent in me. Yet if I respond without assembling, then even though I hit the mark in interpretation it would be useless.

According to Gou Xiang, the *Zhuang zi* was just a mass of characters that needed some order for meaning. According to the *Dynastic History of the Han* which preceeds Gou Xiang, the *Zhuang zi* has 52

\(^{22}\) *Zhuang zi* is known as a gardener because of the importance of trees to his arguments, and his elaborate descriptions of them. *Zhuang zi*’s trees are often gnarled and twisted, impossible for a carpenter to use. Just as it is difficult to use the base text provided by Guo.
chapters. Guo Xiang's edition has only 33 chapters. As Guo Xiang explains elsewhere in his *Commentary*,
Each scholar in their specialized corner has recklessly altered the text to suit their strange explanations. The titles of the "Yan Yi" and "Yi Xiu" chapters are examples of this, as are entire chapters called "Wei Yan [Dangerous Words]", "You Fu" and "Zi Xu". Generally speaking, among all the chapters, about three of ten are strange and disorderly. [in Lu Deming:4]

Hence Guo cut out nineteen chapters of "Dangerous Words," about 30% of the text. After stating that he is about to mold the text, Guo makes the mystical use of the *Zhuang zi* that appeals to him clear, recalling Zhang Xianliang's novelistic writing of *Zhuang zi*:
Although Mr. Zhuang does not yet have a form-body, his words reach the ultimate. They communicate the unity of heaven and earth; they comment on the nature of the myriad things; they understand the changes of death and life; they illuminate inner wisdom and external way of kings. Above, they understand that creation lacks form, and below, they understand that things create themselves in this world.

His language is vast, his point is mysterious and hidden. He arrives at the ultimate way, which is bright and minute pointing to its elegance....

Guo is living up to the literary name that he picked for himself -- Zi Xuan - the philosopher of the mystic.

There are various historical ans social explanations for this influential mysticism. Guo Xiang's *Zhuang zi Zhu* was produced during a turbulent time, much like that of the Warring States that produced the *Zhuang zi*, "returning to a time of poor and greedy people, and entering an age of intolerant scholar-officials" as Guo
wrote. The Han dynasty had collapsed after nearly four and one half centuries of rule. In the course of the dynasty not only the institutions decayed, but the Confucian ideology also had exhausted itself in corruption. Intellectuals were disillusioned with the ideology and looked to alternative schools of thought, most notably digging up the texts of the Daoists and Neo-Mohists.

It was an unhealthy time to be a scholar-official. There was civil war in the Jin dynasty, and scholar-officials were often executed along with the deposed rulers. As a result, many intellectuals retreated from "public life," and wrote poetry in their gardens among friends. Mysticism was in vogue: the Mystical School - Xuan Xue is the term used to characterize the intellectual currents of the age. This movement, called Neo-Daoism in English, was involved in offering a synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism. Perhaps in reaction to the entry of Buddhism on the stage of Chinese philosophy, the Neo-Taoists turned Confucianism and Daoism to questions of creation and cosmology which were not considered in Classical China.

The trends of a mysticism of cosmology and a synthetic urge are evident in Guo's preface. The following passage shows Guo's peculiar twisting of the Zhuang zi to consider not just mysticism and Confucianism, but a mystical Confucianism -- all through the veneer of the Zhuang zi!

The utmost humanity's extreme is found in lacking parents; filial sons and kind fathers reach their end in all forgetting; rites and music return to the abilities of the self; loyalty and sincerity burst out up to the brightness of heaven.

Grammatically speaking, Confucian virtues are the subject of Guo's discourse and mystic space is his object. The Confucian virtues,
which the text of the *Zhuang zi* usually questions and often mocks, are here let loose on the ultimate bounds of the universe and the self.

In short, Guo is using the *Zhuang zi* to interpret a new kind of Confucianism. Although he writes of "the cleansing of the great waves and the flight of the lofty winds," his commentary on the text shows that he is still interested in order. It is an odd turn, for he has much social commentary throughout a text that he has framed as mystical -- yet it seems to be for reestablishing some kind of Confucian order with a capital "O" which also stands for "oppression." For example, he twists the mysticism to meet his political needs of hierarchy by arguing that each of us is "fated" to a certain position in life.23

Has Guo Xiang altered the text to meet his own needs, as he accuses others of doing? This is a question that cannot be answered until we find another edition. ("Keep digging," I urge the peasants of China.) Guo has certainly managed the text in his preface, and through his *zhu* has directed our gaze to the mystical portions of the text. Guo ends his preface by reminding us that he is seeking salvation from contemporary problems by mystically leaving the scene:

> Explore its profound and distant thoughts, and joke with those who will live forever! Pursuing the *Zhuang zi* for a long time with purity for a distance, we can discard the dross of the earth and return to the mysteries of the ultimate.

23Cf. Callahan 1986
To complete the circle, I should note that in most recent academic translation of the *Zhuang zi*, A.C. Graham edits the text, translating only those sections which make sense to him. Graham represents the text not as a whole, but edits it according to various themes that he finds interesting.

Though there are no more prefaces before Guo's, the onion skins continue. The trail grows sparse, but still leads us on. Here we must shift from philosophical and literary texts to primarily historical accounts of Zhuang Zhou and the *Zhuang zi*.

(a) Guo is accused of stealing much or all of his commentary from Xiang Xiu -- which is one way of accounting for the schizophrenia of the text. Xiang was one of the famed "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" a loose group of men who drank lots of wine and wrote a little poetry about the mysteries of the universe. Xiang's edition is reputed to have been different from Guo's in that it only had Inner and Outer sections -- no Mixed chapters.

(b) the text seems to have been very unstable in the Han-Wei-Jin period (second and third Century A.D.) as the list from the end of Lu Deming's preface attests. It was during this time that it was divided into the Inner, Outer and Mixed chapters, for the *Shi Ji* only lists it as having over 100,000 words with no mention of these three sections.

(c) In the *Shi Ji* Zhuang zi's biography is placed after Lao zi's and before Han Fei zi's. Lao zi's biography ends with a combatative statement: "Later generation's students of Lao zi degraded the study
of scholars (i.e. Confucianism), and the Confucians likewise degraded Laozi." [2143]

This ordering is not surprising, viewing the narrative of Chinese thought that Sima Qian\textsuperscript{24} is writing, dividing it up into schools like "Daoism" and "Confucianism." Zhuangzi is also presented as following Laozi's teachings.

More importantly, Sima's biography of Zhuang Zhou makes a point of noting how the Zhuangzi is critical of Confucius and his disciples as well -- citing some of the chapters which were edited out by Dong Boxu:

"He wrote 'The Old Fisherman,' 'Robber Zhi,' and 'Rifling Trunks' in order to satirically criticize Confucius and his followers and thus illuminate the techniques of Laozi." [2143-2144]

(d) Xunzi, a Confucian from the end of the Warring States period lists Zhuangzi as one of the philosophers against whom he is arguing. As part of a long list outlining the obsessions of various people, Xunzi writes: "Zhuangzi was obsessed with Heaven, and did not understand people." [79/21/22] This has mystical implications such as those we saw in Zhang Xianliang's modern representation of Zhuangzi.

Prefaces, Mirrors and Conclusions
There are piles and piles of onion skins laying all around me, each with a different representation of the Zhuangzi carved on it. Yet

\textsuperscript{24}Sima Qian studied under Dong Zhongshu, the Confucian scholar who convinced The Marshall Emperor of the Han to set up the Confucian academy.
when I am done peeling the onion, where do I find myself? Back at
the text and its own various representations of Zhuang zi. Perhaps I
would genealogically start with the last chapter -- the Tianxia
chapter which is in many ways the first history of Chinese
philosophy written. But I will resist this urge, for I might start
arguing how this was appended on and is probably from a later
editor, and so on and so on, until I start cutting out chapters and
slicing up the strings of characters in the service this time of politics
rather than mysticism. But I will resist this urge to oppressively
order and Understand the text, I do not want to kill it by ordering it,
as Hun Dun's (Chaos) friends killed him in an effort to make him just
like them in one of the Zhuang zi's stories.

As we have seen, prefaces serve to order our reading of the
text. The framing of these various representations of Zhuang zi
which are drawn from history, literature, popular fiction, comic
books as well as philosophy has shown how politics has been largely
denied. Yet the politics is found in this framing itself -- hegemonic
Confucian culture has preserved the Zhuang zi by interpreting it in
terms of utopia and mysticism. Confucian culture utilizes the Zhuang
zi's dissidence to preserve itself by deflecting the critical gaze away
from the serious issues of philosophy and politics to the petty talk of
fiction and storytelling.

Section II: Laughter and Politics
After this long preface we can finally get to the title and discuss the
laughter and politics of the Zhuang zi, and how it has been involved
in the politics of dissidence. Resistance through dissidence takes
place in many different times and places, yet certain texts such as the Zhuang zi keep being reproduced not only in the context of resistance in traditional China, but also in the twentieth century. The "Humor of Protest (Modern)" section of George Kao's *Chinese Wit and Humor* begins with this passage from the Zhuang zi: "When all under heaven is muddled it is not time for serious talk." [267] Here we will politicize laughter and its attending storytelling practices by examining how laughter functions in the social space of power relations.

Politics and Intertextuality

In section one we addressed the importance of the Zhuang zi to the Chinese literary canon. Such works as The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature affirm how the Zhuang zi has been framed as a literary text as opposed to a philosophic text -- a very important distinction since generally speaking classical Chinese philosophy is political theory.

There are many reasons for this -- the text itself lacks the familiar order of discourse found in the other Chinese classics such as the Analects, the Mencius, the Xun zi and especially the Mo zi. Umberto Eco has some interesting comments on the difference in style between philosophy and literature that are useful here [1983:8-9]:

Anyone who writes essays must work to reduce the labyrinth. He must impoverish the wealth of the real in order to permit definitions, even provisional ones. He must make an effort to reduce the
ambiguity. When you want ambiguity to run free, you write poetry or fiction.

In the *Zhuang zi* the ambiguity runs free but unlike Eco, I take this to be a very appropriate and political thing in philosophic literature.\(^{25}\)

The politicized laughs come out just because of the complexity and ambiguity of the text, and the ironic positioning of the text explains some of its overwhelming success.

Eco explains the success of another complex text in terms of how it allows "different paths of reading." \([7-8]\) Here he is discussing his own novel *The Name of the Rose*, and posits that there are naive readers enjoying a "simple detective novel" and more sophisticated readers who are reading philosophy and semiotics, getting all the intertextual jokes that the novel contains. Pasi Falk comments that \([353]\):

> *The Name of the Rose* is indeed part of an uninterrupted 'intertextual' process, but at the same time it is a conscious playing with tales that always turn out to be variations, combinations, mutations or images of other tales.

The *Zhuang zi* is likewise an ironic text with many spaces of meaning, many of which address politics and humor. It can be read as a collection of stories, easily read and "understood in one half hour" as Cai Zhizhong's comic book edition advertizes. But these stories are usually part of an argument; ironic allegories are introduced for a certain problem, in a definite context. Once the telling is finished, other styles of explanation often follow. For example, many of the

\(^{25}\) The title of one of A.C. Graham's collections of essays is instructive here -- *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophic Literature* -- here he addresses the ambiguity contained in the taxonomy.
stories (e.g. the first cycle of stories which tells of swallows, crickets and the huge bird Peng) in "Xiao Yao You" are traditionally understood as demonstrations of the evasiveness of a Cosmic Whole. Yet they can also be read as parables to explicate "perspectivism," and how one is always attached to one's discursive economies.

There are many paths of reading in the Zhuang zi: some look to the stories as fairy tales, some look to how they are framed in "philosophic issues," and others such as my own look to the different and multiple social and political spaces that the Zhuang zi's styles afford.

The 'intertextual process' is a very important part of the style of the Zhuang zi. It is full of references to other texts, extant and otherwise, which it twists and turns in the telling and retelling of its tales in a strangely funny way which squeezes out laughs. Indeed, the first story of Kun the huge fish and Peng the huge bird is elaborated on by an intertextual reference: "The Funny Tales of the State of Ji records strange occurrences. It's funny words say..." [1/3] The tale keeps twisting tighter and tighter as it is retold again in the same chapter, although in a slightly different way. [1/14] The Zhuang zi reproduces other texts, but it is not in the familiar style of commentary on them.26 Texts, including the Zhuang zi itself since it is full of self-reference, are played with and remolded into a different sort of argument, and a different sort of history, in a different space.

26As the Han Fei zi comments on the Lao zi, or the Xun xi on the Zhuang zi.
The *Zhuang zi* is known for what Chad Hansen calls its "double rhetorical style." There is no base; again, there are no clean roots in the *Zhuang zi*, only gnarled trunks and twisted branches. The text will offer an idea or an example, then criticize it, then criticize the criticism. The argument is not in terms of reaching a conclusion, of looking for a core, but in terms of onion skins. The question in reading the text is always, "when to stop." The stories spin round and round, like a merry-go-round, in a different sort of Revolution. When the discussion is done, and one has leapt off of the ride, one has to leaf through the various representations to see which one will work best at that time.

The politics of the text is foregrounded in this way, for meaning is so self-consciously negotiated, and renegotiated. My tutor, Yang Youwei, once told me that after 50 years of reading the classics he still is enjoyably challenged by the *Zhuang zi*, while he can teach the *Analects* with his eyes closed. It is not that the meaning evades the reader's understanding, it is more that the meaning is always produced and reproduced with each reading. For each reading is taken in different circumstances.

Perhaps the *Zhuang zi* is not coded as political in the Chinese tradition or the tradition of Sinology because politics itself stands for many different things. Traditionally politics means government and government service. Confucius was continually in search of a government position where he could put his doctrines into practice for the state. Mencius was always roaming around telling his political views to rulers whether they wanted to hear them or not;
and telling the people that they could revolt against a king who was not worthy of the name "king."

Kings, Dukes and Sages are also present in the Zhuang zi, but in different ways. There are many stories where the intense hierarchy of traditional China is inverted, and these authorities go to "common people" for wisdom -- a wisdom about how to live one's life rather than how to govern others.

Politics in the Zhuang zi is not so much about kingship with the relevant passages being shuffled to Chapter 7 "Responding to the Emperors and Kings," as we are usually told. As Graham interprets [1981:94]:

This last of the Inner Chapters collects Chuang-tzu's few observations on the ideal kingship. For the Syncretist editor this would be the greatest of themes, but it is plain that to find anything remotely relevant in Chuang-tzu's literary remains he had to scrape the bottom of the barrel.

Political utterances are found throughout the text -- so perhaps our job then is to question the mystical coding of the Zhuang zi and look for political meanings in it.

The Zhuang zi is involved in a different sort of politics -- a politics of meaning and of identity. A political text then does not instruct us in how to rule so much as highlight the problems with the present order, and suggest different ways of organizing and living that might work better. As such, the Zhuang zi is a very political text. Much of it is involved in a discussion of zhi not as government, but as ordering.
One of the themes in the Zhuang zi is static oppressive ordering which appeals to books and sage kings of old. The Zhuang zi addresses this theme by talking of transformations, how the world and our relationship to it is always changing -- to be still is to die a sad death. In other words, there is revolution in the Zhuang zi, but it is not a social revolution that Mencius is famous for justifying; it is a revolution which spins. Likewise luan, which is usually glossed as "chaos", is used in the Zhuang zi in ways which involve processes of multi-ordering. These "chaotic revolutions" are often coded as mystical, but they are also a shifting of existing orders of being and orders of discourse. In short, the politics of the Zhuang zi is a politics of possibility and the space of the Zhuang zi is heterotopia.

But even this politics of possibility is often mystified. Zhuang Zhou is commonly known as a "philosopher of freedom." But where does this freedom reside and how does it operate? It is usually represented as a freedom of the mind, or freedom in relation to a cosmic whole. It is certainly not freedom in the social-political sphere. There one is regulated by Confucian rites, and Zhuang zi's freedom is seen as a separation from this (Confucian) social world.

laughter

The Zhuang zi is known for its laughter -- indeed, there is good reason why Cai Zhizhong started his "Philosophers in Comics" series with this text. Laughter is an important part of the Zhuang zi's politics of possibility which is expressed through the relationships involved in language and culture. Laughter is political because it is often involved in exploding orders to allow space for other ways of
acting. In the Preface to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault begins with such an explosive laugh ignited by "Chinese culture" [xv]:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought -- *our* thought.... This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.' In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.

In this passage, laughter has a shock value which explodes a familiar notion of the present and its political relations. The fabled Chinese encyclopedia posits a different way of understanding -- and mis/understanding -- the world. This encyclopedia entry is an example of what Foucault elsewhere calls a heterotopia. Whereas utopias "represent society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." [1986:24] Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." [24] This encyclopedia entry
is an example of heterotopia because the different representations of animals -- which do not add up to a whole by western standards -- are juxtaposed in one space. In their contradiction the definitions make us question all notions of reality, exciting a laugh from Foucault.

The Zhuang zi likewise employs stylistic devices to "simultaneously represent, contest, and invert" images to create different political meanings. Throughout the text, various characters disrupt the static order of hegemonic culture and the rites through laughter. Once this order of discourse is disrupted, the Zhuang zi's strangely funny stories allow for a possible reordering of political relationships. Hence laughter and its expression in funny stories serve complementary purposes -- laughter has the shock value to explode structures of meaning and the stories rewrite political relationships in a positive productive way.

A good example of the discursively political placement of laughter is found in the "Autumn Floods" chapter. One of the stories in this very important and very popular chapter involves a character named Gong Sunlong, a noted Logician in classical China. He is the most rational thinker and talker of the age, yet as the story shows, his is only one form of reasoning:

Gong Sunlong asked Wei Mou: "When I was young I studied the ways of the ancient sage kings. Now that I am grown I understand the practice of benevolence and righteousness. Synthesizing the similar with the different, analyzing the hard and white, I make so what is not, and make possible the

---

27This is my translation, see Graham 1981:154-156 for another translation of these passages from chapter 17.
impossible. Embarrassing the knowledge of the Hundred Schools, obstructing the debates of the multitude voices, I considered that I had achieved the utmost outstandingness. Now that I have heard the words of Zhuang zi which confuse me and make me feel strange. I do not even know how to talk about it without reaching it; or do I not know that I can't compare with it. Now I even lack what is necessary to open my beak. Dare I ask Zhuang zi's formula?"

Prince Mou sighed as he leaned on the table; looking up to the sky he laughed and said: "Haven't you heard about the frog in the well? It said to the tortoise of the Eastern Sea: 'Boy am I happy! I jump up onto the rim of the well, and then hop back in. When I dive into the water, it covers my flank and supports my jaw. When I squat in the mud it covers my feet so that the top of them disappears. Turning around I see small clams and crabs and tadpoles. None is able to be like me in this. Moreover, I am in sole possession of this cavity of water. To squat and loiter in the happiness of this well is really great! Why don't you drop by and check it out?"

The left foot of the tortoise of the Eastern Sea had not yet entered the well when its right knee was already stuck. Therefore it withdrew after a moment's hesitation. Then it told the frog about the ocean: 'A distance of 1000 miles is insufficient to summon up its great size....'

Wei Mou jams Gong Sunlong's logical discourse of formulas by laughing at his questions. This is a monovocal laugh; it has stun value to resist the logical discourse. While Gong is startled, Wei Mou uses the opening to heterotopia provided by the laughter to switch the mode of discourse from logical dialogue to a series of stories which in addition to having a point in the argument, introduce ambiguity and the necessity of interpretation. An interpretation of the "Frog in the Well" story is that it uses perspective to engage the discursive economies of desire, truth and happiness.
Wei Mou talks about a frog in a well to chide Gong that he will never learn Zhuang zi's way through a narrow-minded formula, without changing from his Logical ways of being Gong Sunlong. Wei Mou is not satisfied; he still wants to talk-story, so he gives another example:

"Haven't you heard about Yuzi from Shouling who went to Han Dan to learn how to walk gracefully? He never attained that state's style of walking, and he also lost his own style; he simply had to crawl home.

If you don't leave now, you risk forgetting what you were before, and risk forgetting your occupation."

Prince Mou again tells Gong Sunlong in an oblique way that to understand and use the teachings of Zhuang zi one must do more than just read them for formulas. Wei Mou plays on the double-coding of xing which means both "to walk" and "to conduct yourself." Because of the importance of stylistics in the Zhuang zi, one must be aware of not just what is being said, but how it is being said. To understand the Zhuang zi is much more involved than reading a formula for logical discourse or ritual action. Thus Gong Sunlong, as he presently walks/conducts himself, will have a difficult time.

The passage ends with "aghast, Gong Sunlong's jaw dropped and he couldn't close it again. His tongue fell out and he couldn't retract it. He thereupon ran away to escape." Wei Mou has opened up space for a heterotopia in this cycle of stories, but he quickly closes it down. But then that does not invalidate these arguments -- who is to say that Wei Mou is expressing what Zhuang zi really meant? The laughter opens the possibilities for discussion.
xiao

The character for laughing used in "Autumn Floods" -- xiao -- has a curious history. Indeed, let us follow Borges' example to see how reference materials can be used politically. The Zhongwen Da Zidian -- the Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Chinese Language -- which provides dated examples of the first uses of the term, helps us trace some of the discursive economies of this character. The character is tied to the Confucian canon; it is a very official term in the encyclopedic dictionary's representation.28 Some of the more interesting citations demonstrate how xiao works to restrict the meaning of laughter to heavily ordered spaces in both the linguistic and social grammar of China.

The first three definitions of xiao include citations from the Confucian Analects and from the Mencius, and the last citation comes from the History of the Han Dynasty. The first definition lists the synonyms "glad, happy." Yet this is a heavily regulated happiness which restricts the meaning of xiao. The fetters of such a happiness are apparent in the full citation for this definition from the Analects [14/13]:

The Master (Confucius) asked Gongming Jia about Gongshu Wenzi, 'Is it true that your Master never spoke, never laughed and never took anything?'

Gongming Jia answered, 'Whoever told you that exaggerated. My master spoke only when it was time for him to speak. So people never grew tired of his speaking. He laughed only when he was feeling happy. So people never

28 Two other important Chinese dictionaries -- the Ciyuan-Origins of Words and the Cihai-Sea of Words -- offer even more Confucian definitions of xiao.
grew tired of his laughing. He took only when it was right for him to take. So people never grew tired of his taking.'

The Master said, 'Can that really be the right explanation for the way he was, I wonder?' (Lau 1979:126)

As we have seen up to now, laughter is much more complex than representing "only happiness." It is involved in political relationships.

The second definition is "sneering laugh, sneering smile." One of the citations is from Mencius to exemplify ridiculous ridicule [1A/3]:

After weapons were crossed to the rolling of drums, some soldiers fled, abandoning their armour and trailing their weapons. One stopped after a hundred paces, another after fifty paces. What would you think of the latter, as one who ran only fifty paces, were to laugh at the former who ran a hundred? (Lau 1970: 51)

The main citation for the third definition, "to smile" is from the Analects [17/4]. Confucius breaks into a smile before playing with one of his disciples who has to take him seriously. The passage ends with Confucius remarking "My friends, what Yan says is right. My remark a moment ago was only made in jest." (Lau 1979:143) The smile is just a smile and is opposed to the serious talk of the proper Way.29

---

29These two passages exhaust the citations of xiao in the Analects. A third citation is found in the text, but it comes from an intertextual reference to the Book of Odes.

After writing his "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy" article, Christoph Harbsmeier published "Confucius Ridens: Humor in the Analects" which takes the same tack of looking for humor in the text. He argues for a looser interpretation of the text recognizing the power of the tradition in creating and restricting meaning. Harbsmeier even starts to question its authorship and composition before he pulls back at the end of the article. Yet Harbsmeier still uses very weak criteria for finding humor in the Analects,
The fourth definition lists an alternative writing of xiao, and the citation is from the Han Shu - the History of the Han Dynasty; it is important to note that among the 95 words listed which begin with xiao, the citations are predominantly taken from official works such as the Thirteen Classics of Confucianism and Imperial Histories. There is no mention of the Zhuang zi at all, and the citation for "laughing expression" comes from this passage of the Mencius [4A/17]: "How could they be respectful and frugal? Can an unctuous voice and a smiling countenance pass for respectfulness and frugality?" Once again, laughing is controlled and restricted on the basis of respect and rites.30

Though laughing in the Confucian Canon is quite different from that in the Zhuang zi in many ways, in other ways it is similar. In both spaces laughter is often involved in regulating relationships; it is the choice of relationships, who is regulating them and how they are being regulated that differs. In the Zhuang zi, often relationships are switched around in a Gramscian fashion to foreground the "organic intellectuals" of the working and artisan classes. It is the workmen who instruct the kings, dukes and sages rather than otherwise. At any rate, in the Zhuang zi the character xiao is often

settling on the reason/emotion distinction: everything that does not make sense rationally must be a joke. There is no room for things that just do not make sense, or make sense in a different way which does not appeal to humor. 30 I should note that the Mencius contains other citations which better bring out the complexity and evasiveness of laughter. In another story [1A/7] King Xuan of Chi uses laughter and smiles to show his confusion, and to evade answering a question. Smiling is placed in a social relation in 3B/7 which speaks of the pain of "smiling ingratiatingly." Smiling is involved in interpretation and the discursive economies of a poem in 6B/3. And smiling is used as a sign of class and sophistication in 7B/23: "the crowd was delighted, but those who were scholar-officials laughed at him."
placed in stating relationships, either establishing a hierarchy through ridicule, or in a sense breaking down that hierarchy through establishing a more equal relationship through "friendly smiles."

An example that covers both of these functions of laughter is found in "The Teacher Who is the Great Ancestor" chapter of the Zhuang zi. The story begins with three men smiling and becoming friends. When one of them dies, a funny thing happens (Graham 1981:89):

Before he was buried, Confucius heard about it and sent Zi Gong to assist at the funeral. One of the men was plaiting frames for silkworms, the other strumming a zither, and they sang in unison:

'Hey-ho Sanghu
Hey-ho Sanghu
You've gone back to being what one truly is,
But we go on being human, Oh!'

Zi Gong hurried forward and asked, "May I inquire if this is in accordance with the rites to sing with the corpse right there at your feet?"

The two men exchanged glances and laughed.

"What does he know about the meaning of the rites?"

Zi Gong scurries back to Confucius, who explains to him the differences these people exemplify in creative expression that is not bounded by rites. Confucius tells Zi Gong how these people don't depend on rites as guidelines, but that people like Confucius need them. Confucius concludes, "I am one of those condemned by the sentence of Heaven." The laughter here, like with Gong Sunlong, is

---

31 1/8, 1/15, 5/21, 17/5, 17/68, 24/85, 28/30, 29/46.
involved in regulating relationships, but it is likewise much more complex than that. Through a strange set of events in a story framework, the discourse is again switched around. The story itself is strange and odd in a "funny way," since funerals in classical China were not typically like a good Irish wake; funerals, like weddings, were intensely ritually ordered activities. Laughing and singing just did not fit in. Such a critique of a ritually ordered society and resistance to it through laughter is common in the *Zhuang zi.*

With this story, we encounter two more themes of this chapter -- the representations of Confucius in the *Zhuang zi,* and the discursive politics of the strangely funny stories in the *Zhuang zi.* These two themes are intertwined, but it is helpful to separate them for more detailed consideration before loosening my grasp again so they can snap back to an entangled state.

**Strangely Funny Stories: Gu and Grotesque Laughter**

In describing the scholarship and attitudes toward laughter in Europe, M.M. Bakhtin writing *Rabelais and His World* makes edifying comments the problematic of which addresses us here [12]:

The present day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire (and Rabelais is described as a pure satirist), or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content.

---

33 Earlier in the story the three men signal their friendship -- the only "equal" relationship in Chinese culture -- with a smile.
34 Zhuang Zhou astounds us again at his wife's funeral by singing another song. The criticism is not of his singing, but that he is singing at all. [18/15]
Though Bakhtin's present day is in the twentieth century, this description of the analysis of laughter mirrors the Confucian dictionary definitions of *xiao* which emptied consideration of laughter not only of philosophy but also of politics.

Much of the *Zhuang zi* produces laughter, but it is not the more simple laughter of happiness, sneers and smiles as the Confucian representations order it. It is an off-beat complex laughter that is produced and is productive in the *Zhuang zi* -- a laughter at things that are funny because they are strange, as in the *Funny Tales of the State of Ji*. As Milan Kundera writes: "The real geniuses of the comic are not those who make us laugh the hardest but those who reveal some unknown realm of the comic." [1988:126] This is reminiscent of Foucault's heterotopia in that the unknown realms opened by laughter are not distant, but already present in the wrinkles of our society.

The strange laughs of the *Zhuang zi* come out not just in stories surrounding *xiao*, but in tales that hover around other laughable characters such as the already mentioned *xie*,$^{35}$ and another central character *gu*. *Gu* is a very complex character that is written in strange circumstances with evasive meanings. As such *gu* allows us to question the dominant analysis of laughter and humor which constructs concepts of *xiao* as either Good or Evil. *Gu* smashes such simplifications and enables us to circumvent the rational dualities to open a heterotopia of possibility, not just in China, but in the North Atlantic as well.

---

$^{35}$ *The Funny - xie Tales of Ji*
Employing Bakhtin's provocative analysis in *Rabelais and His World*, one can refigure *gu* as grotesque laughter and add some more body into the mindful Cartesian analysis of laughter and humor demonstrated in Chapter 1. Grotesque laughter, we may recall, is not a comic spirit but issues out of the body. It is explosive like the impious farts and the screams of sexual pleasure that often induce it. These explosive bodily practices of grotesque laughter are perhaps most graphically shown in American culture through cartoons such as "Road Runner" where Wile E. Coyote continually blows himself up to produce a laugh. Or more recently, much of the comedy in the prime time cartoon "The Simpsons" relies on grotesque laughter: the strange bodies and twisted hair styles of the family, as well as a continuing parody of the violence in cartoons through the "Itchy and Scratchy Show."

*Gu* as grotesque laughter is involved in heteroglossia, and like the style of the *Zhuang zi*, "this [grotesque] laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives." [11-12] Bakhtin uses the word "grotesque," to unearth meanings both of a positive and a negative force. Again, like the *Zhuang zi*, Rabelais is involved in a grotesque humor of the body, laughter which is a regenerating force involving both death and birth, growth and decay. The metaphors are circular according to the seasons, rather than linear, change is the only universal: "The last thing one can say of the grotesque is that it is static." [52]

The character for *gu* is richly multi-coded. It actually has three pronunciations -- *hua*, *gu* and *hu*. The two main sets of entries are
for hua and gu. Hua is how the character is pronounced in Modern Chinese (Mandarin), as in huaji, the word for comedy. Yet modern dictionaries list this comedy in a negative sense -- hua is "cunning, crafty, slippery." But the productive comic senses of the word come out much more in the ancient pronunciation of the character -- gu. Unlike xiao which seems to be a Confucian term according to the dictionary representations, gu has citations from all around the classical tradition for its nine definitions. These include references to encyclopedic texts like the Guo Yu; other Daoist texts like the Huai Nan zi; Confucian texts like the Xun zi; the Mo zi; and historical texts like the Shi Ji and the History of the Latter Han dynasty. And of course, the Zhuang zi itself.

What is even more interesting is the double-coding of synonyms which surround the term. The term is wrapped up in antonymic questions of multi-ordering which tie together laughter and politics. The first citation, which comes from the Guo Yu and the Huai Nan zi, is glossed as luan-disorder. The second definition's citation comes from the Zhuang zi and is glossed as zhi-well ordered. In this way, the term gu plays out the textual politics which are found generally in the Zhuang zi.

The importance of the Zhuang zi to mis/understanding gu is brought out in the number of times the Zhuang zi is cited in the 65 compounds listed which begin with gu. The Zhuang zi which appears eight times is used the most frequently of any text.36 The laughable

---

36The next most frequent text is the Huai Nan zi, which some including A.C. Graham see as an extension of the Zhuang zi. Cf. Graham:1986, "How Much of Chuang-tzu did Chuang-tzu Write?"
strangeness of the *Zhuang zi* comes out in many of the stylistic moves which involve *gu*. One move which characterizes the *Zhuang zi* is the strange array of characters who speak the text. There is a plethora of talking animals who act in twisted parables, and two of the *gu*-compounds speak to these fabulous birds: *Gu jiu* and *Gu diao* are fabulous birds inspired by the aviary of "Xiao Yao You" (Chapter 1).

Likewise, the *Zhuang zi* is noted for making up strange and funny character names which act out some important aspect of the character. Gu is involved in two of these characters names, Younger Uncle Gu [18/19] and Gu Ji [24/26]: Young Uncle Gu is involved in a story motivated by grotesque laughter and the cyclical imagery of death and birth:

Uncle Zhi Li [Twisted Limbs] and Younger Uncle Gu [Jester] looked up at the Ming Bo Hill in the emptiness of the Kun Lun Mountains where the Yellow emperor retired. Suddenly a tumor grew up on Gu's left shoulder; startled, he looked like he detested it.

Uncle Zhi Li asked: "Do you dislike it?"

"No, how could I dislike it," Uncle Gu answered. "Our life is borrowed, and a borrowed life is temporary. Death and life are like the patterns of the night and day. You and I look at these transformations for a while and now it is I who is transforming. How could I dislike it?"

Another important citation of *gu* is in the compound *gu ji* which itself is a very complex term which we will come back to in later chapters.

---

37 See chapter 5 "De Chong Fu-The Signs of Fullness of Power" and recall Younger Uncle Gu's story.
when it carries the general meaning of "court jester." The dictionary lists five definitions of just this one term, two of which use a citation from the Zhuang zi -- one referring to a "funny talker." [24/26]

These moves and more -- such as the Zhuang zi's making up of new words to meet his needs, or using words for sage sometimes to mean sage, sometimes to mean fool -- all add to the semiotically strange laughs; the reader always is aware of the power of context.

As the citation for compound number 48 exemplifies, such a twisting of discourse can lead to a different order of understanding - - gu yi zhi yao "the glitter of the funny and strange" is defined as "when the heart-mind starts off confused, but becomes enlightened in the end." The citation is from the Zhuang zi [2/47].

One of the techniques that the Zhuang zi uses to excite the glitter of the funny and the strange is to comment on other texts. Likewise Rabelais uses grotesque humor, and images of the carnival in what Bakhtin calls a grotesque canon which runs parallel to the official canon and comments on it in strangely funny ways [86]:

Generally speaking, we can find in Rabelais' novel a sufficiently abundant material of travestied sacred texts and sayings which are scattered about his work.

Which provides a neat opening for the next section and its grotesque "funny and strange.".

---

38 "The glitter of the funny and strange is the plan of the sage. They lodge in the usual (common things) because of the uselessness of deeming with static names. This is what is called 'enlightenment.'"

39 Grotesque humor and the carnival will come up again in the next chapter where I consider laughter in resistance movements.
Confucius and the Zhuang zi

Now let us get back to the mode of storytelling to see how the funny and strange is political in the Zhuang zi. Above, we started in again with the representation of Confucius. I promised a few caveats. It worries me that I have chosen to outline the representations of Confucius, since he is but one character in Zhuang zi's bounteous text. I am afraid of reifying the dichotomy of dividing Chinese philosophy into "Daoism" and "Confucianism" when these terms came much later, and since the Zhuang zi is a source of so much of the diversity of classical Chinese thought.40

Yet I will settle in on representations of Confucius and his disciples because they are so numerous and important to the stories and arguments presented in the text. They are especially important for looking at the political laughs in the text since Confucius has come to be such an important figure not only for the Chinese tradition, but in the manipulation and management of the Zhuang zi text. As mentioned in section one, a Song dynasty scholar edited (out) the text with the representations of Confucius in mind. The struggle continues in Sinological scholarship today. A.C. Graham frames the question of Confucius in the Zhuang zi in this way [1981:17-18]:

40 See the works of Angus Graham who highlights how the Zhuang zi is a source for many of the fading strains of Chinese thought -- in some cases the Zhuang zi is the only source (or the main source) for the ideas and doctrines of thinkers, such as Hui zi and Shen Nong, who were very important in classical Chinese writing. The last chapter, "Down in the Empire" is the first history of Chinese thought [Graham 1989:31], and it is interesting how that writer ordered philosophy in very different ways than Sima Qian and Sima Tan who first wrote the taxonomy in the Shi Ji that still serves us (or plagues us) today.
...why Chuang-tzu chooses to present Confucius as sympathising in theory with his own philosophy is a puzzling question. It was common enough for thinkers of competing schools to put their own opinions into the mouths of the same legendary ancient sages, but to do this to the fully historical and comparatively recent founder of a rival school, whose doctrines are publicly known, is quite a different matter. Nobody else does it, apart from later Taoists writing new stories about Confucius. Psychological speculation is hardly in order here, but it is almost as though Confucius were a father-figure\textsuperscript{41} whose blessing the rebellious son likes to imagine would have been granted in the end.

This convenient passage shows how even the most sympathetic readers of the \emph{Zhuang zi}, such as Graham, are caught in the traditional modes which defend Confucius at the expense of a so-called Daoist text. I have already dealt with the problems of speaking of \emph{Zhuang zi} as a person in section 1, and here the problems are exacerbated with Graham speculating about authorial intent.

Graham's problems do serve to shed some light on some of the issues -- the \emph{Zhuang zi} utilizes Confucius just because his doctrines are publicly known, rather than in spite of their being publicly known. \emph{Zhuang zi} is not trying to "get Confucius right" but use a known text for parody, satire and the irony of multiplying the representations -- all for political laughs.

There is one more issue concerning Confucius to address before settling back into storytelling. There are many

\footnote{Graham [1989] also argues that Hui zi is a former teacher of \emph{Zhuang zi}; still others argue that Yang Zhu is a former teacher.}
representations of Confucius in the Zhuang zi, spread throughout the text, each addressing different issues in different ways. Sometimes Confucius is treated respectfully, as recognizing his limits.\textsuperscript{42} Sometimes he is criticizing his disciples for being what we now would call "too Confucian,"\textsuperscript{43} other times he is ridiculed for his slavish attendance to the rites.\textsuperscript{44}

The representations of Confucius are complex; here I do not wish to give a "comprehensive view" of Confucius in the Zhuang zi; it doubtful that this is possible. Rather, the politics of laughter and resistance work themselves out in some of the representations of Confucius.

The following two stories to exemplify some of the different ways that the Zhuang zi positions Confucius in relation to laughter. Sometimes laughter is in the story, sometimes it is the irony of juxatposed texts -- sometimes both these methods are used and more.

The Old Fisherman and Confucius
The first story comes from chapter 31, "the Old Fisherman." There are two things worth noting about this chapter, (a) it is one of the chapters that was excised by the Song dynasty scholar, and (b) Graham [1981:248] recognizes it as a "remarkable literary innovat[ion]" and an example of some of the first fiction in the Chinese tradition.

\textsuperscript{42}Recall Confucius's statement cited above: "I am one of those condemned by the sentence of Heaven."
\textsuperscript{43}see Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{44}see the Robber Zhi stories cited in Chapter 1.
Confucius on an excursion in the woods of Zi Wei had sat down to rest on the top of Apricot Mesa. The disciples studied their books, Confucius strummed on the zither and sang. Before the piece was half over, an old fisherman stepped down from his boat and came forward, whiskers and eyebrows glistening white, hair loose on his shoulders, hands tucked into his sleeves. He walked up from the level ground and stopped when he reached the summit, left hand resting on his knee, right hand propping his chin, listening.

When the piece finished he beckoned Zi Gong and Zi Lu. Both responded. The stranger pointed at Confucius.

'What sort would he be?'
'A gentleman of Lu,' Zi Lu replied.

The stranger asked about his clan.
'The Kong clan.'
'What does Mr. Kong do?'
Zi Lu would not reply, but Zi Gong answered,
'Mr. Gong is by nature devoutly loyal and truthful, in his personal life is benevolent and dutiful; he is embellishing Rites and Music, and codifying rules of conduct, in the first place out of loyalty to our present sovereign, and in the second to reform the common people, with the purpose of benefiting the world. That is what Mr. Kong does.'

The man had another question.
'Is he a prince with land of his own?'
'No.'
'Is he adviser to a lord or a king?'
'No.'

Then the stranger laughed and turned away, saying as he walked off,
'Benevolent he may be, but I'm afraid he won't escape with his life. By such exertions of
heart and body he is endangering the genuine in
him. Alas, how far he has diverged from the Way!'  

The text here positions Confucius and his disciples in a strange way.  
These characters find themselves having to justify Confucius and his
"accurately" described doctrines to a "commoner." The old fisherman,
who is otherwise nameless, rejects Confucius by judging him on his
own terms of government service -- and he remonstrates him with a
laugh.

The story continues to ridicule Confucius by pushing him
socially lower and lower in his own hierarchy, shifting him from a
proud teacher to a groveling student. For example, when the disciple
Zi Gong tells Confucius of the old fisherman, Confucius seems to seek
out abuse. Coming to the lakeshore,

Confucius stepped quickly back, bowed twice and
came forward.

'What do you want of me?' said the stranger.

'Just now before you went away you hinted at
something, and I am not clever enough to know
what you meant. Allow me to stand waiting in all
humility, in the hope of hearing some of your
sublime eloquence, so that your help to me will not
have been in vain.' [249]

By the end of this relatively long story, Confucius has changed. His
disciples are uncomfortable at these strange and funny shifts in
Confucius' character. The story continues with the old fisherman
refusing to take Confucius as his disciple, and thus enter into the
hierarchy of teacher and student. The fisherman replies in a way
which effaces the rigidity of rites,

'Do the best you can. I leave you! I leave you!'
Then he poled the boat out. While he lingered picking his way among the reeds, Yan Hui turned the carriage round, Zi Lu held out the strap for Confucius to pull himself up. Confucius did not turn his head. He waited until the ripples settled on the water and he did not hear the sound of the oar, before he ventured to mount.

Running beside the carriage Zi Lu asked
'I have been in your service a long time, Master, but never yet did I see you in such awe of any man you met. The lord of 1000 or of 10,000 chariots never fails when he sees you to grant you the seat and the rites proper to his peers, and even then you have a proud air. Today an old fisherman stands insolently leaning on his oar, and you, Master, bending at the waist to the angle of a chiming-stone, bow twice every time you reply. Surely you went too far? All your disciples wondered at you, Master. Why should an old fisherman deserve this?'

'Zi Lu, how hard it is to make another man of you! You have been steeped so long in Rites and Duty, but even now that rude and coarse heart of yours will not be gone.' [252-253]

The politics of this story, which is punctuated light laughter and characterized with its uncharacteristic characters, involves the politics of ordering one's live and the institutions that influence it. The Zhuangzi in this story repositions Confucius in such a way as to question what has come to be Confucianism. Confucius is not addressing political leaders with his comments, rather he is attending a nameless commoner. The critical edge of this story comes not from the reasoned argument that one might expect from a master, but from shifting the discourse to the realm of a story that is funny in
that it is strange -- once again, the critique of the hegemonic order begins with the old fisherman's laugh. After this odd episode, much like Confucius's disciples readers are left wondering just what Confucius and Confucianism mean. The critique is neither mystical nor cryptic -- Confucius's words are easy to understand, they are powerful in that they are unexpected, and thus open up possibilities for interpretation and action. The politics of government is then in many ways displaced by the politics of possibility

An Ironic Madman

The next set of passages revolve around intertextual ironies in classical Chinese texts. Jie Yu, otherwise known as the 'Madman of Chu,' is one of the characters present in both the Confucian Analects and the Zhuang zi. This madman is much like the 'outlaw' Robber Zhi whom we called on in the last chapter. Yet Jie Yu transgresses not the legal code of banditry, but the social code of reason. Jie Yu is mis/understanding and multi-ordering ways of life and relations to the State with his funny words which have the power of a jester's talk.45 Again, here I rely on Graham's interpretation. In the Analects the passage goes like this [18/5]:

Jie Yu, the madman of Chu sang as he passed
Confucius,

"Phoenix! Phoenix!
What's to be done about Power's decline?

45 See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the social and political power of jesters.
The past is not worth reproach,
The future we can still pursue.
Enough! Enough!
These days to take office is perilous."

Confucius got down from his carriage and tried to
talk with him, but the man hurried off to avoid him,
and he did not get the opportunity.

Graham notes "This ballad ironically welcomes Confucius, preaching
ideal government in a decadent age, as the phoenix which comes as
an auspicious omen when there is a sage on the throne." [1981:75]

The version in the Zhuang zi starts out much the same, but
quickly shifts to a more critical view of the present. The madman
uses poetic form to both mock and warn those who wish to change
the age through government institutions. Rather, Jie Yu shifts to one
of the Zhuang zi's most powerful themes -- the usefulness of
uselessness:

When Confucius traveled to Chu, Jie Yu the madman
of Chu, wandered at his gate crying

"Pheonix! Pheonix!
What's to be done about Power's decline?
Of the age to come we can't be sure,
To the age gone by there's no road back.

When the Empire has the Way
The sage succeeds in it.
When the Empire lacks the way
The sage survives in it.
In this time of ours, enough
If he dodges execution in it.

Good luck is lighter than a feather,
None knows how to bear its weight.
Mishap is heavier than the earth,
None knows how to get out of the way.
Enough! Enough!
Of using Power to reign over men.
Beware! Beware!
Of marking ground and bustling us inside.

Thistle, thistle,
Don't wound me as I walk.
My walk goes backward and goes crooked,
Don't wound my feet.

The trees in the mountains plunder themselves,
The grease in the flame sizzles itself.
Cinnamon has a taste,
So they hack it down.
Lacquer has a use,
So they strip it off.

All people know the uses of the useful
But no one knows the uses of the useless."

[Graham 1981:75]

In this poetic commentary and critique, the text effects a shift in many spaces for resistance and dissidence. Intertextually it is re-ordering the familiar text of the Analects away from encouraging Confucius in government to warning him to stay home. In the Zhuang zi version, Confucius does not pursue Jie Yu, but is left out of the balance of the poem while Jie Yu enters new spaces. The Zhuang zi is playing with the Analects to reproduce it -- re-present Confucius -- but with additional twists:

(a) There is a shift of looking to "common sense" and the benefits of the useful, to trying to examine what such a practice leaves out. Jie Yu's poem follows several passages in the Zhuang zi which, in a sense, trace out the politics of "usefulness." Use is figured in a relational sense, with examples of how the useful are used not
always to their best interests, for example, healthy men are
conscripted, cripples are given subsidies.46

(b) In Jie Yu's poem, the politics of possibility are once again
put into play against the politics of government. This involves a shift
out of the jurisdiction of "common sense," "logical discourse," and the
orthopedic orthodoxy of Confucius -- Jie Yu tells us "My walk goes
backward and goes crooked." The character xing for walk is also
read "conduct," just as the character dao for path is read "Way."
Hence the fourth stanza of the poem addresses how to act in such a
dangerous world where the straight and narrow path of
Confucianism often leads to execution. To talk about modes of
survival, Jie Yu twists his discourse for resistance.

(c) The discursive space is also shifted from the narrow sphere
of human relations which characterizes Confucian discourse47 to a
widened optic which includes relationships other than those human.
The examples walk into the thorny woods, and according to
Confucians into the wilds beyond civilization. The word for madman,
kuang ren, also is read as recluse. Jie Yu is limping out of the
Confucian world, but not into emptiness but into a heterotopia of
resistance.

46Zhuang zi, Chapter 4
47Analects 7/21: "The topics the Master did not speak of were strange things,
power, multi-ordering, and spirits." Confucianism is a humanist discourse
which does not address animals or the natural environment.
48Conversely Harbsmeier [1990] in his article about Confucian humor
characterizes these passages and their arguments in this way: "the infamous
Robber Zhi launches into a sizzling and totally outrageous personal attack on
the Master." [147] My question is, is the critique outrageous because it is on
"the Master"?
49Lun yu 12/11
Section III: Dissidence

The tradition of dissidence in China has a loud voice in the Zhuang zi: perhaps one that can be heard by the Chinese Writers in Exile. This is not simply because the text is critical of Confucius and the Confucianism which would later become the dominant tradition in China. Other works which challenge Confucianism have been sucked up into the strict hierarchical ordering that characterizes it.

A case in point is the Lao zi Dao De ling, the other main Daoist text. This slight text of 5,000 characters in 81 poetic chapters has had an enormous impact not only on China, but now through translation on the world. It is a very open text which is an exercise in interpretation, as James Legge -- the first English translator of both the Lao zi and the Zhuang zi -- notes: "not a single proper name occurs in the Dao De ling. There is hardly an historical allusion in it. Only one chapter, the twentieth, has somewhat of an autobiographical character." [33] The text in many ways is an abstraction, an attempt at boiling something down to its essentials. A joke among Sinologists is that reading a translation of the Dao De

---

50 The "Sayings of Confucius" comic book reproduces the Confucius myth, including his bad times, before it launches into the text of the Analects.
51 Elsewhere in the Zhuang zi these stories are reproduced in more detail. See passages in Chapter 14, Tian Yun, for examples.
52 The Lao zi is the second most translated book in the world. The first is the Bible.
53 The legend of the transmission of the text falls into this representation of it -- the story goes that Lao zi was leaving the (civilized) world in disgust when Guan Yin the gatekeeper at the Western Pass asked him to write down his ideas before he passed through.
Jing tells you more about the personality of the translator than about the text.

The style of this open text has been used for the politics of (oppressive) governing since soon after it appeared in its present form. There is a whole chapter in the Legalist text the Han Fei zi interpreting the use of the Dao De Jing in kingship. While the only reference that the Zhuang zi gets in the tradition is a short note on his obsession with heaven in the Xun zi. The Dao De Jing was quickly made into a manual of princely rule -- the oldest version of the Dao De Jing, the Mawangdui manuscript, was dug up from a prince's tomb.54

The oppressive uses of the Dao De Jing go on and on. It was utilized for governance after the fall of the Qin dynasty by the first three emperors of Han as part of what was called the Huang-Lao School.55 It was not the School of Lao-Zhuang (Lao zi and Zhuang zi) as Daoism is often called.

Lastly and perhaps most funnily strange, Ronald Reagan cited the Dao De Jing in his 1987 State of the Union address. Reagan mispronounced the Lao zi in support of his suspicion of government and ordering. But Reagan used this to extend his own notion of government.

The Zhuang zi, on the other hand, has not been used in this way largely because its stylistics exercise the usefulness of uselessness --

54This edition of the text foregrounds its governing aspects even more. It was edited as the De Dao Jing -- the Classic of Power and the Way -- rather than the Dao De Jing -- the Classic of the Way and its Power (as Arthur Waley translates it.)

55This refers to the School of the Yellow Emperor (Huang Di) and Lao zi.
the style of the text is involved in resistance too. As Legge continues his comparison of the *Lao zi* and the *Zhuang zi*: "The Books of *Zhuang zi* are of a different nature, abounding in pictures of Daoist life, in anecdotes and narratives, graphic, argumentative, often satirical." [33] The *Shi Ji* biography of Zhuang zi tells some effects of this style: "Even Kings, Dukes and Ministers were unable to use him [Zhuang zi] as a tool for their purposes." [2144]

The tradition of dissidence that knowingly or unknowingly surrounds the *Zhuang zi* comes out largely in the stylistics of "funny storytelling." The one story that the *Shi Ji* includes about Zhuang Zhou has him laughing at high ministers.\[56\]

The tradition of "funny storytelling" comes out in the *Zhuang zi* in its crafting of strange words, funny character names and the retextualization of familiar characters onto unfamiliar ground. In the *Zhuang zi* these are involved in criticism of existing orders and the ordering practice that produced them.

Examples of this tradition of resistance are numerous. The *Lie zi*, other major "Daoist text" -- probably put together in the third century A.D., 500 to 600 years after the *Zhuang zi* -- has a whole chapter named "Confucius" where he continues the resistance through ridicule of Confucius and his disciples. This is more directly

---

\[56\] There are no stories and only one laugh in the whole of the *Dao De Jing*. It is a laugh that supports my view of the politics of possibility in the *Zhuang zi* and how it tends to undermine hierarchy. Chapter 41: "When a scholar-official hears the dao (path), they conduct (walk) it action. When a middle scholar-official hears the dao, they sit where they are and forget. When a low scholar-official hears the dao, they heartily laugh at it. Without laughter, one cannot sufficiently do the dao." (my translation)
dissidence since the Confucian Canon had been in play for about 400 years when the *Lie zi* finally took the form that we have it now.

Lin Yutang, the creator of the Chinese word for humor-*yoomo*, propogated this term and its concept in "a literary fortnightly named, somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion, after the Confucian classic *The Analects.*" [Kao:267] This journal was published in the capital, Nanjing, and was related to the National Government [Kao:267]: it was their self-appointed job to play the jester to the new Kuomintang rule. There should be a place for such a magazine and such a group [of comic writers] under any government, because the targets of their good-natured attack are nothing so much as cocksureness and hypocrisy.

Lin's journal finds humor in recontextualizing both ancient mores and the contemporary political scene much as the *Zhuang zi* does.

The "funny storytelling" style comes out in contemporary Chinese authors as well. The works of Maxine Hong Kingston -- a Chinese American writer -- are littered with funny stories and strange laughter. She, like the *Zhuang zi*, defies classification -- is the text fact or fiction; biography, history, sociology or literature? They are funny stories which defy such an ordering. They are funny stories which are intensely critical of many things depending on where the laughs are placed. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's main target is patriarchy and the Confucian Chinese culture which denies girls and women. *China Men* is more involved with the issues of an anti-colonial struggle and racism that these Chinese Men found themselves in. It is an internal colonialism of Chinese in New York
and California; it is the European and American imperialism of Hawai‘i where Chinese were contract laborers.

In the following passage laughter, storytelling and the Zhuang zi all coincide. Kingston's Great Grandfather, Bak Goong, is confronting the horrors of passage to Hawai‘i stuffed aboard a freighter. While he wonders what will happen to him, and confronts another problem of modern imperialism in China -- opium and the vomit it produces [94-95]:

"Try laughing," said Bak Goong. "I'll bet you can't laugh and vomit at the same time." Laugh is another word that has the thl combination in that queer dialect....

Bak Goong thought he understood the Tao, which was everywhere and in everything, even in our excrement, which is why opium is shit. It seemed that he would have to bring his mind hard to bear in order to discriminate between sleeping and walking, work and play, yours and mine. Wars were laughable; how could a human being remember which side he was on? Fear gives us red to brighten the world, and meanings are for decoration. "Is this true?" he asked, and answered "Yes." Everything is true. He was Lao Tse's great thinker, who can embrace opposing thoughts at the same moment.

Even though Lao zi is named in Bak Goong's opium dream, it is the Zhuang zi that Kingston is largely quoting from. But that doesn't matter, for it is a story, and knowingly or unknowingly Kingston is again playing with characters and retextualizing the familiar -- all in a critical struggle, all in dissidence.
The modern Chinese text that I use more extensively -- Zhang's
_Half of Man is Woman_ -- also provides examples of funny stories that
play with the tradition. Even though Zhang's representation of
Zhuangzi is quite mystical and falls into that tradition of obscuring
the political points of the text, _Half of Man is Woman_ exhibits many
of the stylistic moves that one can trace to the _Zhuangzi_. Zhang
plays with the border between humans and other animals -- a main
countler is a talking horse. A horse which is very wise from eating
old newspapers and listening to the loudspeaker; a horse which gives
Zhang advice as one gelding to another. Zhang also plays with the
naming of his characters: "the Man Who Killed Cows by Feeding them
Too Much," the "Big Footed Female Philosopher," the "Mute."57

But most importantly to my argument, Zhang retextualizes
known historical and literary characters (again mixing fact and
fiction) in an endeavor of the main character's personal politics
involving his wife and the local party cadre. We have already
addressed this episode in considering how Zhang mystifies Zhuangzi.

Our consideration of Zhang's representation of Zhuangzi in
Section I ended with Karl Marx "strolling out from the moon."
Zhuangzi is the penultimate character in this episode, and Marx is
the ultimate character -- the one who deals with human affairs -- to
help Zhang address his cuckold problems. Zhang tried to change the
subject, to ask Marx about the future of "our country, our society."

57 In Martha Avery's translation of _Half of Man is Woman_ this character is
named "Dumbo" -- a nice twist, but one I think is inappropriate since it
conjures up images of a big-eared baby elephant with tears in its eyes, not a
peasant who has been silenced for his desires in a peculiar "mutation" which
allows him to only repeat what others have safely said.
But Marx switches it back in a wonderful Zhuang zi-an move by Zhang Xianliang which mixes east and west with laughter [145]:

"He, he ..." Marx let out a hearty laugh. "My child," he said, "you say that you have thought this matter through, but actually you haven't. The basis of Eastern philosophy is self-cultivation and the nurturing of one's nature, seeking to fulfill one's morality, to return to the natural and come back to the essence of heaven and earth to achieve a communion of humans with Nature. In my view, you should first consider it from her point of view: to treat her with equality and respect. The Western precepts are freedom and equality, Eastern precepts are ethics and reputation.... I just want to point out that you and she are husband and wife. But you are incapable of fulfilling the role of a husband. What right have you to deny her temporary happiness? You think you can forgive her because you have a high level of morality, but in fact you don't even have the right to forgive her. This kind of 'taking yourself as good' does not jibe with your Eastern philosophy's concept of 'The Way of the Sage.'"

"Yes, yes," I thought to myself. "Master, please continue talking."

"Okay," Marx said as he flipped his coattails and sat down on a stump in front of me. "First, I beg of you, I want you to treat me as an equal. Let us talk as friends from different times. The reason I call you "child" is because I am so much older than you. Here there is no such thing as Great Teacher or Master. I never advertized my own greatness before, and I certainly did not want to stop up the mouths of later people. This is really one thing that really grieves me in heaven. "The
reason that great men are great is only because you are you are kneeling before them." I remember passing on those words long ago. The pity is that later people rarely heard my words...."

"Ey!" I said with astonishment...

Marx has been positioned as teaching Chinese philosophy to a Chinese, and using the Confucian Rectification of Names to refigure Zhang's relationship to his wife. But even more interesting passages of the funny and strange follow this. Zhang is opening up critical space for dissidence by using Marx to say unorthodox things -- Zhang starts to defend the status quo of Marxism in China, but Marx cuts him short. This is the style that the Zhuang zi often uses with Confucius and his disciples. The disciples are rigidly Confucian, while Confucius is critical. This Marx story in *Half of Man is Woman* perhaps clarifies Graham's query of why Zhuang zi would talk about Confucius -- a historical figure of the recent past whose ideas were well known -- for Zhang deals with the similarly positioned and respected Marx in an effort of ironic commentary which twists accepted wisdom around. Zhang uses the irony of Marx uttering unMarxist things as a mode of critical survival.

The discussion between Marx and Zhang goes on for pages and pages. They consider the problems of the revolution and Chinese society -- yet they do it in very peculiar ways, and Marx is always laughing or smiling. For example, when Zhang wonders about the truth of Marx's words, since they can be used in such heinous ways, Marx makes some peculiar semiotic moves which again mix in Chinese philosophy. Marx replies [146-147]:

```
"I very much admire your saying in Eastern philosophy: 'when you get the meaning, you can forget the words.' If you get my 'meaning' you can forget my 'words.' But after Engels and I went to heaven, so many people then got my 'words' but forgot my 'meaning.' This is what you in Eastern philosophy call 'small knowledge does not reach up to great wisdom.' Now what can one say about truth?"

The Chinese philosophy that Marx is quoting from comes from the Zhuang zi. The second passage comes directly from the Xiao Yao You chapter. It is also hilarious to note how Marx and Engels have been positioned -- they look down upon us from heaven, when religion is reportedly the "opiate of the masses."59

Zhang is still pushing for truth and the guiding significance of Marx's teaching. Marx responds with a smile from under his great beard, and says [147]: "If anybody wants to succeed in revolutionary work, that is the methodology that should be applied within the framework of doing what one considers at the time is best to do."

With this passage the author Zhang opens up space for contextual action by using Marx's words. Zhang covers himself because the "methodology" refered to is dialectical and historical materialism, and later Marx tells us that economics is the key to understanding the world, but all the same space has been created through cracks in the existing ideology.

58 An analogous phrase in English is "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."
59 A phrase which Marx and Engels uttered in The Communist Manifesto soon after the Opium Wars, one should note.
Zhang's work in the 'superstructure' is cut out for him, and he is earnest -- so earnest that Marx laughs heartily when Zhang talks about carrying on his work [147] -- until the door to his house opens and the man his wife has been sleeping with slips out. Marx disappears, ideas and concepts disperse into the bright stars, opening doors on the ground for many struggles at the state farm. In an often sad politics of possibility, Zhang is left wondering what to do with his life. There are no ultimate answers, only possibility in heterotopia.

This story from contemporary Chinese literature serves to exemplify a mode of critique and resistance that appeals to laughter and funny stories which are ordered along the lines of the Zhuang zi's style. This shift from a "serious treatment of the issues" is not only useful because it is fun; the laughing critique and curiously funny stories also can explode the ideology of complete answers and ultimate liberation. The laughs and stories leave us wondering about just what our society is and how it functions because a funny politics of possibility and action is opened up by the explosive laughs and stories which twist our notion of society and the acceptable. Thus there is dissident resistance to the tradition be it Confucianism or Marxism.
Part II

Explosive and Implosive Laughter

Laughter
is a very important thing.

Sometimes
it's the only weapon we have.

-Roger Rabbit
Chapter 3
Laughter, Empowerment, Resistance

Revolution is not a tea party.
- Mao Zedong

If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution.
- Emma Goldman

I could believe only in a god who could dance.
- Friedrich Nietzsche

A weekly news magazine once ran a picture of a row of uniformed men shouldering guns and sporting helmets with plexiglass visors. They are looking in the direction of a group of young people wearing T-shirts and jeans and holding hands and dancing in a circle before their eyes.... They are not united by a march, like soldiers or fascist commandos; they are united by a dance like children. - Milan Kundera

If opposition is not enough, we must resist.
And if resistance is not enough, then subvert.
- Edward Abbey

Revolution; Understanding; Liberation. These three capitalized terms weave their way in an out of discourses of social change. They well up at certain points, certain dates like October 1, 1949, only to be submerged again.

To Theda Skocpol, the dean of the school of revolutionary studies, revolutions begin with state paralysis. Another void. Her functionalist attitude takes the revolution away from the people, and centers it around the state and the bureaucracy. The intense
struggles for social change thus end up with further institutionalization and bureaucratization. The revolution is again taken away from the people. Defended from the people. Skocpol (and her husband) set a fine table of revolutions; yet one rises from the table full but a bit dizzy -- the victuals proffered are a bit stale. With a focus on the state and bureaucracies, it is hard not to come to such counter-revolutionary conclusions.

Liberation is bound up in History. It is a single event before which we are bound, and after which we are set free. The Chinese term for liberation is jiefang: jie means to unravel; fang means to loosen, let go. And this is related to Understanding: liaojie -- to understand -- means to be able to unravel. Time, in China, like in Republican France and Democratic Kampuchea, is measured in terms of the date of Liberation: 1 October 1949. All events are either jiefangqian -- before liberation -- or jiefanghou -- after liberation; dates are named with the attending moral judgements.

Terms like Revolution, Understanding, Liberation are themselves enraveled in a single-ordered linear discourse of History that tends to stifle out difference, no matter how good the intentions of either History or its actors are. As Ozouf writes about the French Revolution [12]:

... it was the revolution that held up the glass in which utopia could see its true features. These were the features not of happiness but of an inflexible order that was to prepare the way for happiness.

Or as Milan Kundera writes of Czechoslovakia:
It was the first year after February 1948. A new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its
features -- they are imprinted upon my memory -- were rigid and grave. The odd thing about the gravity of those features took the form of a smile, not a frown. [1982:23]

With a focus on the Cleanliness, the Orderliness of Liberation, it is hard not to come to such counter-revolutionary conclusions.

Hence, I wonder if "revolution; understanding; order; liberation" is the best configuration to use in describing and thus in a sense prescribing avenues of social change. The view of a single-ordered, scientific, rational universe with progressive linear timelines -- on which points of liberation are dotted -- is no longer so convincing. But what are the alternatives? Counter-revolution? Reform?

Here Michel Foucault's approach is useful. Rather than choosing positions -- revolution or counter-revolution -- which take the present as given, he refigures politics in looking for new schemas of politicalization. [1980:190] Likewise, in this essay, I choose to shift the focus away from states, revolutions, and liberations to oppression, resistance and empowerment -- of people, and in a way of the worlds in which they live. There is an attendant shift from focusing in on Order, to concentrating on the tangled strands of disorder.

Ordering and Luan

Disorder. Chaos. Anarchy. These nasty terms become more palatable in Chinese. Different senses come out. Luan is the central character. Yet its sense is ambiguous. Looking over what the Chinese leadership said before and after the June 4th massacre this term crops up repeatedly. In a letter just before declaring martial law, Li
Peng stated: "The nature of this patriotic student's movement is becoming that of an armed rebellion -- *fan luan.*" [RMRB: May 22:1]

The announcement of martial law stated: "Presently the order in the capital has taken on an atmosphere of complete chaos -- *hun luan* [mixed *luan*]. The traffic and communications have been severed." [RMRB: May 22:1]

The first sentence of the statement of the martial law forces said that their mission was to: "put an end to the increasingly grave social upheaval -- *dong luan* [mobile *luan*]." [RMRB: May 22:1]

And the head line of the announcement of the massacre on 5 June included *bao luan* -- sudden and violent *luan*; the first sentence contained both *bao luan* and *dong luan.* [Wen Hui Bao]

The demonstrators were *luan-ing* Chinese society and the Four Modernizations. In a statement just before martial law, Zhao Ziyang warned: "we hope that the students are able to maintain sober minds, and be rational, restrained and orderly for the sake of the whole country..." He appeals to order and to the singular whole for social control. [RMRB May 21:1]

Looking at *luan* in classical Chinese, a different order of meaning emerges, or is recalled. According to the *Shuo Wen*, China's first lexicon dating from the second century A.D., *luan*'s synonyms are *zhi* -- to order/orderly -- and *li*-- to pattern/orderly pattern. Other classical sources reaffirm these meanings. Yet in the literature *luan* is often patterned with *zhi* as antonym. I argue that distinction here is not between order and disorder, as most maintain, but between single or hegemonic order and multi-order. Rather than

---

1RMRB is the *People's Daily - Renmin Ribao.*
disordering, *luan* is multi-ordering: *luan* is a social mis/understanding. Anarchy, in the same way refers to lacking (*an* in Greek is negative) a single determining order (*archai*). One only has chaos when one tries to impose order; in this sense Order is productive of chaos. "Why are you here," shouted the man at the straight line of tanks on June 5. "You have done nothing but create misery. My city is in chaos because of you." [Talbott:10]

The demonstrators in Tian'an Men Square were opposing the hegemonic stance of the Party. Their *luan* was found not in the disruption of traffic -- indeed, the daily reports of martial law before June 4 say the streets were peaceful -- or the huge piles of garbage, but in the demand that such things as independent student unions be recognized. The interest was in a multiplication of sources of power beyond Party sanctioned groups -- to a multi-ordered situation.

There are still problems after Liberation. Things are not suddenly unraveled: *luan* also means tangled. But viewing social change in terms of Liberation means that we can no longer name our post-revolutionary struggle. All opposition becomes counter-revolutionary. So I find it more instructive to talk in terms of empowerment for resistance to specific oppressions and centers of power. Empowerment centers on actors and movements, and their skills and tools, rather than the structures of bureaucracy as Scocpol's social(ogical) revolution does.

**Resistance**

There are many approaches to resistance. James Scott focuses on everyday forms of peasant resistance in Malaysia in his excellent
book *Weapons of the Weak*. Scott shows how peasants are empowered by their everyday practices in a continuing struggle against the spread of Modernization in the form of (imported) farm combines and the Green Revolution. He ends the book with this hopeful statement for social change outside the bounds of a social revolution [350]:

> If revolution were a rare event before the creation of such states, it now seems all but foreclosed. All the more reason, then, to respect if not celebrate, the weapons of the weak. All the more reason to see in the tenacity of self-preservation -- in ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of non-compliance, in foot dragging, in dissimulation, in resistant mutuality, in the disbelief in elite homilies, in the steady, grinding efforts to hold one's own against overwhelming odds -- a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better.

In this essay, I am involved in a specific form of resistance that Scott alludes to in this passage. Here I am looking for a form of resistance that plays with the multiplicity that is sought: laughter. Or to put it another way: I'd like to make tea parties sites of resistance.

Laughter is bound up in multiple meanings and is produced in mis/understandings. Gu and luan are interrelated in the classical texts considered in chapter 2; laughter and multi-ordering produce and reproduce each other. Laughter is a tool that can be pulled out at any time, and then retracted, if need be. It plays with meanings and is attached to more serious pieces. It examines them as it examines itself. "Laughter is not a frill but standard equipment."

[Varon:20]
Laughter is largely found in certain places which speak to its luan: poetry speaks for revolution in the sense that it is often single-voiced and utopian in character. [Bakhtin 1981] As Kundera defines it [1988:138]:

LYRICISM (and revolution). "Poetry is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed; it only desires that people merge with it. For that reason, revolutions are lyrical and in need of lyricism.

Resistance and laughter are found in the heteroglossia of modern genres like the novel which are -- like the stylistics of the Zhuang zi -- based on dissonance, differentiation and detail. "The novel is born not of the theoretical spirit but of the spirit of humor." [Kundera 1988:160]

According to Kundera's myth, laughter originated in disordering the single order of God -- a theme echoed throughout European literature. [1981:61-2]:

The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified. It was in the middle of a feast with a lot of people around and one after the other they joined in the Devil's laughter. It was terribly contagious. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed at God and the wonder of his works. He knew he had to act fast, but felt weak and defenseless. And unable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactic against him. He opened is mouth and let out a wobbly breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register... and endowed it with the opposite meaning. Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up to the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good and sensible everything on earth was.
All laughter and resistance is bound up in the power that it opposes - as Umberto Eco repeats, nobody's hands are crystal clean: Sin is like tar; when you grasp at it, it sticks to you. This speaks to Foucault's formulation of power and resistance [1980:94]: "Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."

As we have seen, Zhang Xianliang is another contemporary writer who addresses the issues of social change; I have already examined some of his laughter, but there is also luan -- it is instructive how laughter and luan both dot his text to support his story in a Seuratian style. Laughter rings through the text, as he plunges through the chaos of his life in the muddled, turbid waters of irrigated paddy fields. His smiles are full of meaning, full of qualification and modification, while Kundera's revolutionary smiles -- see the quotation at the head of the essay -- are empty. In both Zhang and Kundera, laughter is used as a tool against totalizing oppressions.

M.M. Bakhtin's work on laughter in medieval and early modern Europe serves to historicize this tactic. It is an old practice, a useful weapon of the weak. A German Romantic author writes:

Is there upon the earth a more potent means than laughter to resist the mockeries of the world and of fate? The most powerful enemy experiences terror at the sight of this satirical mask, and misfortune itself retreats before me, if I dare laugh at it. What else indeed except laughter does this earth deserve... [1968:38]

The power of laughter to undermine totalizing movements is repeated again and again. It can be explosive of institutions. And
such powers realize their position. Here a character admonishes a friend in a passage imbedded, again, in Kundera's Christian imagery:

All I'm trying to say is that no great movement designed to change the world can bear to be laughed at or belittled. Mockery is a rust that corrodes all it touches. [Kundera 1982:203]

On the other side of the revolutionary fence, Ah Q was excluded from the 1911 revolution in China when he thought "Revolt? It would be fun." [Lu:98] He was seen to be not serious enough.

As many of the passages quoted above suggest, laughter in-and-of-itself is not necessarily Good. The angel can use it as well as the Devil. So it is necessary to chart the discursive economies of laughter to see where it is being used and by whom, and for what purpose. Here I am interested in examining how laughter is used by those on the short end of power relations, how it can be used to resist seemingly totalizing oppressions.

In situations of extreme oppression, where power is laid bare, laughter may be one's only defense. As Roger Rabbit remarked: "Laughter is a very important thing; sometimes it's the only weapon we have."

It is what Foucault might call a "technology of the self" when it is used as a shield. In this passage Zhang is commenting on the sight of ruined vegetables, speaking of the hunger of the camps [31]: "Originally we would have cried, but this time however, we laughed; this result, was it from a weakening of the human spirit, or from a strengthening?" Laughter is an ambiguous practice -- the Chinese
word for comedy begins with the character for slippery -- *hua*. Lu Xun writes of a person in an analogous situation -- although the character figures that everyone is trying to eat him -- in defense he writes: "I could not help roaring with laughter I was so amused. I knew that in this laughter were courage and integrity." [Lu:11]

Using laughter as a shield is more apparent in Kundera's *The Joke*. To survive in a penal brigade, Ludvig appealed to joking, satire, biting laughter. This passage comes when he finally meets someone with whom he can let down his guard [58]:

"...I started conversation naturally, without a joke or an ironic remark, and I was surprised at how easy it was after all the masks I'd hidden behind."

Zhang and Kundera write of "communist societies" where the unity coalesces around "the state," and oppression is singular and thus more namable. In "liberal-democratic societies" oppression is harder to name. It is more multiple, and more political in that it centers around race, class, gender and other residences of difference.

Edward Said in *After the Last Sky* cites example of humor being used in the equally brutal non-communist states as a tool of resistance by Palestinians against Israelis. This interrogation is a stunning example of the contrast of monovocal with polyvocal [65]:

Israeli Broadcaster: Your name?
Captured Palestinian *fedayi* ('guerilla'): My name is Ahmed Abdel Hamid Abu Site.
I.B.: What's your movement name?
Pal.: My movement name is Abu Leil ['father of night'].

---

*2The word for comedy-huaji has the same characters as the ancient pronunciation guji.*
I.B.: Tell me, Mr. Abu Leil, to which terrorist organization do you belong?


I.B.: And when did you get involved in the terrorists' organization?

Pal.: When I first became aware of terrorism.

I.B.: And what was your mission in South Lebanon?

Pal.: My mission was terrorism... in other words, we would enter villages and just terrorize. And wherever there were women and children, we would terrorize. Everything and all we did was terrorism.

I.B.: And did you practice terrorism out of belief in a cause or simply for money?

Pal.: No, by God, just for money. What kind of cause is this anyway? Why? Is there still a cause? We sold out a long time ago.

I.B.: Tell me, where do the terrorist organizations get their money?

Pal.: From anyone who has spare money for terrorism; in other words, from the Arab regimes that support terrorism.

I.B.: What's your opinion of the terrorist Arafat?

Pal.: I swear that he's the greatest terrorist of all. He's the one who sold us and the cause out. His whole life is terrorism.

I.B.: What's your opinion of the way the Israel Defense Forces have conducted themselves?

Pal.: On my honor, we thank the Israel Defense Forces for their good treatment to each terrorist.

I.B.: Do you have advice for other terrorists who are still terrorizing and attacking the IDF?

Pal.: My advice to them is to surrender their arms to the IDF and what they'll find there is the best possible treatment.
I.B.: Lastly, Mr. Terrorist: Would you like to send a message to your family?
Pal.: I'd like to assure my family and friends that I'm in good health, and I'd also like to thank the enemy broadcasting facility for letting me speak out like this.
I.B.: You mean the Kol Israel, the Voice of Israel?
Pal.: Yes sir, thank you sir, naturally sir.

The "Captured Palestinian"'s parody is a polyvocal response, using hyperbole, to the stereotypes broadcast by the Voice of Israel. The ideological mufflers of the interrogator's mind are so powerful as to shut out any alertness to the Palestinian's parody of terrorism: Each line he speaks repeats and, by rhetorical overkill, overdoes what his interrogator wants from him. Buried in the black comedy of his performance is his message, which cannot speak straight out but must lie in wait to be perceived by others. [66]

Again, various "languages" are being spoken, and the resistance takes place on the borders between them where laughter is produced. "...there are even cassettes of it available for an evening's entertainment." [66]

Humor, Language and Resistance

Using humor as a shield has its time and place -- extreme times and places -- yet this tactic has limited use; it is highly defensive, and tends to undermine itself with practice. As Richard Terdiman puts it: "The contesters discover that the authority they sought to undermine

---

3Notice how Mr. Abu Leil loses his name by the end of the interrogation to become simply "Mr. Terrorist."
is reinforced by the very fact of its having been chosen, for opposition." [65]

The problem with using humor as a shield is that it often takes the hegemonic discourse -- the norm -- for granted, and the multiplication is involved in reflecting off of it, bouncing off of it. The dominant language is still seen to be pure, it is still used as the primary mode of discourse, and interaction is not with it, but within it. There are complete translations and thus understanding, the resistance is not so much to the Language, as being excluded from the Language.

Recalling Bakhtin's concept of language is useful here. Indeed, he contests the notion that there is a "Language," and focuses instead on the heteroglossia, the many-voiced nature of the text. Hence Language is revalued and multiplied into languages; in exemplary genres like the novel, voices are given free play, rather than one dominating.

...languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.... It might even seem that the word "language" loses all meaning in this process -- for apparently there is no single plane on which these "languages" might be juxtaposed to one another. [1981:291]

Viewing texts, and the world, in terms of heteroglossia refigures the way that one relates to them, and analyzes them. Bakhtin talks about this shift in terms of style: style is removed from language to languages. The focus is not on the unity of language and its unmediated intensionality, but on how the many languages are negotiated in a text. Analysis then centers on excavating these
languages not to see how they are mixed together to form one new language, but to see how they are juxtaposed in a dynamic system of languages. [416]

In Little Big Man, Thomas Berger presents us with an example of how one can hide behind one language of identity, while striking out with another [87]:

It was pretty early on that I come to realize that most serious situations in life, or my life anyway, were like that time I rubbed out the Crow: he spared my life because I was white, and I killed him because I was Cheyenne. There wasn't nothing else either of us could have done, and it would have been ridiculous except it was mortal.

There is power in such an irony; it is enabling and empowering.

In "Politics, Patriarchs and Laughter" Renato Rosaldo writes of how with the textual resistance of "Minority Literature" Chicanos can use their bilinguality to produce laughter as a means of resistance. Chicanos are oppressed by the Mexican/American border, but empowered by the boundary between Spanish and English. "In a trilingual text, which as a political weapon opens the critique." [74] He draws on the importance of the Border as a guiding image for Chicanos, to argue that resistance is found in the laughter emerging on the borderline between English and Spanish. Reminiscent of Bakhtin's "Discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" [1981:284], Rosaldo comments on a representative text [76]:

Galarza's work can be read with solemnity, as if it were written in a flat earnest manner. Yet the work is marked by heteroglossia, a ploy of English and Spanish, and by an
understated, often self-deprecating deadpan humor through which his political vision becomes apparent. Analogous to Berger's ironic identity, humor is a useful tactic here because it resides in the polyvocality of the text, and as such protects the speaker in the irony of languages. The dominant language hears what it wants to hear, but the minority discourse is apparent to its constituency as well.

Rosaldo takes this to be a strength of Chicano narrative form [86]: "its understated humor can readily be missed, but it is barbed."

This is similar to the interview described above by Said where language is reflected through hyperbole to generate resistance; yet the differences here are vital as well. A parallel language is being spoken by Galarza; its resistance is not a reflection, but a refraction characteristic of another culture.

Humor plays with the official culture, here the Anglo-Texan state, by appealing to a second world of comedy which is unofficial and parallel. [Bakhtin 1968:6] As Kundera writes in a passage that bears repeating throughout this dissertation [1988:126]:

I suppose that all things have their comic aspect, which in certain cases is recognized, acknowledged, utilized and in others is veiled. The real geniuses of the comic are not those who make us laugh the hardest but those who reveal some unknown realm of the comic.

Humor, and "culture," are useful in resistance when a head-on direct action, a full scale revolution seems out of the question. The "American" state is too powerful, the racism is too strong: "Doomed to lose the shooting wars, Mexican singers use their corridos to resist brute Anglo-Texan racial prejudice." [72] The resistance then is
textual, and largely takes place through the alternative languages and cultural forms of music, ballads, anecdotes and sayings, rather than the authoritative print of the Anglo media. [72-3]

In chapter 1, I utilized passages from Rosaldo as examples of how Chicanos in California resist the power of official bureaucracies through reframing, [80-81] much as the Zhuang zi plays with characters such as Confucius. The reframing is a play with the position, a mocking in another linguistic turf: "Not the figure but its ground is altered." [Terdiman:203]

The heteroglossia in such texts is often multiple as well. For Galarza, as Rosaldo quotes him, there are two sets of languages being spoken on the Border. As well as the bilinguality of Spanish and English, there is the bilinguality of serious and fun alluded to above where Galarza's text is identified as both solemn and humorous. Yet Anglo anthropologists are blinded to this by their single-ordered discourse: "ethnographers have systematically erred by taking literally jokes, metaphors and apochryphal stories." Whereas, "with a peculiar double vision and a sense of incongruity, humor itself is constituitive of Chicano culture and its political vision." [74-5]

RESISTANCE, LANGUAGE AND LAUGHTER, PART II
Many of the texts that I have cited have been caught up in the double-bind of serious-fun which is of the same structure as rational-irrational and Understanding/Misunderstanding. One way to get out of this bind is to recall Bakhtin's notion of grotesque laughter and put it in the productive social context of the Carnival.
Grotesque laughter effaces the distinction between serious and fun, to make the fun serious and the serious fun. It comes out of the medieval European carnival which turned the world upside-down and inside-out [Bakhtin 1968:11]: this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

This ambivalent laughter was involved as popular culture in resistance to "official culture." At certain times and places through the cycle of the year it was a critical practice [10]: carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.

The carnival was not just a suspension of hierarchy, but a resistance to it which opened the way for a heterotopic construction [88]: Not only does laughter make no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it.... One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state.

Bakhtin argues that the grotesque laughter of the carnival is radical precisely because of its institutional geography in Medieval Europe [71]: In the Middle Ages folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness.
Many scholars utilize Bakhtin's research on Medieval and Renaissance laughter to explain contemporary movements. Terrence Des Pres in "Holocaust Laughter?" points to the carnival and ambivalent laughter to address productive ways of writing about the Holocaust. Much like that of "Revolution," Holocaust discourse is restricted by tight generic and historical boundaries which dictate, among other things, that "the Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead." [217] Des Pres effaces these sacred boundaries respectfully through a Bakhtinian sort of laughter as one way of coming to terms with "tragic events." He treats "the energies of laughter as a further resource" for both active revolts in the Polish Ghettos and more mundane acts of resistance to Nazi occupation and extermination. He cites Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* as a discursive example of Jews coming together in a community of carnival with its characteristic inversions. As Des Pres writes [222]:

I do not mean to say that the Holocaust becomes a carnival, but rather that in a world of death the spectacle of life defending itself is open to unusual perspectives. In Bakhtin's view, carnival laughter draws its authority from utopian hunger in general. It attacks all rules, regulations, and hierarchies, and revolts against any order that claims to be preeminent or fixed. Things lofty, grand, and solemn are degraded, pulled down to earth, officialdom and worldly power first of all. At the same time, carnival laughter celebrates the regenerative powers of human community as such, life and the plenitude of life, and proceeds by way of vulgarity and excess.
Earth First!: the environmental joker

Laughter is often used for self-preservation and defensive action, or for some sort of temporary survival in horrible times. Next, I would like to see how the explosive power of laughter can be used in more active ways -- appealing to the regenerative side of the grotesque. The radical environmental movement Earth First! provides a fine bed of analysis to bring this essay back to social texts and *luan/gu* where more offensive action can be taken in a surprisingly "Bakhtinian style" which makes resistance "fun."

Earth First!’s goals and tactics, including humor, move resistance out of defensive actions to more offensive practices. Rather than just working to preserve the wilderness from the onslaught of "development" by the timber, mining, and tourist industries as mainstream environmentalists do, Earth First! works to expand and reclaim wilderness areas, to reintroduce endangered species such as the Grizzly Bear and the Wolf to their former terrains. The group strives to remythologize "nature" in a regenerative sense.

I would analogously like to expand the terrain of my analysis from using Bakhtin's linguistic and popular culture tools primarily in literary discourse to more social discourse. For as Terdiman writes, the difference between literary discourse and social discourse is that social discourse never ends, it "has no final sentence and never concludes." [60]

Earth First! is an ongoing and expanding movement which employs many languages from its minority position both in terms of mainstream politics and the environmental movement. Dave
Foreman, one of the co-founders of the movement states: "We decided to form a group that would consciously not try to gain political credibility, that would consciously not try to become part of the political establishment." [1985b:18] They have been called both "terrorists" and "insignificant" by leaders of the mainstream environmental movement.

Heteroglossia pervades Earth First! Luan characterizes it. They are often called, and also self-styled, "anarchists."4 There are no leaders in Earth First! It is not an Organization. It is a loose network of "tribes" scattered all over the West, and increasingly in the East, which are joined together by certain attitudes and goals, written down under the name of "Deep Ecology." The Earth First! Journal is the one entity that unites them, and is itself an artifact of a decentered mode of organization. The only mainline in the journal is that articles, poems, artwork must be dedicated to the spirit of deep ecology which sees all entities in this world as interrelated and homo sapiens as just one species out of many others with no primacy. "I'm acting as a part of the wilderness defending myself," says co-founder Dave Foreman. [Kane:102]

Earth First!ers are working to create a heterotopia: "I think we're developing a culture, myth and ritual." [Zakin:16] By attacking the dominant anthropocentric mode of action, Earth First! has challenged the bounds of the politics of the environment: "The idea of wilderness, after all, is the most radical in human thought -- more

---

4 Although Dave Foreman in Confessions of an Eco-Warrior [1991] denounces these anarchist elements as "the New Left" distracting EF! from biocentrism.
radical than Paine, then Marx, than Mao." [Foreman 1991:19] Or as Foreman put it another way: "The actions of Earth First! -- both the bold and the comic -- have gained attention.... We are thwarting the system, not reforming it." [1991:30] With this active heterotopia, Earth First! has succeeding in just one decade to "redefine the parameters of debate on ecological matters." [1991:215]

In the conscious construction of this heterotopia with its different set of issues, laughter has been a guiding force. Foreman argues that Earth First!'s quest to expand ecological diversity necessitates a discursive diversity -- "True Believers" are not to be trusted for their singleminded seriousness is one of the main sources of the environmental problem[20]:

Radicals frequently verge on a righteous seriousness. But we felt that if we couldn't laugh at ourselves we would be merely another bunch of dangerous fanatics who should be locked up -- like oil company executives. Not only does humor preserve individual and group sanity; it retards hubris, a major cause of environmental rape, and it is also an effective weapon.

Laughter, humor, and fun serve to multiply the heavy issues of ecology. Radical grotesque laughter has become one of the cardinal points of EF! [1991:33]:

A commitment to maintaining a sense of humor, and a joy in living. Most radicals are a dour, holier-than-thou, humorless lot. Earth First!ers strive to be different.... We laugh. We laugh at our opponents -- and, more important, we laugh at ourselves.

As such, Earth First! consciously positions itself as a resistance movement, rather than a revolutionary program.
In the spring of 1981 Earth First! made its first public resistance move at the Glen Canyon Dam -- a foolish monstrosity in the eyes of many environmentalists for its strangling of the Colorado river and drowning of ecosystems -- a 300 foot plastic sheet was unfurled over the dam simulating a giant crack in the concrete. The opening gesture was a joke appealing to grotesque laughter: destruction of the dam for a regeneration of the drowned canyon. "March 21, 1981 was the historic day. Afterwards no one could ever accuse the environmental movement of lacking a sense of humor." [Setterburg:68] And as another writer commented: "It set the tone for the Earth First! style." [in Foreman 1985b:18]

The focus on fun and laughter is deliberate. In the section of her article on "tactics strategies and effectiveness," an activist put it simply: "One attractive feature of the Earth First! movement is that we make environmentalism fun!" [March 88:9] They have the ability to explode the serious/fun distinction in political action, insisting on being both/and rather than either/or. They can speak both languages simultaneously or in succession. "More than anything, Earth Firsters take pride in their ability to laugh at themselves -- even those, like Roselle, who claim the mantle of 'revolutionary.'" [Setterburg:70]

It is this attitude that has set Earth First! off from the mainstream environmental movement which generally considers them to be "adolescents" involved in potentially dangerous "vandalism." As one official from the Sierra club commented: "They're not influential. Not many people take them seriously. They don't have much impact on the real world, on public policy
decisions." [Setterburg:71] This curious statement perhaps explains why an activist such as Dave Foreman left his job in Washington as an environmental lobbyist for the Wilderness Society. He found that the environmental movement was being sucked into the language of development which it opposed by becoming bureaucratic, "pragmatic." That the "people" to impress were now located in offices in Washington, not out in the woods. That influence came from a certain style of "seriousness." That the "real world" was not wilderness, but the arena of public policy. Earth First! "regret[s] that the environmental lobby has become less distinguishable from its adversaries in industry and government." [Zuckerman:77]

Maybe, some of us began to feel, even before Reagan's election, it was time for a new joker in the deck: a militant, uncompromising group unafraid to say what needed to be said or to back it up with stronger actions than the established organizations were willing to take. [Foreman1991:17]

The established organizations which find their laughter offensive.

Rather than reproduce the dry bureaucratic language, Earth First! consciously opens itself up to many languages, both "serious" and "humorous." These heteroglossia form both an attitude, and a box of tools, a bag of tricks, for the defense of the wilderness and its species. As Foreman explains: "When we formed Earth First! the

---

5One of the things that drove Foreman out of the mainstream environmental movement was the contradiction that such a serious approach (to highly emotional issues) was not working in favor of the conservationists. He comments simply: "They [logger, ranchers, miners] looked like fools. We looked like statesmen. They won." [1991:16]
basic concept was to try to use music, to try to use humor, passion to talk about visionary wilderness proposals." [Zakin:16]

This approach to environmentalism serves to expand the category of "people" beyond the stereotyped serious environmentalist: "It's important to have fun. Not all environmentalists are granola-crunching hippies. Some of us are rednecks and cowboys." [Sutterburg:70] Although Mike Roselle, who says this, is a former Yippie. Some say that with its 10,000 plus readership, Earth First! is the largest radical movement in the U.S.6

This perhaps demonstrates its effectiveness as a potent grassroots organization in a land where all direct political dissent has been largely domesticated. And the movement is spreading: "If Earth First! has succeeded in anything, it's in gaining the attention of the working class, which in general perceives environmentalists as hopelessly elitist." [Kane:104] And not just the working class; for as Foreman recounts the composition of one gathering [1991:25]:

Before me sat several hundred people: hippies in tie-dyed shirts and Birkenstocks, rednecks for wilderness in cowboy boots and hats, middle-class hikers in waffle stompers, graybeards and children. The diversity was impressive.

With humor, and fun, this diverse group of beer and Perrier drinking folks can speak many languages, singing and belching in many classes and residences.

6Unfortunately the F.B.I. has recognized this and has infiltrated the movement to an astonishing degree, "spen[ding] over $2 million in an attempt to frame me for "conspiracy" and brand the Earth First! movement as "terrorists." [Foreman 1991:128]
tactics: empowerment

What sets Earth First! apart is its different store of tactics:
We believed that new tactics were needed -- something more than commenting on dreary environmental-impact statements and writing letters to members of Congress. Politics in the streets. Civil disobedience. Media stunts. Holding the villains up to ridicule. Using music to charge the cause. [Foreman 1991:19]

To conclude this chapter on resistance and empowerment, I would like to do a brief stylistic analysis of some of the characteristic tactics used by Earth First! I will largely focus on laughter and fun as tactics of empowerment for resistance; anyone can tell a joke, not everyone can fly a helicopter gunship. The investment is much less, the payoff potentially much more.

Guerilla theatre is a favorite tactic of the movement. Typically, the developers and their actions are retextualized to undermine their arguments. As Terdiman states [201]:
What had previously been agreed to as socially effective language, carrying the unmistakable cachet of authority, upon retextualization in their texts [here in guerilla theatre] comes to be perceived in its grotesque intellectual poverty; it then becomes licit -- indeed imperative to withdraw assent to its truth.

Through guerilla theater, the obscenity of talk of short term gains in terms of profits and jobs for locals is demonstrated. Earth First!'s first public action at the Glen Canyon Dam is one example of the power of laughter in guerilla theater. Dave Foreman reports that the show went on even as the "authorities" tried to close down the demonstration: "While they questioned Howie Wolke and me, and tried to disperse the illegal assembly, outlaw country singer Johnny
Sagebrush led the demonstrators in song for another twenty minutes." [1991:22]

There have even been guerilla theater demonstrations on the streets of Honolulu. On Halloween 1989 activists donned costumes to protest Geothermal Development. Development was retextualized as the rape and murder of the environment. The mountain came alive with Pele. Trees were anthropomorphized to screech out in pain with the destruction of the tropical rainforest. Death dances around with glee, cheering on the Aloha shirts. As Bakhtin puts it, the rogue unmasked people of position -- Hawaiian Electric -- with re-accentuation in an atmosphere of gay deception. [1981:408]

Earth First! is notorious for acting out grotesque humor, reframing the questions through an inversion of the "Natural Order" to make nature into a more multi-ordered -- and diverse -- space. Firstly, it often up-ends the biological heirarchy dictated by humanity. In guerilla theatre and road blockades a common tactic is to switch places with animals, to dress up as a Grizzly bear in Yellowstone. This appeal to laughter in a grotesque style is very convincing. It is always a media event, and campers stop to watch and take pictures.

The Earth First! Journal is another important space where humor is employed as a tactic. Though because of its decentered style and format as an artifact of luan it is difficult to generalize about the journal, one can safely say that it has its own unique attitude characterized by irreverence and humor. It has hard hitting articles about the current events of environmentalism, ones which address and radicalize "childhood skills" to stop logging such as tree-
climbing, as in the "platforms across America" movement of August 1989.

The journal is full of articles which use impertinent metaphors to make their point. There is an article that associates approaches to environmentalism with a man's choice to wear boxer shorts or jockey shorts: should he look good for now in tight fitting jockey shorts and risk sterility, or should he wear baggy boxers? [1989:21] This reframes the question in a more laughable mode the ends of environmentalism as stated here more conventionally:

Earth First! has led the effort to reframe the question of wilderness preservation from an aesthetic and utilitarian one to an ecological one, from a focus on scenery and recreation to a focus on biological diversity. [Foreman 1991:215]

Cartoons in a carnivalesque Gary Larson style dot the text: they shift the issues around to put humans in the place of animals or plants.

Each issue contains regular columns which treat serious issues in a comic style -- as in Rosaldo's Chicano narrative, there is always a barb. There is also an appeal to what Bakhtin calls the materialization of laughter: it is produced in the lower body. The Letter to the Editor column is called "Dear Shit Fer Brains." Tribal Lore's "Shit Happens in San Diego" tells of fresh cow dung being dumped on a beautiful Forest Service carpet with a fact sheet about overgrazing on public lands attached. The Nemesis News Net collects snippets of grotesque humor. It is from columns like this that Earth First! gets the reputation of being misanthropic. The Nemesis News Net is a collection of stories of the grotesque power of animals -- the power of a squirrel to stop a stockmarket by shorting out the power
system; the power of a snake to close a factory in India; the power of
dolphins to save swimmers. Things are switched around, animals are
striking back at humans: snake downs plane; bluefish attack
swimmers; alligator eats snorkeler; eagle disables jet. [Eostar 1988]

Even though most of the stories are sad and brutal, they are also
ambivalently laughable.

Even with all this play, the editors of the journal did not think
it was enough -- "Earth First! has been too dry and depressing
lately." -- so the April 1, 19907 issue includes a tabloid called "Mirth
First!" which contains some wonderful examples of what Terdiman
would call re/citation. This tactic of resistance through counter-
discourse reproduces the opposition's stance in the full arrogence of
its hegemony in order to undermine it. If ideology is characterized
by its ubiquity and naturalness, then its re/citation subverts it
through fragmentation. [210-212]

The main target of the first page is self-criticism and a
grotesque guard against the "True Believer" factor. The first article
of Mirth First! is entitled "We'll Show Them How It's Done." Subtitle:
Intense Personal Observations on the Third World Environment. It is
part of the MF! Travel Guide. The second article is called
"COMPLETING THE LORD'S WORK." Languages of humor are criss-
crossing all over the text.[1989:19]

Another important part of the movement is ecotage -- sabotage
in defense of the wilderness. This is not officially a part of Earth
First!, but then nothing is officially part of Earth First! It is not a

policy, but it is not denied, and is facilitated through the Ned Ludd column of the journal. As well as, editor Dave Foreman's classic handbook of ecotage, *Ecodefense: a Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*.

Ecotage is the most active aspect of Earth First! where people engage in civil disobedience to fight the forces of development as "Eco-warriors." Ecotage consists of activities such as spiking forests - driving nails into trees to make them difficult to mill; burning or cutting down billboards; disabling construction vehicles; pulling up survey stakes and seismographic lines; and propaganda. "Ecotage is a way someone can empower himself." [in Malinowski:568] In *Confessions*, Foreman characterizes Monkeywrenching as "a campaign of restistance;" [113] with one of its principles being [115]: *Monkeywrenching is not revolutionary*. It does not aim to overthrow any social, political, or economic system. It is merely nonviolent self-defense of the wild."

Though all of this is serious and for the most part illegal and potentially dangerous since the opposition often carries guns and does not hesitate to use violence, fun is an integral part of the activity. The following passages from the *Field Guide* exemplify this mixing of the languages of serious and fun:

---

8It is interesting to note that all Earth First! documents are written in the spirit of humor, yet Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkeywrench Gang*, which inspired the movement, largely fails in this respect. Abbey tries to write a funny book, yet it has the dry singular style of a manifesto, while the EF! manifestos insist on humor and are multi-voiced. For example, Dave Foreman's book *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* is a personal account of the wilderness, a history of environmentalism, a political-economics of the Western U.S., as well as a well-researched policy proposal.
It is time for women and men, individually and in small
groups, to act heroically and admittedly illegally in
defense of the wild, to put a monkey wrench into the
gears of the machine destroying natural diversity. This
strategic monkeywrenching can be safe, it can be easy, it
can be fun... [10]

*MONKEYWRENCHING IS FUN
Although it is serious and potentially dangerous activity,
monkeywrenching is also fun -- there is a rush of
excitement, a sense of accomplishment, and unparalleled
comraderie from creeping about in the night resisting
those "alien forces from Houston, Tokyo, Washington D.C.,
and the Pentagon." As Ed Abbey says, "Enjoy, shipmates,
enjoy." [12]

Humor is found throughout the book as part of the empowering of
ecotage. The editors cover themselves against lawsuit in the
re/citation style of what they call the "STANDARD DISCLAIMER"
which is repeated in the introduction [2]:

Of course, this book is for entertainment purposes only.
No one involved with this project in any form encourages
anyone to do any of the things described herein. We are
all fat and out-of-shape (and would rather drink beer
and watch TV than go out into the nasty, old outdoors).
We're just hoping to make a buck with this book.

In a section on how to disable a diesel engine, the author, Mr.
Goodwrench deals humorously with many of the issues of scholarship
of social change raised in works such as James Scott's Weapons of the
Weak. How ethical, or here useful, is it to publish tactics where the
authorities can read them as well as subversives?

Now, you see, the problem is everytime one of the tricks
I know is printed, it warns all the pro-development
people about what to look for. Like if I say that diesel
engines don't like water, then all the paranoid diesel engine guys who read this would figure out ways to protect their equipment. Well... I guess a lot of assholes wouldn't so... [72]

The difference here between Scott and Mr. Goodwrench is that Mr. Goodwrench decides that more good than harm will come from his writing. He is publishing in a clearinghouse for tactics. Scott, on the other hand, is solely in the academic arena -- the question is not one of effectiveness but of morality -- for the agents of power go to school to learn control methods along with forces of resistance. The tactics he describes in *Weapons of the Weak* are everyday practices; the Malaysian peasants already know them, and hence can only suffer from their publication.9

Mr. Goodwrench also uses irreverent humor to explain his tactics, and throws in practical punchlines such as "Another good way to use water [to disable a diesel engine] is to push the machine off a cliff into a lake." [72]

Fun as an act of resistance comes out in the chapter on "Miscellaneous Deviltry."

In this chapter, we look at a potpourri of tricks in the monkeywrencher's bag. Smoke bombs and stinkers, lock jamming, political fun and games, returning trash -- this is where the ecoteur can have some fun! After all, we do need to let our hair down once in a while. Enjoy! But don't forget the security. [104]

Here simple tactics which undermine the opposition are described. Often this deviltry engages using developer's own resources against

---

9To address this problem, since I am writing in the academic arena as well, I have drawn only from already published and well known sources. I have not said anything new about the tactics.
them, e.g. manipulating business reply mail and fund raising events for politicians. Creativity and a sense of humor are put to political use.

afterword

Let us now stop and look back at what I have written in this chapter; it may be a blur of quotes from all over the disciplinary and geographic world, starting out overseas and then returning home, but that was one of my purposes. I hope that this has been a productive example of luan/gu and mis/understanding. With resistance there is no final resting place, no conclusion. Rather what one must work towards is accumulating a bag of tricks which is broad enough to address the diverse situations that one finds oneself in.

Laughter is a very powerful element in this bag of tricks. It is useful and effective in social change. As Herzen says: "Laughter contains something revolutionary... Voltaire's laughter was more destructive than Rousseau's weeping." [in Bakhtin 1968:92] Here, of course, I argue that laughter is a form of resistance because of the corrosive qualities of its heteroglossia. It is a very persuasive tool, it is highly contagious. And it is feared by those in power who have defended their position on the basis of abstractions and rationality. "In the midst of the loftiest reflections on the nothingness of things, on death, infinity, and so on, I find nothing real except the horrible fear of being laughed at." [Stendhal:414]

Laughter is a particularly useful tool in that it is a part of what it is fighting for -- laughter celebrates difference. Earth First! in particular shows how laughter can attend a respect for diversity and active possibility. As such, laughter grows out of multiplicity and
reproduces it, rather than reproducing the repression of difference, which unfortunately characterizes what has come to be called "serious revolution." Act out the world that you want, they tell us: and laughter can also be a part of that happiness; critical smiles can still turn up at their edges.
Chapter 4

Court Jesters, Johnny Carson and
The Myth of Political Humor

Up until now this dissertation has been concerned with the politics of laughter, figuring it in terms of literary dissidence and social resistance as a potentially powerful force. Yet, thus far the topics considered have largely avoided what is generally accepted as "political humor" -- editorial cartoons, stand-up comics, and the humorous anecdotes of the likes of former president Ronald Reagan. I have been avoiding what is normally taken as political humor so as to look to a different sort of politics -- a politics of possibility, a politics of subversion -- which operates with empowerment and resistance.

In this chapter, let us shift the optic back from the politics of the periphery to examine the center in order to show the dangers involved in a trust in "political humor," for the carnival does not go on forever. The Devil can use laughter just as well as the Angel.

Though Revolutions have been presented as dour and humorless in chapter 3, political humor is commonly seen as liberating. Many argue that humor and comedy are a sign of a free and democratic society, one where there is tolerance and an appreciation of many different views in a pluralistic political culture. In modern culture, court jesters are taken as a sign of licensed speech. These points have already been suggested in the preceding
chapters, but here let us address them in more detail to trace out this popular myth and its discursive economies.

Perhaps political humor is not as nice and pretty as "common sense" tells us; the laughs are not as clean and democratic as the philosophers in Chapter 1 would like us to believe. Much of political humor is what I have termed monovocal -- rather than opening up possibility, it slams the door on discourse of difference. With monovocal laughter there is one code, one way of Understanding that is hegemonic: it laughs to reinforce itself. It is conservative laughter in that it does not question the present, only ridicules the idiosyncracies of the agency of some wayward individual, who becomes the clown or the fool.

Ronald Reagan's many stories and anecdotes can serve as examples of such a monovocal laughter in "political humor": he shut down consideration of his age in the 1980 presidential campaign against Jimmy Carter by joking that he did not want to make an issue of the youth of his opponent -- in a way, scripting Carter and his campaign as the fool. Reagan thus ended consideration of his [old] age with that simple joke. Such political humor is involved in a politics of distraction rather than a politics of possibility.

The myth of political humor operates in various ways. Here the myth operates, not by suppressing speech, but by authorizing a cacophony of voices which limit themselves to certain topics, as such, myth is a productive oppression. Most instances of "political humor" operate as myths involved in projects to conserve the status quo rather than question it. Certainly, not all "political humor" is
reactionary -- Doonesbury and Bloom County at times have each pointed to many of the contradictions in American society.

Let us examine how political humor works in the present by going to the past. By historicizing political humor through the image of the court jester, we can show how comedy is tied to power, and thus usually serves power. The jesters certainly criticized their patron's position; yet a critique of the foibles of this person often actually served to uphold the extant structure of authority. Hence, the fool operates as a government institution. Demonstrating this involves a switch from the popular culture and popular movements of Chapter 3 to the high culture of the courts of China, Europe and Washington. This figuration of "political humor" enables us to reexamine some of the contemporary popular representations of this form in terms of the role they play in the political economics of the U.S. -- i.e. in the last section get back to Johnny Carson and popular culture as the chapter title promises.

Democratic Humor

First, one of the myths of political humor: American political humor. Of course, like any good myth, it is a complex weaving of languages and stories which are sometimes contradictory but always deployed for a purpose. As Roland Barthes writes in "Mythology Today" [132]:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.
Indeed, even in our critical reading of the myth of political humor, few "facts" will be contested. It is how these "facts" are represented and woven into a fabric of meaning which comes to be common sense that carries the political weight. Yet these same "facts" can be unraveled and woven into new texts with different politics, a task that we will return to at the end of the chapter.

According to the myth of political humor, such laughing is judged morally to be a Good thing. Sigmund Freud recounts Jean Paul Richter who writes [11]: "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom." As part of our modern rational society, the analysis of humor effaces the ideological differences between liberals and marxists. Both Charles E. Schutz, an american liberal, and Francis Hearn, a marxist critical theorist, utilize many of the same images in describing and analyzing humor and play. Schutz states that "political humor is often a highly rational project," [7] which is part of "rational and purposeful communication." [8] Hearn argues this position more rigorously, utilizing the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas to refigure play as a rational means of political/communicative action.

Hearn relates play in this rationalized society to liberation and freedom through the mediation of language. [147] The conclusion to his article "Toward a Critical Theory of Play" -- one of the first theoretically informed analyses of play and humor -- is a further call for rationality in the utilization of these cultural possibilities and tools. It reads,
Yet, the playful celebration of freedom is nonrational in origin and, by itself, incapable of producing human emancipation. Ultimately, the celebration of freedom must receive rational articulation, the playful circumvention of conventional constraints must be committed to the search for truth. In short, play must be informed by critical discourse. For in play we learn to be equal. [160][1] Schutz, in *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Ervin*, specifically studies the humor found in politics. He examines the canon of political philosophy and contemporary politics to apply theories of humor in an effort to see what "insights into the problems of man's governance" they can yield. [26] His conclusion is that Democracy and humor are happily intertwined, and that this is rational: "The concomitance of political comedy and democratic politics is natural and functional." [333] Schutz argues that political humor demonstrates the strength of a society in that "the permissiveness of political comedy would require a considerable measure of political freedom." [37] For example, *The Analects*, a Chinese humor magazine which was active in Shanghai of the 1930s, was seen in this way [Kao:267]:

it was their self-appointed job to play the jester to the new Kuomintang rule. There should be a place for such a magazine and such a group [of comic writers] under any government, because the targets of their good-natured attack are nothing so much as cocksureness and hypocrisy.

[1] Though Hearn ends by deploying these generalities of critical theory, one should note that in the article he also talks of creating communities for resistance, citing examples of workers using play to undermine capital.
This is a common and powerful argument; there are numerous
citations of comedy being silenced in totalitarian regimes. One
example is found is a book entitled *Forbidden Laughter (Soviet
Underground Jokes)*, which, as the title page tells us, was "collected
and smuggled across the Soviet border in a false-bottomed box
(known as a 'skull')". On the Tonight show in May 1991, Johnny
Carson showed a similar attitude about freedom and political humor
when he answered some questions from the audience. The first one
was from some visiting Estonians. They simply asked him who, and
more importantly what, he was. "I do this for a living," Carson
answered. And after a pause, he asked if they didn't have people
like him in Estonia; "I guess they're having some problems over
there," was Carson's response to their silence. In other words, a lack
of television stand-up comedians is taken as evidence of oppression.

Even more to the point is a newspaper article published in
1989 about the opening of a comedy club in Moscow:

In one of the ironies of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or
greater openness, he has become the butt of jokes by a
growing group of fearless comics, who once could not
have dreamed of mocking the country's leader -- at least
not in public and not while he was alive. [Goldberg:E4]

The tolerance of political jokes publicly pointed directly at leaders
like Gorbachev is given as proof that Soviet society is "opening up,"
acting out Glastnost.

Schutz bases his arguments of the resonance of democracy and
political humor on notions of community. He reasons that laughter is

---

2Recently I have also heard of another book from this genre. Its title should
be self-explanatory: *Do you call this living: Eastern European political jokes.*
a peculiarly human affliction, and that it is constructive of community. As Henri Bergson, in his classic work *Laughter*, analogously writes, "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" [65] which "pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement." [73] Hearn likewise talks of play, community and a "generic human bond." [151]

Schutz argues further that one of the social functions of political humor is to civilize conflict, and diffuse violence. He cites the psychotherapy of Freud to argue throughout the book that comic aggression stops open aggression. As he writes in the conclusion,

To view something humorously is generally to cease to regard it as an enemy. That at which one can laugh is no longer fully threatening, and the very pleasure of the humor gives one some appreciation of its source. To laugh at someone in political humor is a step toward community with him. [331]

Political humor can actually heal social wounds, and end conflict: "Politics abstains from force and violence; humor mocks social warfare and alleviates its pressure." [298]

In the concluding chapter, Schutz brings it all together to explain the "positive negativity of political humor." "Above all, the dominant note of political humor is its negativity, and therein is its positive contribution to politics." [297] Through the human bonding process the "positive negativity of political humor; its very naysaying maintains and strengthens politics." [14]

With the second reading of Schutz's text, his analysis begins to break down in familiar ways. What is "politics," "democracy," where
are "political regimes"? He rather uncritically draws global generalizations about political humor from American electoral politics, which he himself admits concerns a very narrow range of issues. In so doing, Schutz reifies "the way we do things here" in the U.S. as both morally good and rationally sound.

Schutz exemplifies a commonly held view by speaking/laughing for the politics of the Enlightenment, of democracy and equality and social progress. Rational political humor can aid in the achievement of these goals through a liberation of laughs in political space. But, once again, the Major Generalizations that Schutz makes serve erase differences and efface existing violence, just as the smart bombs of Major General Scharzkoff silently destroyed another "civilization."

A case which illustrates the silencing powers of such laughter is the position of women in Schutz's text. They have none. But more than that, his generalizations explicitly exclude women. Schutz theorizes in terms of the subtitle "PHALLIC HUMOR AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS." He speaks of the universals of obscene humor "that interest and intrigue all men." He philologizes the word "comedy" tracing it to a Greek "phallic procession." [14, 34]

Perhaps "Man" in Schutz's text is taken uncritically in the sense of "human" or "people." Yet the images he uses are heavily gendered, and heavily gendered as "male." Consider this passage from the final page of the text:

In conclusion, the democratic nature of political humor is as clear as the demand for democracy in politics. As man is social, so does he speak and think; so also does he laugh. The distinctive manliness of his laughter is due to
his distinctive sociability. His highest humor is of his language and reason, and is found in his politics.

Humor, democracy, community, language and reason are positioned in the politics of "manliness," a very gendered term.

Gendered laughter will be addressed again in Chapter 5 which utilizes feminist theory. Yet this critique is useful here to point out some of the oppression in the myth of political humor, and how such myths can support institutions such as Patriarchy.\(^3\)

The point here is to suggest that political humor, as Schutz and others have figured it, does not serve to maintain and strengthen politics as Schutz guarantees [14] but merely serves to maintain and strengthen existing political institutions. Or put another way, political humor not only is oppressive thematically -- i.e. according to gender or class -- but it has structural imperatives which can affect all people who are subject to power regardless of gender or race or other difference. To argue this point, I will venture to ancient China and medieval Europe\(^4\) to examine other figurations of laughter and power and see how they function in relation to the hegemonic political institutions -- to wander back before the Enlightenment with its democracy and rationality, and see what the laughs mean then and there.

\(^3\) The myth of Political Humor also supports class structures where the "leveling process of political humor" often acts in the service of middle class culture.

\(^4\) There are substantial bodies of work that deal with "Tricksters" in African cultures, for example Robert Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa* which I appealed to in chapter one. Likewise, Native American cultures also have many trickster images. I utilize the historical narratives of China and Europe because they help to bring out the institutional power relationships involved more clearly for me.
Is There A Jester in the Court?

Court Jesters are a peculiar phenomena which have produced their own myths of a multi-faced reality. There are at least two narratives which appeal to this curious tradition of the past where reason and madness were effaced in the figure of the Fool. I will initially separate these two threads in an effort to politicize this dancing character: first the myth of licensed free speech, and then the history of servitude.

The powerful notion of the Jester rests on the oxymoron of the "wise-fool" -- the sophomore. In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler argues along these lines. In the frontispiece to this very scientific and psychological text, Koestler positions the sage, the artist and the jester in a triptych relating their creative processes "which shade into each other without sharp boundaries" in a logical grand scheme.

He relates humor with Understanding through an analysis of the words "wit" and "jester" [50]:

'Wit' stems from *witan*, understanding; whose roots go back to Sanskrit *veda*, knowledge. The German *Witz* means both joke and acumen.... The word 'jester', too, has a respectable ancestry.... With the coming of the Renaissance, satire tended to replace the epics of chivalry, and in the sixteenth century the heroic 'geste' turned into 'jest.'

Erasmus was perhaps the first scholar to suggest the "wise-fool" image in his *In Praise of Folly*. In both mode and example, Erasmus

---

5 The ironic positioning of the Fool comes out well in French where *folie* means both madness and folly, both anger and happiness in american parlance.
acts out the 'wise-fool' effacing the distinction in passages like this [18]: "I was certain none of you is so wise, or rather foolish -- no, I mean wise -- as to be of that opinion." Throughout the text, Erasmus curiously argues that generally the wise are failures, and the foolish are successful: to be wise is to be unhappy. The stylistics of the text contribute to the argument: Erasmus frames himself as Folly. The first three words of the text are "FOLLY HERSELF SPEAKS;"

This image of the wise-fool was popularized in the notion of the medieval and renaissance court jester by William Shakespeare. His plays contain perhaps the four most famous fools: Touchstone, Feste, Lavache and Lear's fool. Robert Armin, the actor who played the fool in many of Shakespeare's productions, took a special interest in historical jesters, writing the book Foole Upon Foole in 1600. Armin is said to have had an influence in how Shakespeare wrote his jester characters. It is from Armin's book that we draw much of our notion of the role that a fool played in a king's court.

Court Jesters enjoyed a special relationship to the king. They generally had a license to speak whatever came into their head. Erasmus writes [55]:

In, fact, even the mightiest monarchs are so delighted with them that without these fools some of them can neither eat breakfast, nor make their entry, nor even so much as survive a single hour. And they value these simpletons far more than those dour wisemen, though it is true that they maintain some of them too, for the sake of appearances....fools provide the very thing for which princes are always on the lookout: jokes, laughs, guffaws, fun. And don't forget another talent, by no means
contemptible, that is peculiar to fools: they alone speak the plain, unvarnished truth.

There are many stories which show a jester as the only person who could counsel a stubborn king, and as such the myth of the court jester suggests that jesters could act as a check on the whimsical power of absolute monarchy. Erasmus continues [56]:

kings do hate the truth. But my fools, on the other hand, have a marvelous faculty of giving pleasure not only when they speak the truth but even when they utter open reproaches, so that the very same statement which would have cost a wiseman his life causes unbelievable pleasure if spoken by a fool.

And as Robert Goldsmith writes in his consideration of jesters in Shakespeare [7):
The fool of tradition, however, was something more than a humorous entertainer; he was also the licensed critic of his master and his fellows. Since he was not held accountable for what his tongue wagged, the fool might clatter or speak unwelcome truths with comparative impunity.

Indeed, John Doran, in The History of Court Fools, writes that "Fools were free to speak before there was a liberty of the press or even a press at all." [51] As Shakespeare reportedly wrote, "Many a Truth is spoken through Jest."

Will Somers is an historical example of the power of the court jester. He was acting in the very dangerous court of Henry VIII, a king not known for his tolerance or patience. Will, not only survived through his wits, but is still celebrated for his wit. There is one story which tells how Will jested Cardinal Wolsey out of ten pounds: Will came upon the King and the Cardinal eating dinner, and asked the
King if he could borrow ten pounds to pay the Cardinal's debts. Indignant, the Cardinal claimed that he owed no one. Will then asks the Cardinal for the money, saying that he will repay him two-fold if he is not true in repaying the Cardinal's debts. The Cardinal agrees. Wil goes to the gate, and distributes it to the poore, and brought the empty bag: there is thy bag againe says hee, and thy creditors are satisfied, and my word out of danger. 

Who received it sayes the King, the Bruer or the Baker? neyther Harry sayes Will Somers: but Cardinal answere me one thing. To whom doest thou owe thy soule? to God quoth he: to whom they wealth? to the poore sayes hee: take thy forfeit Harry sayes the foole, open confession open pennance, his head is thine, for to the poore at the gate I payde his debt, which he yeeldes is due:.... The king laught at the jest, and so did the Cardinall for a shew, but it greeved him to jest away ten pound so: [Armin:130]

Will Somers was taking part in the struggle between the King and the Cardinal, to the delight of the King. Some credit Somers in aiding in the eventual downfall of Wolsey. [Welsford: 168]

Archie Armstrong is another British court jester who was known for his political influence in the reign of King James. He is known as one of the wildest court jesters who would often "make mischief and interfere with politics." [Welsford:172] He finally pushed his "meddling influence" too far, and was banished from the court. Still Archie roamed freely around London, living off of the capital and land that he had accumulated during his lucrative career as the jester to the king.
Ancient China also has curious jesters who maintained a special place in the court. Stories of these figures are accumulated in two of the earliest histories (dating from the first and second centuries B.C.) of the place that we now call China: the Shi Ji -- *Historical Records* and the Qian Han Shu -- *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. The first story is about a Jester named Zhan who served in the court of the First Emperor of Qin -- a person known for his ruthlessness and cruelty -- it was he who ordered the book burning [*Shi Ji*:3202]:

Jester Zhan was a dwarf in the court of Qin. He was very good at telling stories which produced laughter, and many of his words contained profound truths....

Once Shi Huang [the First Emperor] discussed with this subordinates his wish to expand the hunting preserve. Eastwards it would reach to Hankou and west to Yong and Chen-cang. Jester Zhan said: "Marvelous! You'd better raise lots of birds of prey and wild beasts in it. Suppose the enemy comes from the east, it would be enough if you ordered the moose and deer to gore them." Because of this reason, Shi Huang ceased his action.

The notes to the text of Zhan's stories explain his position. The word for jester in classical Chinese is *gu ji*. *Gu ji* -- the modern Chinese word for comedy⁶ -- means many things including sarcastic humor and remonstrating humor. The word is part of a metaphor for preparing liquor: originally it signified a wine filter which separated out the dregs from the liquid. *Gu ji* refers to the ability to make pleasing words flow from your mouth constantly like the methodical day long filtering of wine. "In speaking of words in a complete composition, expression is never exhausted which is just like the sieve's filtering of wine." [*Shi Ji*:3201]

⁶Though in Mandarin Chinese the character for *gu* is pronounced *hua*. 
As in the stories from Europe, the jester is known for his -- I found no records of female jesters -- ability to reach an otherwise unreachable ear, and as the above story exemplifies, remonstrate the emperor through humor. The following passage again attests to the jester's special position; it concerns Dongfang Shuo, a jester for the Martial Emperor of the Han dynasty -- another surly character: he castrated Sima Qian, the writer of the *Historical Records*. Shuo seems to have been much more involved in influencing the politics of his time than the other jesters, [Watson:94-5]:

Though Shuo was given to jests and buffoonery, he would on occasion observe the emperor's mood and, if he found it right, would speak out boldly in severe reprimand. The emperor always listened to what he had to say. From the highest nobles and office-holders on down, Shuo would bait and banter with everyone, betraying no hint of subservience. Because of his glib and witty responses, the emperor was fond of asking him questions.

This image of the jester also is utilized in contemporary American literature. The positioning Jack Crabb in General Custer's army in Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* is a case in point. In this passage which leads up to the Battle of Little Big Horn, Jack Crabb the muleskinner semiotically clarifies the interpretations made by scouts of the position of the Indians, and thus attains the dubious position of jester to the General[282]:

...the whole point of being an Indian lies in the practical combination of fact and fancy. These here drawings and bones was left purposely for you to find and be scared by....

He [Custer] laughs again, taking off his gray hat and slapping his boots with it. "This campaign has been altogether too humorless! Very well," he says, "you wanted to be a scout. You are one as of this moment. Your orders are to stay with me, to say whatever comes into your head, and not to bother these other fellows."
So that's how I was appointed official jester to the commander of the Seventh Cavalry, as a result of merely telling the truth.... It meant that I might be even more ineffectual than when travelling with the mules, for everything said by a man who is an authorized idiot, so to speak, is naturally taken as idiotic. But I would be at the head rather than the tail of the column.

With these stories in mind it seems safe to say that jesters were in a position to exercise considerable influence on the court through their humorous counsel. They acted as the conscience of the king through their special ability to speak the truth.

Official Fools

What is interesting to see in research about court jesters in medieval Europe is that there are two sorts of data to be gathered about these figures, the anecdotal information recounted above, but also the more official hard data of numbers -- the political economy of jesters.

The last section considered the license that jesters had to say whatever they wanted. This notion of license gives an accurate idea about the institutional positioning of jesters: the title of the second chapter of John Doran's *The History of Court Fools* is "The Fool By Right of Office." Fools held an institutional position in government; as Doran writes [42]:

In France the *Fou du Roi* [Royal Fool] was an official title, and Champagne is thought by some to have enjoyed the monopoly of furnishing his Gallic Majesty with a new *Fou du Roi en titre d'office*, when the old one died.
This office had its own uniform; the "fool's coat" usually red and white checkered, and the motley with cloth ears and lots of bells were taken as signs of being a fool or a jester. When Archie Armstrong was dismissed from King James' court the action was carried out through the symbolic power of manipulating the coat: "it was ordered that he should be carried to the porter's lodge, his coat pulled over his ears, and kicked out of court, never to enter within the gates." [Welsford:177] Archie was defrocked as a wayward priest of comedy.

Much of Enid Welsford's research involves examining the account books of these royal courts to determine the position of the jester. In tracing the historical development of jesters, she notes [113]:

The medieval court-jester is a more solid personage, occupying a not unimportant position in royal account-books as the recipient of wages, clothes and medical attendance.

Welsford's accounts of jesters around Europe are full of references to their often lucrative and respected position -- recall that Archie Armstrong was given land and money. Scocola, a jester in the active court life of Northern Italy, "was paid a regular salary, and lived in a house of his own. He had a wife and a very large family..."

[Welsford:131] Bruquet, a noted French jester "enjoyed financial independence and freedom of movement, and occupied a responsible position." [Welsford:151]

---

7 Archie put it more simply: "I was exiled from Court having my jesting coate pluckt off." [Welsford:178]
8 The entries for clothes are most apparent in the earliest account books giving some idea of the importance of the special dress of jesters.
Jesting Under the Power

But there is another story of jesters which is not so responsible, and does not have such a happy ending, where licensed speech served to silence action. Perhaps there is something else going on; as Henri Bergson writes [111]:

There are innumerable comedies in which one of the characters thinks he is speaking and acting freely, and consequently, retains all the essentials of life, whereas, viewed from a certain standpoint, he appears as a mere toy in the hands of another, who is playing with him.

I have been engaged in producing and reproducing a common myth of jesters. Even though the jesters dance right next to the power of the king, the text has been depoliticized in that it has effaced the history of the fool, and elaborated on images conjured up by Erasmus, then Shakespeare, in the task of making jesting reasonable and responsible, and thus political in modern times.

Yet the jester springs from other places. In Europe they come out of medieval times when things begin to be written down -- in history. They appear as sparkling figures in the marginalia of these texts, serving as keepers of secret wisdom and special talents -- in short, they were not reasonable, jesters were insane. This is why fools had license to speak their minds, because the insanity alleviated them of responsibility for speech. Fools were known as

---

9It's really hard to say if jesters are missing from history or from historiography. Billington argues that they were around, but that fools were not respectable, and thus not written about.
10Craziness is also a characteristic of Chinese Jesters Dongfang Shuo was so labeled [Shi Ji:3205]:
"Naturals," meaning that in their madness they retained some natural spiritual quality. Early images of medieval jesters show them naked and associated with the Devil.¹¹

On the other hand, in pre-Christian Ireland and pre-Islamic Arabia, there is a tradition of jesters as poet-prophets. After Ireland was Christianized by St. Patrick, fools lost their spiritual power and became wards of the Church.¹² Until the fourteenth century the church protected these "natural fools," and placed them in homes of nobles where they would be looked after.

As well as being "insane" rather than "reasonable" jesters have not been exclusively associated with the upper class. Though the focus has been on the pinnacle of jesters and the high official culture of court life, jesters are also part of peasant popular culture in Europe. Indeed, the word "clown" comes from an Italian word for "rustic clumsy innocent." The respected, responsible, official jesters only functioned in small historical windows of possibility, for example: fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy and around the turn of the seventeenth century in England. Or as Welsford writes of the fashion of fools in Europe [115-116]:

¹¹See Billington, and especially D.J. Giffords essay "Iconographical notes towards a definition of the medieval fool" which takes a genealogical approach to studying Bible manuscripts in England.
¹²See Welsford, Chapter IV "Origins: The Fool as Poet and Clairvoyant."
The vogue of the court fool seems to have steadily increased during the fourteenth and to have culminated in the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth century...[as an actual social institution]...

Knowledge, Power and Jesting

How did jesters fare in the knowledge/power game of innocence, madness and humor? Even though the court jester evolved from being a natural fool to an artificial fool -- a person who jested professionally, acting the fool as part of their job description -- the licensed speech also served to silence action. As Robert Goldsmith writes of historical and literary jesters: "Will Summers and Lear's Fool live constantly under the threat of the whip." [6] Jesters had to learn to play the king's game, rather than play being a mark of equality as Hearns argues.

In many ways, jesters were created as the Other. They reminded the king of death and mortality. Of the possibility of insanity. Of worldly desires and spiritual knowledge. Often in both China and Europe, jesters were chosen not just for their mental peculiarities, but for their physical deformations. Dwarfed and mangled bodies. Scapegoats, pets and mascots. There are many references to the animality of the jester, for example, the motley represented the ass. Jesters were created as the Other and treated as such.

13Sandra Billington argues convincingly that fools, jesters and comedians have a longer history than that -- both before and after -- but that they are from popular, unlicensed culture of English fairs and perhaps French carnivals rather than the high culture royal courts.
Insanity took away much of the jester's subjectivity. Jesters were treated as property of their master. As Welsford writes of the reign of Henry VIII [159-160]:

According to the writ de idiota inquirendo, the King was allowed to grant to any of his subjects the profits of the land, and the custody of the person, of any man who had been legally proved insane. A man who applied for the guardianship of any such unfortunate was said 'to beg him for a fool', and it seems likely that court-jesters were sometimes procured in this manner -- sometimes it is to be feared on false pretences.14

There are stories of jesters being stolen from their rural homes,15 -- nobles went on "talent searches" when they toured the countryside -- though Welsford notes that the families were probably glad to be relieved of the burden of the "innocents."

There is also power invested in the fool's coat. In rural areas, the distinctive dress -- including the fools coat and motley -- signified insanity: "it was a costume traditionally associated with lunacy." [Welsford:124] Even with the different attitude towards folie in the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, which Michel Foucault describes as "a dramatic debate in which [people] confronted the secret powers of the world" [1973:xii] -- a good description of early jesters -- the fool's coat also carried the signs of confinement which would come with the Enlightenment:

The fact that the fools dress was sometimes imposed on offenders as a peculiarly degrading form of punishment

14 Billington recounts one of these sad stories. The punchline comes when the "fool" cuts a representation of a fool out of his host's tapestry, explaining that the host should be happy he just took a piece, his master would have taken the whole tapestry.
15 Billington:36
is only explicable on the assumption that it was no mere carnival costume, but a badge of madness and servitude. [Welsford:123]

Will Somers can serve as an example. He is known as one of the most accomplished "artificial fools," yet he was still treated like property; not being human, he was worse than a servant. After telling Henry VIII three baudy riddles to pull him out of a deep melancholy, "the King understood his meaning, and so pleasantly departed for that season, and Will layes him downe among the Spaniels to sleep." [Armin:128] It was not uncommon for jesters to eat with the dogs as well.

One of the stories of Gonella, a famous fool from Italy, illustrates the dangers of being a jester, and how success can be fatal16 -- not to mention failure. Gonella was jester to "the terrible potentate...[Duke] Borso of Ferrara." Gonella once scared the Duke out of a serious fever, yet was punished for his lifesaving service: The latter was condemned to exile, with a sentence of death in case of his being found upon the soil of Ferrara. Gonella went into banishment, which he bore with so much impatience, what after a few months he resolved to return, -- without incurring the threatened consequences. He thus contrived it: filling a cart with the earth of the Paduan district in which he had been sojourning, he rode boldly into Ferrara, where, upon being captured, he pertinaciously maintained, as he sat in the cart, that he was still upon the soil of Padua.

The Duke was not amused. He condemned Gonella to death; but the sentence was carried out as a counter-jest:

16Gonella is another of the jesters that Welsford notes as having a good salary.
The executioner stepped up, and, from a phial, let fall a single drop of water on the fool's neck. Then arose a burst of laughter and a clapping of hands, and shouts to Gonella to get up and thank the Duke for the life given him. The fool did not move ... at last the headsman went up to him, and raising Gonella from the ground, discovered that he was dead. The drop of water had had all the effect of the sharpest axe; and the spectators went home repeating to one another, "A shocking bad joke, indeed!" [Doran:362-363]

The jester indeed had an official position in the court, but like all the others under the king, it was a position intertwined with the king's absolute power.

Even the privileged aspects of being a court jester ended with time. Billington, perhaps a bit too strictly, limits the time period of "official respectability" for the fool in England to the forty years between 1580 and 1620\(^{17}\) -- the time period of Will Somers and Shakespeare. Afterward, the jesters lost their licenses and left high culture, with its licensed theaters, for rural fairs which were constantly under threat of repression for their potentially rebellious activities. [60]

Folie also increasingly turned from a royal institution to a problem that needed to be institutionalized. The Church with the rise of the court jester switched from defending the "innocent natural fool" to censuring the artificial fool. The image of the fool was inverted not only from high culture to popular culture, but from licensed speech to silence: in 1642 Thomas Jordan "drew a picture of the world from the idiot's point of view and the idiot was no longer a

\(^{17}\)Billington:42
protected natural, but an inmate of the lunatic asylum of Bedlam..."

[Billington:51]

This accords with Michel Foucault's history of folly and reason, *Madness and Civilization*, where the bourgeois rationality that came with the Enlightenment tightened the societal shackles of normalcy to confine folly in the then emptied lazar houses.\(^{18}\) Though Foucault deals mostly with popular movements and mass culture, rather than the high culture of the court jesters, his analysis is pertinent here.\(^{19}\)

Foucault writes that with the coming of the Enlightenment madness began to rank among the problems of the city.... Madness was thus torn from that imaginary freedom which still allowed it to flourish on the Renaissance horizon. Not so long ago, it had floundered about in broad daylight: in King Lear, in Don Quixote. But in less than a half-century, it had been sequestered and, in the fortress of confinement, bound to Reason, to the rules of morality and to their monotonous nights. [63-64]

The jester did not disappear, the fool was confined to the institution or banished from the city.

\(^{18}\)Enid Welsford at the end of her chapter, "The Decline of the Court Fool" attributes it to progress and a lack of place for the fool in the scientific world. At first I disagreed with her assessment, but if one mutes the positive value judgements of "progress" and "science" her explanation also fits into the ambiguity of reason and folly, and the social power of reason.

\(^{19}\)Tose Barchilon, M.D. makes a good point in a footnote to his Introduction to *Madness and Civilization*: "My only quarrel with the book is the lack of emphasis on the humoristic elements in psychoses and neuroses: i.e., the patient laughs at himself, or laughs at the world through his illness." [viii]
The Function of the Fool

There are many conflicting stories and images being put into play here. I feel like Lear’s fool when he was caught between the King and his daughters, singing:

They’ll have me whipped for speaking true;
thou’lt have me whipped for lying;
and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace.

[Lear I.4.186-188]

At first political humor is rational, democratic, and liberatory. The myth of official jesters in the medieval Europe and classical China seems to support this; political humor served as a check on absolute powers. Then these jesters, seen in a historical light, are crazy bumpkins who are abused in very unequal and undemocratic positions. Would Hearn say that jesters learned to be equals to Kings by playing with them in the court? What about Schutz’s reason and democracy in political humor? Or am I relating two very anachronistic social processes?

The key to this question lies in how political humor and court jesters function in relation to the norms of their societies. It’s time to return to Roland Barthes again with a sprinkling of Umberto Eco and a dash of Henri Bergson in a effort to politicize these myths.

Much of the secondary literature about political humor and jesters cited has been involved in mythologizing: the texts mention all the data represented above, and have mixed it together into a narrative, stating the bad with the good, the empowerment with the confinement. As Barthes writes:
Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection...We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into Nature. [116]

The mythologizing comes in with the mode of presentation, how the licensing and liberation are highlighted and the silence and servitude are inflected.

The politics of the function of court jesters are even more complex. Simply put, court jesters do not question the reigning order with their jests, and political humorists likewise do not question existing institutions, but rather that both serve to inoculate the order and the institutions from such questioning, and thus strengthen these institutions.

One of Barthes' mythologies is useful here. In "Operation Margarine" Barthes argues that one way to uphold institutions of power is through a kind of homeopathy: one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. [41-42]

Rather than going to the roots of society and questioning Order, with mythology one snips off the browned leaves of excess or corruption with great fanfare of self-criticism. Recall the hopeful note of the passage cited above describing political humor in Republican China where "the targets of their good-natured attack are nothing so much as cocksureness and hypocrisy." [Kao:267] The notion of "hypocrisy" being the most important target is crucial here: in political humor one is not critical of the face, but only of those who are two-faced. Discourses of Unity are functioning here, where the Order is not
questioned, only deviations from it. There is no room for laughter which multiplies the ordering practices.

Barthes' idea is that one bad apple won't spoil the whole basket if it is promptly excised. In discussing the inoculation of "Myth on the Right", Barthes writes [140]:

this very general figure... consists in admitting the accidental evil of a class bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; thus one protects it against the rise of a generalized subversion.

The point to stress here is the perceived "accidental evil" which draws the gaze away from more fundamental problems and radical solutions. "A little 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil." [42]

Political humor which focuses on the excesses and corruptions of kings, presidents and legislatures inoculates these institutions against more rigorous challenge. Resistance to the violence of these institutions is laughed off with a jester's gesture or a political cartoon.

This is not a new argument. For some time, people have been questioning the rebellion through the laughter of the carnival as M.M. Bakhtin has argued it. Umberto Eco conversely argues that carnival depends on the societal laws that it is breaking:

Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible... In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent

---

20 "What is the trifling dross of Order, compared to its advantages? It is well worth the price of immunization." [42]
paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule. [6]...one should conclude that the comic is only an instrument of social control and can never be a form of social criticism. [7]

It cannot be a form of social criticism because it is temporal, it is institutionalized, it is organized by the Church and the Town that it parodies. Bakhtin, himself, alludes to these temporal problems in *Rabelais and His World* [90]:

Throughout the year there were scattered islands of time, strictly limited by the dates of feasts, when the world was permitted to emerge from the official routine but exclusively under the camouflage of laughter. Barriers were raised, provided there was nothing but laughter.

Bakhtin also writes explicitly of how the carnival was used for social control by quoting a 1444 circular letter from Paris School of Theology[21] [75]: "we permit folly on certain days so that we may later return with greater zeal to the service of God." Yet Bakhtin is not critical of such practices since he writes in terms of utopias of freedom.

Henri Bergson likewise writes of laughter, comedy and humor as a means of social control: we, he argues, laugh at those peculiar individuals who are rigid to the forces of society. In laughing we reinforce the social codes, making the social codes more rigid, rather than opening up society to a more "natural, plastic state" as Bergson would argue.

There are many examples of how jesters not only serve the individual king, but serve to buttress the institution of kingship, or

---

[21] This is an institution which Erasmus writing in 1511 notes as particularly humorless.
"democracy" -- to strengthen whichever regime or ideology is in power. William Willeford argues in *The Fool and His Scepter* that order always prevails.\(^2\)[155]:

In tolerating such jokes the king partly affirms the royal power that the fool pretends to deny. Thus the office of the jester fulfills some of the same functions as the ritualized rebellion in which political subjects express actual and possible resentments against authority. The fact that the rebellion is allowed and even encouraged implies that the social institutions and the persons in power are strong enough to tolerate it; thus it serves the interests of authority and of social cohesion.

With just a subtle twist, Willeford's argument which is much the same as Schutz's for political humor, changes to show the power and culture involved in laughing at the king: yet perhaps the jests do not show the strength of the king so much as produce the power of the monarchy. Or as Sima Qian comments of the jester stories he has recounted in *Historical Records*: "When Quan Yukun leaned back and laughed at King Wei of Qi's unreasonable behavior, the King became a mighty monarch."\(^2\)

The stories of Dongfang Shuo from the *History of the Former Han* are full of Shuo upholding order as respect for the rites at all costs. One passage tells how Shou's jesting resulted in one official getting banished for crossing the ritual lines of class in courtship.

---

\(^2\)Robert Pelton [266] likewise argues that the West African trickster lays bare the depths of social order.

\(^2\)This passage actually combines my translation "unreasonable behavior" and Yang and Yang's translation "became a mighty monarch." [409]
Welsford and Doran's texts are full of stories of jesters being deployed as weapons in political battles, such as this witty talk of war:

a Venetian ambassador, endeavouring to dissuade Louis XII from making war against Venice, spoke of the wisdom of the Republic, Louis replied, "I wager many of my fools against your sages, because all of their wisdom will be incapable of resisting them."^[Doran:50-51].

Welsford cites "French and English evidence which suggests that the court-fool was used at times as a convenient tool in the hands of politicians." [140] Above, the story about Will Somers and Cardinal Wolsey is one example, for there was a bitter struggle between civil and religious spheres going on during the reign of Henry VIII -- Wolsey as eventually dismissed.

Archie Armstrong had even more pronounced struggles with the Church and people in court:

The extent to which Archy was able to interfere with politics and the liberties he took with great men seem incredible, but there is little doubt that he was used as a tool by those more important than himself. Though he had his enemies he gained fame, wealth and popularity by voicing the discontents of a large and powerful faction. [Welsford:180]

John Doran recounts a more generalized example; it is the story of Bertoldo a jester of 572 A.D. in the court of Alboin, King of the Lombards. The court is entertained with Bertoldo's witty answers to paradoxical questions:

---

24 Many thanks to Sumalee for helping me translate the last sentence from the French.
"Bertoldo," said the King, "could you contrive to bring me water in a sieve without spilling any?"

"Certainly," answered the fool; "in a hard frost, I could bring you any quantity."

"For so clever a rejoinder, you shall have from me any boon you desire."

"La, you there!" cried Bertoldo, "I shall have nothing of the sort. You cannot give me what you do not possess. I am in eager search of happiness, of which you have not a grain; and how could you give me any?"

Alboin alluded to his kingly power and glory, which the fool mocked mightily. He pointed to the glittering crowds of nobles who stood around his throne. "Oh yes," was the comment of Bertoldo, "they stand around your throne; so do hungry ants round a crab-apple, and with the same purpose, -- to devour it." And therewith he so satirized the condition of a King, that Alboin threatened to have him whipped out of court. [353]

Yet Bertoldo stayed, and became famous. Bertoldo satirizes not the condition of a King, but the corruption of one court with the discursive result of upholding the monarchy. There is no question of whether Alboin was a good king or a bad king -- he was just the king. Any question of comparative kingship would be missing the point, for political humor supports power, usually indiscriminate of what that power is. Jesters served as radical conservatives who criticized vehemently in order to preserve the Order.

Jesters were attached to not only the king, or even the court, but to power and institutions: jesters were transferred and exchanged like the items in a will25 or the spoils of victory.26 In classical China

25Welsford notes that Will Somers served at least three monarches. [169]
26In The Long Ships, Frans Bengtsson tells of two Irish jesters who fit well into this model and serve as a literary example: they only jest when asked by
Jester Zhan goes to the new Han dynasty when the Qin emperor dies. "Thereby, the emperor laughed and stopped his plan. After a while, the second emperor [of Qin] was assassinated, and Jester Zhan went to the Han court, where he lived for many years before dying." [Shi Ji:3202] Notice that there is no break even in the sentence to signify any transition across dynasties from his service to Qin to his attending the Han.

Modern Political Comedy
In this last section, let us return to Schulz and his book Political Humor. In a sense, I have been making Schulz play the fool, because in the end we both agree that humor strengthens the political institutions. Schutz simply states that "despite any radicalism of political humor, I hold that it [political humor] is essentially conservative in thought and in impact." [9-10] "Humor is not revolutionary; it is stabilizing, for that at which we laugh is being acted upon in a manner that no longer calls for direct aggression." [38] He argues this point in terms of evaporating aggression [328]:

royal blood. They figure their utility is in keeping kings happy and content, and thus not violent. But most importantly here, they are treated like property, and transferred like booty from one king to another [288]:

King Colla descended upon us. King Domnal was killed as he hewed naked about him at his chamber door; his Queen was taken from her bridal bed and carried off with the rest of the booty; and my brother and I suffered the same fate, for such was our fame.

But justice was served when after a few jests at Colla's wedding feast "King Colla's laughter grew louder and louder and more breathless.... [until he] burst inwardly with the violence of his laughter." [290] The jesters were forced into exile and wandering beggary because of this.
We have seen that the cathartic effect of political humor also serves social stability, and thus there is an innate conservatism resulting from the comic drama of politics.

The comic drama of politics takes place in a peaceful space of rules and regulations:

The notion of humor as an expression of sublimated aggression is of importance to politics. Politics as a peaceful means of settling social conflicts requires of its citizens that they forgo direct action or aggressiveness in pressing their claims. They must behave according to highly structured social convention and repress more primitive impulses. [31-2]

So rather than political humor setting one free, to question the norms of politics and thus act as a healthy check on government, the practice confines one to highly structured playing field.

With Schutz's notion of humor, as with Bergson's of laughter, we are back to saluting the social structures and political institutions. I agree with both Schutz and Bergson that humor and laughter can operate this way, I just do not support it. And wish to listen for other kinds of laughter that will explode these edifices, and just let people and differences just be. To laugh and cry when whatever force moves them.

How does this "conservative political humor" operate in contemporary politics? The respected position for jesters began to erode throughout Europe in the seventeenth century. With the eighteenth century the table cloth of luxury and status was pulled out from under the fool, and this character of Medieval and Renaissance Europe was pushed underground with the Age of
Reason. As Sandra Billington lists it, there were three options for the English fool at the end of the eighteenth century: rural folk-Fool, a new sort of Harlequin, or to be part of "the increasing number or respectable comedians." [80]

The third option provides a space for a consideration of modern political humor, specifically the politics of comedians and their political humor. Though this may seem to be a strange shift, there are many asides in the various texts cited which suggest the analogy of a modern celebrity and jester; in discussing the stature of renaissance jesters in Italy, Welsford writes that those "really successful in the practice of their art, could acquire something of the notoriety of a modern27 music hall artist or film-star." [128] Looking around cinema and television there are many examples of comedian jesters: Being There, Night Court28, Capital Steps29, King of Hearts, Woody Allen and his films: especially Zelig, Bob Hope and the U.S.O.30, and so on. But Johnny Carson rises from the crowd, for he is perhaps the most respectable comedian around American popular culture, and in many ways the most overtly political.

27Welsford was writing in the 1930s -- before television.
28Judge Harry Stone acts out the role of a pre-Christian Irish jester in that he combines jesting with judging.
29Capital Steps is perhaps the best example of a modern model of court jestering. It is seen on public television and occasionally on public radio: the jesters joke about the current events of Congress and the government, jesting through song and dance to an audience of legislators and government officials. I do not consider Capital Steps in more detail because it is hard to find; the examples from popular culture are both more persuasive and more powerful.
30Hope was at his best as a jester for the government and democracy in "Welcome Home America" a tribute to the USO which was aired on Sunday night, April 14, 1991. Hope here, acting with George Bush and Colin Powel, is a jester for the armed forces -- the least democratic aspect of American society.
Generally speaking, the layout of *The Tonight Show* is much like a noble court. There is a stage, there is a live audience which cheers and eggs on the comedian. Johnny Carson makes faces, and Doc Severensson dresses in bright colors with clashing patterns -- often playing the fashion fool. Carson directly appeals to the tradition of court jester with his "Carnac the Magnificent" character who engages in the witty questions and answers much like those of Bertoldo in Alboin's court. In many ways, it is a stage for an artificial fool, for the monologues are written down by others and transcribed onto the prompter. Indeed, Carson is only there half the time, but that is not a problem for his heir-apparent Jay Leno's jokes are from the same writers.

Carson's humor\(^{31}\) seems superficial, so it in many ways only affords a superficial analysis. Yet the show is interesting in that topics directly address political humor: most of Carson's jokes are about politics -- what, along with religion, is usually considered to be to controversial for polite conversation. The monologue at the beginning of the Tonight Show is where these jokes of "current events" come out. The popular conception of its political importance is brought out in this quotation:

> Carson's opening monologue has long been a television staple, considered by many to represent a barometer of the national mood. [Boedecker]

Hence I have chosen to examine the monologues from 17 shows in April and May of 1991.

\(^{31}\)From now on, Carson will mean *The Tonight Show* and include Jay Leno; this is a reasonable move to make since Carson is now a symbol of American Culture. Furthermore, the name plate on the show is "Carson Productions."
The monologues address current events, with political criticism forming the butt of the punchline. All the powerful figures and institutions of American politics are lined up to be cut down: President Bush, Vice President Quayle, former president(s) the Reagan(s), White House Chief of Staff Sununu, Senator Kennedy; the list goes on and on to include Congress, presidential candidates, government organizations, the military, and so on. It is daring, and critical of the existing order in Washington D.C. and the local center of power in Los Angeles. Statistically, the Kennedy dynasty and the Reagan Emperors are the most common targets of the jokes. The power that is being played with is strong, for whenever a joke gets a strained response, as cutting too close to home, both Carson and Leno quickly cover themselves, whining lines such as "not true, not true, that's a joke, a big joke!"

But how do these jokes function? Following the analysis of court jesters, that these jokes are largely monovocal. They do not question politics and its institutions and ideology, but pull the punch(line) to laugh at the excesses and hypocrisies of the personalities involved. This serves to inoculate the institutions to show their "strength."

Rather than joking about far reaching issues such as President Bush's alleged involvement in negotiations with the Iranians to delay the release of the hostages until after the 1980 election -- an issue in the news at the time of the research -- the jokes address superficial excesses and corruption. John Sununu's abuse of military planes for personal use was repeated over and over again. The most common reference in the sixteen monologues that I recorded was to Ted
Kennedy's sex life and wild partying. Jay Leno figured that he went a little too far with Kennedy one night, yet in response to the crowd's howl, he made another joke to bolster his "fairness": "Now that's a cheap shot...I admit that we pick on Ted Kennedy alot; I'm sure he takes his pants off one leg at a time just like everybody else."

Issues are rarely considered in these politics, only excesses. Or the only issue is the liberal equality of abuse; as Jay Leno reasons when pushed after yet another repeat of a "drunken Kennedy" joke: "gotta balance those Quayle jokes, come on now, gotta be fair."

Next most popular were references to Kitty Kelly's "scandalous" biography of Nancy Reagan. One joke came from Carnac the Magnificent who answered "roses, violets and Kitty Kelly" to the hidden question "Name three things that Nancy Reagan would like to plant in her garden." There were the usual jokes about the stupidity of Dan Quayle -- especially after President Bush's heart beat irregularly -- and other scandals from Congress including a Senator denying he had an affair with a beauty queen.

Just like the narrowness of issues that governmental politics addresses in the United States, such political humor is limited to a few celebrity politicians and the general ineptness of government. And they are repeated over and over again, the same joke told by Johnny, then Jay, then Johnny again -- each time pronouncing the punchline as if it was new material. Carson even quipped about this: "In honor of Earth Day... all these jokes are recycled."

---

32 By my count, it came up twelve times in the sixteen monologues, and the events in question happened after the first monologue.
These jokes, which lose their force with each repetition, are very soft towards kingly power. Reagan was never addressed directly. Most of the jokes were about Kelly's biography of Nancy Reagan; it is very interesting to see how Carson managed this critique of the Reagans. Whenever Carson or Leno mentioned the book, they prefaced it by asking if anyone in the audience had read it. A strange silence always followed. This was the only silent response to any of questions to the audience in all of the monologues that were analyzed. Furthermore, Carson went to great lengths to undermine the "credibility" of this gossip biography. He once continued his talk of current events by saying that according to the book "apparently Nancy had the Contras working at the ranch building their jacuzzi -- nobody knew; [pause] That's not true; I made that up."

All of the jokes that mentioned the two reigning political parties in the U.S. without fail had the Democrats as the butt of the joke. For example, in discussing the Presidential Campaign Fund box of the income tax form on April 15, Jay Leno joked: "I have some advice for the Democrats: take your dollar, bet it on the Republicans, and next year you'll have twice as much for your money."

And of course, all jokes about U.S. politics are tempered with stories which will show the familiar political myth that "even with all our faults, we're still the best in the world": in this survey, foreign political humor settled largely on the Soviet economy and Iraqi dictators -- which explains the function of publishing Soviet political humor in the United States. Perhaps it is not so much to liberate the Soviets, as to reassure citizens in "amerika."
So mainstream political humor, as expressed on Carson, is largely if not entirely monovocal. It not only refracts attention away from political struggles, it tends to reify social institutions as well. Many of the themes of the jokes, as in Schutz's political humor, involve sexual humor which is usually objectifying towards women. For example, Carson told one joke about a new Japanese product which combined insecticide with pantyhose. He joked: "If you can't afford a bug zapper you can just hang your wife up on the back porch." Similar jokes were made about blacks and the LAPD to address the current event of a black motorist being brutally beaten by white Los Angeles police officers in April 1991.

Another source of power, or a shift in power, also becomes apparent in the references in the monologue. They support capital (or business, as Carson would name it) over government, through numerous citations of the ineptness of government bureaucracy: the slowness of the post office, the folly of retiring Scharzkoff as soon as he "does something right." There are also numerous references to products and brand names. The only time that Leno really feels uncomfortable about the effect of a line, and says "that is a joke isn't it... am I getting in trouble with that," is when he criticizes the chicken content in Campell's Chicken Noodle Soup.

Political humor is becoming Political-Economic Humor. As Welsford writes [121]:

Fools were employed by corporations as well as by kings and noblemen, indeed they seem to have penetrated

33Jay Leno repeated this joke later in the week.
everywhere in the fifteenth century, not excluding taverns and brothels.

**Political-Economic Humor**

Sidney Lumet's academy award winning film *Network* [1976] is an optimum example of the political economics humor. This vibrant and demanding movie addresses many themes and issues, not the least of which is the power of a medium like television, and of course movies. Yet our focus will settle on the two plot lines in this complex film which directly address politics, economics, laughter and jesters: (a) the making of the *Mao Zedong Hour* and (b) the crazy antics of Howard the Jester.

**The Mao Zedong Hour**

Through the *Mao Zedong Hour*, *Network* addresses the issues of radical politics and government. Radical politics is presented as a silly fragmented circus where each faction plays their part -- always with big guns and violence. Government is presented as meddlesome, getting in the way of the *Mao Zedong Hour* and through its regulation screwing up deals for the Conglomerate.

Diana Christensen, a new programing executive for United Broadcasting System (UBS) television, wants to expand the audience for the network by shifting away from the same old tired themes. As she yells at her staff: "I don't want conventional programing on this network. I want counter-culture; I want anti-establishment." She settles on what comes to be the *Mao Zedong Hour*: a radical idea sprung from a home movie of a terrorist bank robbery. Diana
proposes to take the footage "shot" by a political terrorist group, the Ecumenical Liberation Army, and write a script around the "mutilated marxism" of the "revolutionary underground" emphasizing anger and violence for primetime television.

Radical politics is marginalized by putting it at the center. As Diana herself says in later negotiations with a representative of the Communist Party, "I don't give a damn about the political content of the show." All of the politics is muted with show business. Radical politics has been shifted from the newsroom to the entertainment division; from fact to fiction; from history to fantasy. One of Diana's colleagues misses the point and still figures the show in terms of facts and news when he objects to "put[ing] the ongoing struggle of the oppressed masses on primetime television."

Yet the struggle is confined to the 21 inch screen where it has been commodified and made a part of the exchange of capital. As Umberto Eco wrote in his critical analysis of the politics of the carnival, the carnival is a servant of the order because it is confined in either space or time -- or in the case of t.v. -- both [6]: "If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen." The struggle is fictionalized and thus domesticated. It is removed from the streets and put on the TV, where it can be turned on and off, at will. In *Network*, Diana is interested in "radical tv" because she figures that
she can get better ratings, and thus more capital. Politics is thus
carnivalized, and we have to pay dearly for the ticket.

Both Diana and her contact in the Communist Party efface their
respective political positions through humor by stating them with a
smile on first handshake:

"Hi I'm Diana Christenson, a racist lackey of imperialist
ruling circle."

"Hi, I'm Lorreen Hobbs, a bad-assed commie nigger."

"Sounds like the basis of a firm friendship," is Diana's answer. This
meeting, as well as all the other business meetings that follow are
presented to demonstrate that the "radical marxists" are just like "us
capitalists," with all of our problems, conflicts, and greeds. In a plush
office, the communist is proffered coffee, and it is Ms. Hobbs' lawyer
that tells Diana that "the political content of the show has to be
entirely in her control."

Likewise, the narrator announces the scene of another business
meeting of the Mao Zedong Hour by saying that "of course there were
the usual contractual difficulties." This scene takes place at the
house of Ahmed Khan, the leader of the Ecumenical Liberation Army.
The lighting is sinister, and the action involves infighting among the
leftist sects over such things as syndication and distribution costs.
"You fuckin' fascist!" one gun toting radical yells after Hobbs screams
"don't fuck with my lousy distribution costs!" The Great Ahmed Khan
settles the argument with a shot of his gun in the air. He then licks
his finger and tells everyone to get back to page 22 of the contract,

---

34It is interesting to note that by the end of the 1980s, television had taken the
opposite track from commodifying the struggle of the oppressed on T.V.; the
"America's Most Wanted" genre celebrates law and order in the capture of
these criminals.
paragraph 5a. Perhaps Hobbs put it best when she first told Ahmed about the Mao Zedong Hour: "Well Ahmed, ... I'm gonna make a TV star out of you -- just like Archie Bunker."

Government is treated like a bumbling circus as well. All it can do is mess things up, whether it is interfering with the Mao Zedong Hour on the basis of federal felonies, or interfering more directly with capital when it threatens to use its regulatory power to sour a deal between the Communications Corporation of America, which owns the UBS, and the Saudis. But I am getting ahead of myself and bumbling into the plotline of Howard the Jester.

Howard the Jester
As the narrator announces in his introduction to Network, "this is the story of Howard Beale," and in addition to being a "latter day prophet," as he is called throughout the film, Howard is also a latter day jester. Yet Howard is a jester who isn't funny, who represents some common anger in his madness. But all the same, people laugh at him and the audience keeps on watching. Yelling his crazy truths, Howard the Jester -- through a fluke, through an accident of the market, perhaps an unseen hand of sorts -- becomes a jester for a dying democracy and the floundering freedoms of American political life. Then Capital becomes God for him, but the King gets too close, and the jesting for capital isn't funny anymore; Howard the Jester is no longer useful and he dies, or he is dramatically assassinated in order to sell still more air time. So in the plot of the film, capital wins out in the end just the same. And of course, we all watch the
film, paying our admission price for the ticket, or rental for the tape, circulating still more capital.

In many ways, Howard Beale is a model jester. Firstly, Howard and his news show are described throughout the film with images that suggest the jester and their space: carnival, circus, clown, freak, lunatic, irresponsible and so on repeated over and over again. In the following paragraphs I will weave Howard into the myth of the jester by highlighting certain character traits and themes: *insanity, prophesy, truth, exploitation, and power*. If nothing else, these images recall the power involved in the jester image. Howard and his antics, however genuine, innocent and natural they might be are still used for political economic projects of others.

**a. insanity.** Howard the Jester comes from the early part of the history of medieval European fools. He is a natural. He is represented as being crazy. When Howard is told that he will lose his job as the TV news anchor at UBS in two weeks because of low ratings, he coolly announces on live television that he will kill himself:

> Since this show is the only thing I had going for me in my life, I have decided to kill myself. I'm going to blow my brains out on this program a week from today. So toon in next Tuesday, that should give the public relations people a week to promote the show. They should get a hell of a rating out of that. 50 share, easy.

With this announcement, Howard still speaks the economic language of Communications Capital. But in many ways, these are the last sane words that he will speak where he maintains a modicum of control.
The balance of Howard's appearances create him as someone possessed. He is possessed by some spirit, certainly, but he is also possessed by the forces that pull his strings. The character is much like a stringed puppet in that Howard the Jester is either completely animated or he is limp; he performs, delivering a message, and once it is delivered and he is relieved, Howard faints.\(^3\)

One of the most famous lines from this film is when Howard urges -- orders -- the audience to get mad at the chaotic situation of the contemporary world:

They're crazy. It's everything everywhere is going crazy ... I don't know what to do... But first you've got to get mad. I want you to get up right now, got to the window, stick your head out and yell, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore."

This pronouncement could be read in many ways. Howard is angry, yet he is also crazy. Is he the devil or a saint? He is articulating the double-edged sword of madness. He does it in the service of the cacophony of democracy as people all over the U.S. yell out their windows to the sound of thunder and sheets of rain pelting against their tenements.

\(b. \textit{prophesy}\). Howard is repeatedly hailed as a "latter day prophet,... inveighing against the hypocrisies of our time." Especially when the Network News Hour needs selling. Jesters from the early age in medieval Europe were also hailed as prophets. Their craziness and possessed speech was seen a connection to something magical and

\(^{35}\)This is not limited to the network news show, but also occurs in his boss Max Schumacher's office when Max says to Howard: "I'm taking you off the air."
spiritual beyond the scope of day to day existence. As Willeford writes [137]: "The other side of the threat of the unknown is its promise; the fool as a borderline figure holds the social worlds open to values that transcend it." Once the "angry man" image of starts to slip in the ratings, Howard has a vision which reconstitutes him as a prophet of Biblical proportions:

Last night I was awaken from a fitful sleep shortly after two o'clock in the morning by a shrill sibilant faceless voice. And the voice said to me, "I want you to tell the people the truth, not an easy thing to do since the people don't want to know the truth." And I said, "you're kidding, what the hell should I know about the truth." And the voice said to me, "don't worry about the truth, I will put the words in your mouth." And I said, "what is this the burning bush? Well I'm not Moses." And the voice said to me "I'm not God, what's that got to do with it."... And I said, "why me?" And the voice said "because you're on television, dummy." So I thought about it for a moment, and then I said, "okay."

Howard the Jester innoculates himself; he makes people trust him by joking with the religious discourse that all the other images appeal to; he likewise makes himself special in that he is not innately special, but only useful since he is on tv.

c. truth. Howard is a Jester in that it is through his madness that truth is produced. In his second strange broadcast he suggests his madness and innocence:

Yesterday I announced on this program that I was going to commit public suicide. Admittedly an act of madness. Well I'll tell you what happened. I just ran out of bullshit.
Howard goes on to rant and rave about bullshit, how everything is bullshit: "Bullshit is all the reasons we have for living." Everyone believes in him for saying this, and they laugh.

Later, when the Network News Hour has been turned into a carnival under the direction of Diana, Howard the Jester comes back to truth. Like a good jester, he attacks his master:

Television is not the truth, television is a goddamned amusement park, television is a circus, a carnival, a traveling troupe of acrobats.... We're in the boredom killing business. We lie like hell, we'll tell you whatever you want to hear. You're beginning to believe the illusions we are spinning here... this is mass madness. So turn off your television sets now, turn them off right now. Turn them off while in the middle of this sentence.\(^{36}\)

With this Howard faints and there is music and cheers from the audience, and the ratings go up. Howard is yelling the truth for the sake of preserving freedom and democracy -- reminiscent of Schutz's figuration of political humor -- but no one is hearing it; the audience keeps on listening and watching and cheering him as he tells them to turn him off. It is all in the manipulation of television production, the film seems to tell us. Yet the truth value of the film *Network* is accentuated by the graceful editing which shows various frames of television production and consumption.

This is how truth and licensed speech work in the modern world. This perhaps was Diana's point when she assured Max, the

---

\(^{36}\)Howard also appeals to the tradition of poetry in jesting. There actually should be many more ellipses in this and other quotes that I have transcribed from Howard's performance. I haven't changed the words, but have cut the sentences since he endlessly repeats himself and elaborates is pronouncements earnestly and poetically.
head of the news division: "I wouldn't interfere with the actual news itself, but tv is show biz, Max." Diana stresses the importance of stylistics and how they form the facts; it is the same move that she made with the *Mao Zedong Hour* where radical politics, and with Howard truth is domesticated and commodified for the viewing audience.

d. exploitation. Howard is used as a tool, much as Will Somers and Archie Armstrong were used before him. Howard the Jester is not just tolerated, but created and encouraged in his railings regardless of what he says. Max is disgusted with Hackett and Diana's use of Howard the Jester, yelling: "I'll go to court, I'll put him in the hospital before I'll let you exploit him like a carnival freak!" What is interesting here is that Howard the Jester is institutionalized regardless of who gets control of him: serving the institutions of capital at the Network, or residing in the institutions of psychiatry and lunatic asylums. So in another way, Howard the Jester is at the middle of the forces of history -- caught between the Renaissance and the Age of Reason -- tugging at what to do with people who do not quite fit in. The plot does not dwell on this point, the exploitation continues, and everybody is happy. The Prophet is profitable.

e. power. But content sometimes matters, and the King is not always pleased with what the jester has to say. Howard is encouraged so long as he is profitable -- meaning he does not directly challenge the

---

37This part of the plot reminds me of how Nietzsche was treated after he went insane, and of Woody Allen's film *Zelig*.
parent company, the Communications Corporation of America.

Howard the Jester's licensed speech flounders when his diatribes to reinvigorate some sort of democracy in the U.S. directly conflict with the global flow of capital on which the Network depends. Howard is incensed because "the Arabs" are about to buy one more slice of America -- namely the CCA. He tells his viewers to pressure the government to stop this deal.

Mr. Jensen, the CEO of CCA is also incensed, but at Howard who is silenced when he screws up this deal. Mr. Jensen leads Howard the Jester into his conference room, dims the lights and preaches to him, communicating in a way that Howard can understand. What is fascinating about this chain of events is the mode of silencing. Jensen does not censor Howard; he does not fire him for Howard would be scooped up by some other network. Jensen silences Howard the Jester in a productive mythical mode -- rather than shutting Howard up, Jensen renews Howard's license, but directs him to a different message.

Through a long and brilliant sermon, Mr. Jensen spiritualizes capital, and gives the corporate cosmology, mythologizing capital from history into Nature. "You get up on your little 21 inch screen and howl about America and Democracy," Jensen tells Howard. "There is no America; there is no Democracy: only IBM and ITT...We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies. The world is a business, Mr. Beale; it has been since man has crawled out of the slime."

Jensen anoints Howard the Jester to preach this evangel, yet it is a flop. Howard is pulling the Network News Hour down with his
depressing monologue of dehumanization and the loss of the individual. Mr. Jensen refuses to cancel him since he "thinks that Howard Beale is bringing a very important message to the American people." Ideological prophet is sometimes more important than immediate economic profit.

This is where the two plot lines cross in an image which shows how both jesters and radicals are used by capital to reproduce itself. The Network programming executives decide nonchalantly that the only solution is to kill Howard. When asked for ideas, Diana suggests: Well, what would you fellas say to an assassination? I think I can get the Mao Zedong people to kill Beale as one of their shows. In fact it would make a hell of a kick-off show for the new season... right on camera, in the studio. And that is how the film ends. The jester is no longer useful, so like the Italian jester Gonella, Howard is executed and it is all part of a show. In the film, the assassination shows how Howard lost his subjectivity when he became the Jester. Though he preaches democracy, Howard lost his own stake in it by forfeiting his power of decision along the way. The film opens with Howard threatening to kill himself on primetime; the film ends with his assassination with images of smoking automatic rifles as the tv cameras zoom in on the blood-spattered body lying on stage.

afterword

In this chapter we have seen how the rationality of political humor has been put into question by court jesters of the past and present. The grammar of this term has changed from its adjetival and descriptive sense -- "rational" -- to its verbal sense of the oppressive
action involved in rationalizing the "necessary violences" of politics and society. So perhaps next time I will start by pointing out the oppression involved in such monovocal humor, rather than toting its liberatory qualities which seem so small in comparison.

Political humor with its licensed speech and licensed laughs is perhaps critical, but only of the excesses of governmental politics in the U.S.: settling on the hypocracies of people rather than the contradictions in political-economics. In this chapter I have suggested some ways in which we can examine other forms of "political humor" to see how humor functions in spaces such as "political cartoons," and strips such as Doonesbury. Sometimes it works, yet sometimes it doesn't: I don't want to make a ruler with which to judge "political humor," but merely point out the problems with a romanticized view of it as a certain form of political critique and "liberation."

The myth of political humor operates in such a way that it authorizes criticism of detail, while it does not authorize a questioning of the politics of how things are ordered. It does not authorize a questioning of authority. Thus it serves to draw attention away from these issues, often with a pleasant chuckle, and conserve the corpus of the body politic.
Chapter 5
laughter, anger, desire

Section I: desiring laughter/laughing desire

"I Love Myself When I am Laughing...
And then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive."

This quote, spoken by Zora Neale Hurston which serves as the title of an anthology of her works also provides an entrance into the slippery and thorny endeavor of considering the configurations of laughter, anger and desire as they are acted out by women. As Hurston's comment on a series of photographs taken of her, this passage addresses many issues current in feminist theory, particularly those of representation: people, and more specifically women, are semiotically constructed, represented and read into identities. Furthermore, Hurston's passage suggests the instability of such identities, the multiplicity of such identities, the struggle of such identities. This is a very political struggle in that historically women have been constructed as the object of the (male) gaze.

Though the above quotation is Hurston's description of herself, it is also her description of Carl Van Vechten's photographic representation of her. Elsewhere in the Zora Neale Hurston Reader there are others gazing at Hurston, focusing on different things: depending on who is talking, and the resulting power relation, she is variously figured as "light yellow," "coal black," or "reddish light
brown." [Washington 7] Perhaps she was all these people, just at different times.

Lastly, and most importantly for this chapter, in her identity Hurston mixes laughter and anger, yet settles in anger for action: to be mean is to be impressive. Perhaps this is because laughter is so often taken as a weakness, and Hurston did not want to risk slipping back into racist and sexist stereotypes; she did not want to be seen as just another "smilin' darkie." Or as she wrote in one of her more famous essays "How it Feels to Be Colored Me": "I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood... No, I do not weep at the world -- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife." [153]

Yet her life shows how such anger can be self-destructive; it can get out of control: she died alone in the County Welfare Home. She was buried in what is now a field of weeds in an unmarked grave.¹

There has certainly been a lot of anger around, anger at the sexisms and racisms characteristic of American society, yet with the first Black Renaissance which was dominated by male writers, this double edged rage remained largely fragmented and unfocused, expressed only in isolated instances such as the writings of Hurston.² Anger has resurfaced as a tactic with the second Renaissance and with the latest Women's Movement. Especially in the early writings of the 1970s, which Adrienne Rich characterized as a "feminist

¹See Alice Walker's Afterword to the Reader, "Looking for Zora."
²In an interesting article, Dianne F. Sadoff has problematized this image of Hurston which as largely been transmitted to us by Alice Walker. She writes [118]: "Needing a precursor to validate her own enterprise as a writer, Walker virtually invents Hurston before she defines herself as indebted to Hurston's example." Yet this is a productive mythology.
renaissance" [de Lauretis 1986:1], anger was newly constructed as an empowering practice, as a resource: "She thought of this anger as an enormous storehouse of energy and wondered whether the women knew that they owned it. Anger can also be a kind of wealth, she thought." [Walker 1989:267] Anger was no longer disqualified as being ill-mannered and immoral. It was refigured as something "healthy." [Kaplow 37] As I argue elsewhere for laughter, anger came to be seen as a tool for resisting patriarchy:

Anger becomes a tool which you can control, not only to help you make personal changes but to deal with the world outside as well. You can mobilize your anger to warn those around you that you're not having any more bullshit, to underscore your seriousness, to dare to drive your point home. [40]

Anger is seen as a powerful way of being taken seriously. Whereas laughter, specifically jokes, are often seen as disarming even among women with the threat of "some cute joke and a round of hearty chuckles -- completely destroying your point." [Kearon 78] Rather, with anger there is a grabbing the bull by the horns, so to speak. Of breaking out of the stereotype of "woman" as the peacemaker, the harmonizer, the selfless mother. With focused anger.

Yet there are problems with this figuration of anger. Though gender focused, it seems blind to race, taking white middle class values as given. Anger as a process too easy to control. And this anger from the "feminist renaissance" seems to have fizzled out in

---

3It is misleading to write this quotation after talking about the beginnings of the "Women's Movement" (1970s) in the U.S., for Alice Walker puts it into the mouth of a woman in contemporary Africa; but the situation of the speech seems analogous enough to warrant use.
the 1980s. Or rather its expression has been displaced onto women of color: where axes of racism and sexism cross sparking up and striking out:

My Black woman's anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret... It is an electric thread woven into every emotional tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life -- a boiling hot spring likely to erupt at any point, leaping out of my consciousness like a fire on the landscape. [Lorde 145]

This passage was written by Audre Lorde, who through her poems and performances vividly demonstrates that she is a Warrior, not a peacemaker. She is a warrior in that she recognizes, encourages and wrestles with her emotions, looking to the "Uses of Anger" to refigure it in an even sharper focus as a positive practice, rather than a negative emotion. Lorde seeks not to tame her energies as Susi Kaplow argues above, but, as the sentence which finishes the passage above states, to train them: "How to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life."

Lorde speaks throughout her writings "as a woman of Color who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival." [133] Echoing again and again that she does not give a damn if some are turned off by her tactics, because her anger and her poetry are practices through which she can live her life, and help others live theirs:

I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself. [147]

Yet Lorde still seems to sense that something is missing. Though anger is useful, it is also spatial: there are other tasks to be done for which anger will not serve:
And true, sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive; it burns with a bright and undiminished flame. Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge. More useful than hatred, but still limited. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. [152]

In this chapter, I argue that laughter, when ironically spiced with anger and desire, can be used to create an alternative future by rewriting the past.

This has been an oblique entry into a discussion of feminist theory and laughter. About the gendered and racial position of laughter. Yet here I hope to be stylistically a follower of Foucault first presenting what I am, in a sense, not going to be arguing for. Though certainly not arguing against the use of anger, I hope to switch the focus to see what use laughter can have on this textual and political turf. Angry folks like Audre Lorde the Warrior will still bleed into the discussion, dying the text with the bright colors of poetry and stories. Nourishing it with her sharp wit. Bringing her own oyster knife. As, perhaps, a Laughing Warrior.

Now let us switch textual turfs to consider A Question of Silence, a Dutch film where laughter, anger and desire are twisted together in intriguing ways. Ways which will adumbrate how an unlikely parallel emerged between my readings of feminist theory texts and laughter texts; "laughter" and "desire" are often deployed in much the same way: the two terms function in similar ways with respect to women. All four terms -- laughter, anger, desire, and
women -- are not natural entities to be discovered, but semiotically constructed signs to be negotiated, just as the film is directed.

The narrative of *A Question of Silence*, is particularly compelling here for it parallels the arguments to be made in the first part of this chapter. It opens with the smiling heterosexual desire of Janine Van den Boos who is trying to seduce her inattentive husband. She finally gets his attention when she parodically "murders" him by tracing a pen from his throat to his belly -- the same wound that Andrea, Annie and Christine have inflicted to kill the shop owner Van Houten, perhaps on the very same day. Only when the murder is complete do the Van den Booses roll together in laughter as the opening credits roll by the screen.

The film ends with expressions of order and disorder. An order of women displacing desire: Janine and the witnesses to the murder, exchange homoerotic glances of solidarity, possibility, after they have been ejected from the murder trial. The trial which they had disordered with raucous, fully voiced laughter to mock the patriarchal proceedings.

The complexities of this displacement of laughter, anger, and desire in *A Question of Silence* can be traced out by considering some of the writing being done in the psychoanalytic semiotics -- which is strangely appropriate since Janine is a forensic psychologist who is saddled with the task of reading the signs of Andrea, Annie and Christine to determine for the court whether they are "hysterical

---

4It is interesting to note that Janine "kills" her spouse with a pen -- which places her discursively; Andrea, Annie and Christine gorging the shopowner with hangers, killing him with the tools of his trade.
women," or whether the patriarchal society in which they are immersed is insane.

desire

One of the main themes of Psychoanalytic-semiotics is the reading and writing of desire. The notion of desire employed here comes from Sigmund Freud's famous bedtime story as narrated by Luce Irigaray. [34-41] A notion of desire which comes out violently with the representation of women in *A Question of Silence.*

Freud's Oedipal myth shows how the narrative of desire has been written just for little boys. It is a phallocentric model, for the libido is always masculine. The "woman's place" in this story is one of exclusion and loss: the little girl sees herself as a little man, for sexuality is focused on the clitoris, which is semiotically constructed as a little penis. When the girl, as the story continues, sees the boy's penis, she sees (notice the heavy ocular metaphor) herself as castrated. Compared with the boy, she has no sex -- only a truncated penis: penis envy now directs her sexuality. Freud further narrates that there is then a switch of erogenous zones from the clitoris to the vagina -- feminine sexuality moves toward the unseen, the mysterious interior, the supposed passivity of the vagina.

Teresa de Lauretis draws the conclusion that in this powerful story women have no autonomous desire: it is not a question of pleasure/displeasure, but just a "fact" of un-pleasure. Desire, for the

---

5There are many other notions which deal with the complexity of desire much more adequately. Yet this simply gendered notion of desire brings out the meanings of laughter and desire better.
woman, is the desire for the other -- man -- and more importantly, the desire to be desired. It is dependent on men. The sexual scenes of the film demonstrate how the female body, as suggested above, is semiotically constructed as the object of the gaze, "the site of multiple male pleasures." [de Lauretis:149] Women are oppressively sexualized throughout the film. The film's last words are "Look where you're going, cunt." In another scene, as Andrea is walking away from the murder she is assumed to be a prostitute, a "street walker" because she is walking the street, licking an ice cream cone. The resulting sex is purely economic for Andrea, who except for underwear is always fully-clothed; she laughs at naked man's looks of confusion and disbelief.

This relation of desires is not "limited to the bedroom" either. It comes out in knowledge practices as well. As the psychologist Janine initially exhibits the faulty syllogisms of her profession-al desire: "I want to understand you. I want to help you," Freud talks not just of [men's] desire for women, but of the desire to know; or put another way: a question is always a question of desire. [de Lauretis:111, 112] Once again Knowledge is Power; Understanding is Control.

Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. [Irigaray:77] Christine feels this mute-ation; she has only one line in the entire film. As Janine explains to the court: "Her refusal to speak is a choice that she has now made.... She can communicate, but sees no point in it." In the end Andrea, Annie and Christine must be declared insane because the male characters in the
film just cannot understand why these three women, who had never met, would brutally murder a man they did not know before that day. These men are blinded to the sexist institutions and processes involved, only seeing isolated actions, and violent incidences. For though it is central to Andrea that the murdered person was a man, the prosecutor "sees no difference between it [being a man] and if there was a female shop owner." It is at this point that the accused women start laughing.

laughter

Though anger is the dominant emotion in *A Question of Silence*, laughter is the most common practice. Laughter serves to build the tension throughout the film until the frustrated flood is released in peals of laughter which disorder the courtroom; the end of the film is punctuated with the full stop of shared smiles on the steps outside as "The End" flashes on the screen. Laughter, as all foregrounded practices in this film, is heavily gendered.6

Regina Barreca's "Introduction" to a volume entitled *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* can help to untwist some of these laughs to hold them up to the hot lamps of analysis before they slip out of my hands springing back to another configuration. Barrecca and others argue that laughter -- as it is

---

6Gendered knowledge practices and understanding as agreement comes out in the courtroom scene when the prosecutor contests Janine's assessment that "I can reach no other conclusion than that the three women [no names mentioned; doesn't say "people"] are completely sound of mind." Following the disorder that this statement produces, the prosecutor argues: "But from a psychiatrist one might at least expect, *even from a woman*, a certain objectivity." Janine's heated response is "What you mean by objectivity is *Your* attitude."
traditionally constituted in the genre of comedy (or how the genre of comedy is constituted) -- is male centered in a similar way to Freudian desire. Barreca cites a plethora of [male] literary critics who figure comedy as an all-male pastime. And as Lisa Merrill writes [272]:

The vast majority of theatre historians who attempt to trace comedy to rites of the Greek god, Dionysius, attach to this development a particularly male cast. For example, Walter Sorell claims that comedy was "born in the name of the phallic symbol"(19), since Dionysian rituals were associated with phallic dances.

Hence [male] critics tend to gloss over women's humor or destroy it, often by taking the figurative as literal, the ironic as monovocal. One critic sees Jane Austen as dealing with only "small potatoes." [Barreca] The gendered power relations of laughter in the film are clear when Annie is told "Mrs. Jongman, you are not doing your case any good." after she starts laughing at the ludicrous nature of her trial.

As in traditional notions of desire, women are only objects of comedy, not the initiators. Even though Erasmus in his classic In Praise of Folly, figures Folly as a woman, her laughter is without power [29]: "a woman is still a woman -- that is, a fool -- no matter what role she may try to play." Women are expected to laugh at men's jokes, just as women are expected to satisfy men's sexual desires. Moreover, reminiscent of the last passage from Irigaray

---

7In the last chapter I cited Charles Schutz making similar phallic references to humor. Irony is also seen as Dionysian: Charles I. Glicksberg, cites Dionysius as an "originator" of irony. Nietzsche refers to a "jesting Dionysius" in his Genealogy of Morals. [156]
cited above, when women initiate humor, and articulate it in their own language, men are most often threatened. [Barreca:6]

feminist humor

_A Question of Silence_ vividly demonstrates the shear volume of chuckles present among characters who are again and again coded as "normal women." Annie in particular is always laughing; her smile is flattened only at a few points, like when the men in the restaurant where she _works_ laugh after one quips: "All women know about economics is how to open their hands for cash, and their legs as a reward." When Annie sneers back, the response is "Don't fly off the handle. Where's your sense of humor?"

To hear her laughs, as laughs of feminist humor, one just has to look in different places, and for different notions than traditional humor, laughter and comedy. Just as the conversations at the Van den Boos dinner party are segregated between the women and the men, so is much humor, largely because women's experiences and social positions are characteristically different from men's.8

Annie resumes laughing again when the police come to arrest her for the murder (of a man). She jokes with her customers that they can come and visit her in the clink. Indeed, women are most threatening to phallocracy when are told that they have "no sense of humor," or conversely when they laugh on their own.

_A Question of Silence_ is an example of how traditional genre can be refigured to serve different needs. Barreca looks to structural

---

differences between gendered comedies. For example, traditionally the genre of comedy revolves around a three act structure where, though the existing order is initially disordered through laughter with the status quo reaffirmed by the close of the curtain and its attending monovocal laughter: tragedies end with the death of the hero, comedies with his marriage.

"Women's comedy," or any other sort of radical comedy, often does not have such a "happy ending" where the structures are reaffirmed after being questioned: *A Question of Silence* does not have a positive ending for the "three women." The laughter disrupts the proceedings, but the judge responds by clearing the courtroom of the laughing parties. He declares that "This case will now continue in the defendants' absence." The Silence that was never really in Question is thus actualized through institutional structures. Outside the courthouse where women exchange glances over the interruption of Mr. Van den Boos' beeping car horn, there is only the possibility for laughter contained in their ambiguous smiles.

Barreca argues more for the anger component of the laughter, anger, desire triad in the examples of "women's comedy" that she cites: there are endings with enraged laughter about how these oppressive institutions need to be changed: an angry laughter, a disordering laughter, a polyvocal laughter which aims to decenter the discourse. The Laughing Warrior as in *Sister Outsider* and the *Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Perhaps there are so many angry laughs and bitter laughs because the gaps in the hegemonic culture, as represented in the film, are so tight that women have to stab through.
back to psychoanalytic - semiotic desire

In *A Question of Silence* the male desire is oppressive, but there is room for other maps of Eros where the cruise control of silence leads female characters down a different road to themselves and to each other. Likewise, as a resistance to a phallocratic discourse of desire, both Teresa de Lauretis and Luce Irigaray try to map out, or leave space for, a feminine desire.

In this project, de Lauretis stresses subjectivity in terms of processes whereby one actively creates one's own character. Recognizing the problematic nature of settling on such a term -- subjectivity -- de Lauretis does not argue in terms of "grounding," but in terms of interplay and process: the subject is where meanings are formed, and meanings constitute the subject.[33] In her mapping out of "woman as subject," de Lauretis's project is not just to make visible the invisible, but to produce the conditions of visibility for a different kind of social subject. [9] Even so, there are problems with de Lauretis' tight focus on "subjectivity" where she stresses subject as producer too much and subject as produced too little.

With her attention to refiguring of the female body, Irigaray's wrestlings with feminine desire are at once both more theoretical and more embodied than de Lauretis's. Irigaray is not looking to make a subject, like de Lauretis, but focuses on how subjects are made, specifically in language and discourse.

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been
submerged by the logic [and comedy] that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks. [25]

Desire, likewise, is submerged in the film: sex with her husband literally becomes a nightmare for Janine. When Andrea asks her with an erotic gaze "What do you want now?" -- playing on the ambiguities between physical and intellectual desire -- Janine does not, cannot, answer in spoken language. Yet Andrea can sense her desire through body language, and Janine receives Andrea's highly erotic "massages;" though Andrea never touches Janine, she traces Janine's body with building desire -- until the spell is broken by a man barging into the room, saying only "Sorry, wrong door," before he disappears again. And, of course, there is Christine who cannot speak her desire in language although she, in turn, accepts Janine's caresses.

Though A Question of Silence opens the possibility of a refigured desire and refigured laughter, the film settles, as does Zora Neale Hurston, in a positive expression of anger. Here we have to appeal to Irigaray to suggest an empowering notion of desire and laughter.

Irigaray's first task is to jam the unitary male discourse, which restricts this expression and constitution, aiming to explode it with (and into) feminine multiplicity, jumping off from what the women briefly did with laughter in the courtroom. Irigaray does this in terms of talking about (and around) "speaking (as) woman" -- a term

---

9A Question of Silence is full of female "speech" being disrupted by men in this way. Mr. Van den Boos, while saying what might be coded as "anti-establishment" things, continually interrupts Janine. At the trial, the judge interrupts Janine's heated debate with the prosecutor so he can break for lunch.
whose attitude is exemplified in the polyvocality and hesitation within the term itself. Irigaray is venturing to create a syntax which would make a woman's self-affection possible -- not reducible to one, to a male-scripted one. [132]

Here Irigaray is referring to her argument that dominant [male] logical discourse is unitary because of singularity of the penis -- an object which must be mediated [by hand, by woman]. This is as opposed to feminine lips which are multiple and autoerogenous -- touching themselves all the time. As Irigaray writes [26]:

The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning ... supplants, while separating and dividing, the contact of at least two (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is being touched.

Feminine desire then is not a simple toggle-switch of either on or off. It is, as Irigaray writes: "Nothing; Everything."

Perhaps then, in an autoerogenous way, women could be said to be laughing all the time, but, like Annie, in a different way; at a different place; at a different time. One could refigure Irigaray's "speaking (as) woman" to "laughing (as) woman," with the corollary of "never laughing; all-ways laughing."

Irigaray suggests, or leaves space for, such an interpretation when she talks about the syntax of body language indicative of "speaking (as) woman" where gestures of resistance come out "in suffering, but also in women's laughter." [134]
In addressing questions about how to avoid the simple reversal of phallogocentrism, Irigaray talks of laughter in terms of the excess of escaping a binary opposition which allows only for reversals [163]: And my "first" reaction to this excess is to laugh. Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcends it "first" in laughter?

Besides, women among themselves begin by laughing. To escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh. Not to forget that the dimension of desire, of pleasure, is untranslatable, unrepresentable, irrecoverable, in the "seriousness" -- the inadequacy, the univocity, the truth... -- of a discourse that claims to state its meaning.

Back in Barreca's volume on women and comedy, Lisa Merrill writes about what I am calling "laughing (as) woman." Comedy by women, and for women, to laugh amongst themselves rather than being subject to and object of male desire-comedy. The difference lies in that women comedians, Merrill argues, are self-critical without being self-deprecating. That things are funny not so much "ha-ha," as funny "amazing." [277]
Section II: ironies and stories

"O! Hwai dungsyi!" -- You bad little thing -- said the woman teasing her baby granddaughter. "Is Buddha teaching you to laugh for no reason?" As the baby continued to gurgle, the woman felt a deep wish stirring in her heart.

"Even if I could live forever," she said to the baby, "I still don't know which way I would teach you. I was once so free and innocent. I too laughed for no reason.

"But later I threw away my foolish innocence to protect myself. And then I taught my daughter, your mother, to shed her innocence so she would not be hurt as well.

"Hwai dungsyi, was this kind of thinking wrong? If I now recognize evil in other people, is it not because I have become evil too? If I see someone has a suspicious nose, have I not smelled the same bad things?"

The baby laughed, listening to her grandmother's laments.

"O! O! You say you are laughing because you have already lived forever, over and over again? You say you are Syi Wang Mu, Queen Mother of the Western Skies, now come back to give me the answer! Good, good, I am listening....

"Thank you, Little Queen. Then you must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever." [239]

This passage from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* helps us jump into the second part of this chapter, for in many ways it is analogous to the quote from Zora Neale Hurston written above. Just as Hurston opts for anger, here the grandmother is pondering how she gave up laughter for survival. But the laughs persist in the infant, and the
grandmother appeals to Syi Wang Mu -- a Chinese fantastic character -- to ask questions about her very historical life.

It is this ironic move, the temporal twist, that is the focus in this section, for Syi Wang Mu [Xi Wang Mu] is a character who lives on borders. Her palace in the Kun Lun Mountains marks the western border of the Chinese cultural cosmos; she is a hybrid in many ways perhaps a mix of Central Asian and Han Chinese stock. And most importantly here, the Queen Mother of the West has an ironic position in that map of Chinese culture that she herself defines: she resides along the border between fact and fiction, between history and story: historians, geographers, archaeologists and even economists still argue over whether Xi Wang Mu actually (i.e. Historically) existed or not.

The temporal irony of History/myth in many ways parallels the structure of Tan's novel: it is a collection of stories written by four mothers and their four daughters. The mothers tell fantastic stories of their lives,10 while the daughters tell familiar tales about "relationships." Mothers and daughters think differently, and this Misunderstanding brings them into conflict, as one of the daughters narrates [27]:

I had always assumed we had an unspoken understanding about these things: that she didn't really mean I was a failure, and I really meant I would try to respect her opinions more. But listening to Auntie Lin tonight reminds me once again: My mother and I never

---

10 For example, the first story is about a woman who abandons her daughters on a road while fleeing the Japanese army during World War II. This action, which seems so unbelievable at first becomes understandable as the circumstances of the story are told and retold throughout the novel.
really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more. No doubt she told Auntie Lin I was going back to school to get a doctorate.

Part of this is geographical: the mothers were born in China and immigrated to the U.S. to give birth to the daughters.

Yet for many this argument is moot, the grandmother doesn't care one way or the other about the History/mythology question. Tan refigures HIStory into mythology to gain position and power in a very oppressive system of Chinese patriarchy\(^{11}\) much like Maxine Hong Kingston -- a shero of Tan's -- does in *The Woman Warrior* [19-20]:

> When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen....

> At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her

\(^{11}\)This patriarchy comes out not just in History in China, but also in Literature which is often based on History. In conversation Milena Dolezelova and Steve Goldberg have remarked that women are cosmologically bound in Chinese culture to the passive Yin element of the "natural process" of Yin/Yang. Whenever female characters become active, they are judged as dangerous deviants. Female power is evil. This stanza from the opening poem of *The Golden Lotus*, a classical Chinese novel, can serve as an example [1]:

```
Beautiful is this maiden; her tender form gives promise of sweet womanhood,
But a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs, whereby destruction comes to foolish men.
No head falls to that sword: its work is done in secret.
Yet it drains the very marrow from men's bones.
```

This is a powerful and important passage in that the first chapter of this genre is structurally taken as reflecting the order of the cosmos. [Bailey; Dolezelova 1991]
father's place in battle.... She [my mother] said that I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would grow up to be a warrior woman.

Yet Tan's character draws power from the Queen Mother of the West to rescript her life with laughter. The grandmother is interested in finding a way to discard the "no reason" from "laughing for no reason," and keep the "laugh" rather than the other way around; to use the laughter just as anger is used for survival (and dare I say, "happiness"?). This brings out the power of the story and the power of the laugh in tandem, as Suyuan Woo says [11]: "Oh, what good stories! Stories spilling out all over the place! We almost laughed to death."

ironies and heterochronia

Though Luce Irigary talks about multiplying the singularity of male discourse and "escap[ing] the pure and simple reversal of the masculine position," [163] she still seems caught up in the totalizing binary of male/female. Irigaray figures "speaking (as) woman as exterior to phallocracy, a formulation which makes me a bit uneasy in light of Foucault's argument that there is no resistance exterior to power. The oppressive nature of arguments scripted by the practice of psychoanalytic - semiotics has been pointed out by such writers as Joan Cocks. She takes cultural-political approach which deals specifically with conscious life -- with what people utter and do, for remember, Hurston speaks her own words -- as opposed to de Lauretis' "politics of the unconscious."
In *The Oppositional Consciousness*, Cocks argues that taking as given such binaries as Male/female can lull us into accepting the seductive, yet limiting, arguments catalogued above. Rather than seeing bodies as specifically male or female, she wishes to look into the conscious actions of people and see the multiplicity of practices and bodies; to look to the holes in Patriarchy, at characters which do not fit neatly into the Male/female binary. Still Cocks takes these bodies, in their new multiplicity, for granted as yet another ground upon which to stand.

Such research as de Lauretis', Irigaray's and Cocks' is innovative in that it focuses on the space of utterances and practices. As Hurston begins her biography [28]: "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say." But thus far the research has over emphasized the "place axis" over the "time axis" of space. Memories are not only of a different place, but also of a different time. In the remainder of this chapter, we will figur laughter not just in heterotopia, but as appealing to the other element of space, to place irony in heterochronia.

Heterochronia is "Of Other Times," and is the juxtaposition of many "real" times against each other to form a temporal pastiche with no central date such as the birth of Christ or the Buddha. It is positioned not just in many spaces, but in Space itself: when looking up at the stars we see the universe not as it is, but as it was. The light from each star (or any other object) takes a different amount of time to get to the observor's eye, hence we are witnessing different
times as well as different places when we look out to the heavens. Closer to this chapter, one could argue that the mother/daughter stories of Kingston and Tan, as well as Walker's "memories" of Hurston are also creative practices of heterochronia. Heterochronic misunderstandings.

Denise Riley, in her book "Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History, deals with similar issues of body and subjectivity as de Lauretis, Cocks and Irigaray, but suggests heterochronia by adding the new twist of temporality. Riley shifts questioning to "when" from "what," and in so doing provides a useful "summary" of the debate as represented thus far in this chapter. She argues that "what" is a metaphysical question, which is used by writers such as Irigaray and de Lauretis to settle in the category of "women," as opposed to "man" or "humanity;" and "what" is used by those like Cocks -- who reject as totalitarian description of things in terms of Patriarchy with its Male/female dichotomy as primary -- to opt for a "post-gendered subjectivity" as a Gramscian counter-identity.

Riley is looking for neither identities nor counter-identities, but is always struggling in process, for there are no subjects without a degree of subjection: she is wary of "the dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection." [17] Or as she puts it in relation to the category of 'women'[15]: "It was not so much women were omitted, as that they were too thoroughly included in an asymmetrical manner."

Hence Riley argues for a temporality of identity which is one way of allowing for fluid identity as characterization, not as a
founding category. Sometimes female bodies are primarily women, sometimes they are primarily other things: students; laughers; writers. With this fluidity, there is space for a multiplicity of identity, for Riley is also against a simple reversal.\footnote{Actually, one rarely come across scholars arguing for a simple reversal; all the writers here state explicitly that they are against it, yet is often still sneaks through since the dominant mode of discourse is legislated to a large extent in binaries.}

But rather than transcending gender or striking out on a new ground of subjectivity, Riley looks to re-negotiate her situation using extant materials: she suggests the politics of irony: an irony of identity in feminism which points to its potentially inexhaustible flexibility in pursuing its aims. This would include a capacity for a lively and indeed revivifying irony about this 'women' who is the subject of all tongues. A political movement possessed of reflexivity and an ironic spirit would be formidable indeed. [98]

Such a politics of irony could more adequately address the needs and issues of the women's movement, which hover around both sameness and difference: (political, social, economic, and so on) equality with men, as well as attention to difference in the 'special needs' of women. Such is the possible politics of an ironic heterochronia.

There have been many jumps thus far in this chapter, particularly with \textit{A Question of Silence} and Irigaray, but the text always seems to stop in midair, hesitation overcoming gravity: jumping from anger almost into laughter. Now I would like to jump off Tan's cliff of knowing hope, to make a leap of faith from Denise Riley's ironic ledge.
into the pools of theory and narrative which wash over into each other, cross fertilizing each other in the works of Alice Walker and Trinh T. Mihn-ha.

The recent works of these writers, particularly Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* and Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other* are involved in the same struggles for power and meaning that the works considered thus far have been. But they differ stylistically in what I take to be important and empowering ways, ways which can bring out the ironies that Riley could only suggest in her more "academic" style. One could call them both "theorists," but they agree that "theory is suspicious, as long as it remains an occupied territory." [Trinh:42] Walker and Trinh both lean more towards folks like Lorde than Irigaray, towards the fantasy of Xi Wang Mu rather than the brutal documentary style of films like *A Question of Silence*. The place they both decide to settle for that of the storyteller. In this loosening of the grip on what one might call "reality" as written in history, they are engaged in different, though certainly related, projects than other sorts of feminist theory. Perhaps this passage from Trinh will help explain [16]:

*Clear* expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric*, whose aim was to order discourse so as to persuade. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify as "clear" (paradox is "illogical" and "nonsensical" to many Westerners), for the intent lies outside the realm of persuasion.

Both Trinh and Walker play on the borders of fact and fiction, each reaching into the other from different angles, stressing different
things: Walker's book is coded as a novel; Trinh's as "Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies." They each utilize the story to persuade, but more importantly to expand, to create, to push at those who are considered to be "normal woman" in *A Question of Silence*, or some notion of "speaking (as) woman" in Irigaray. As Trinh says: "A story is not just a story. Once the forces have been aroused and set into motion, they can't simply be stopped at someone's request."

[133] Or some man's interruption as in *A Question of Silence*.

Again: the stories are much more complex than persuasive devices. Following *The Joy Luck Club* they are not only told in desperation, but also in joy [Trinh:119]:

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy. Told for the joy it gives the storyteller and the listener. Joy inherent in the process of storytelling. Whoever understands it also understands that a story, as distressing as it can be in its joy, never takes anything away from anybody. Its name, remember, is joy.

In heterochronia, the stories are not just timeless, but timely as well: "The story never really begins or ends, even though there is a beginning and end to every story, just as there is a beginning and end to every teller." [1] Yet they are not innocuous tales of flight and fancy, but another means of resistance. Or another means of the politics of relating to each other in a community; Trinh opens her book telling the story of a village meeting where decisions are made through the consensus of story-telling: "By the end of the meeting, everyone has spoken." [2] Storytelling is importantly gendered: the
tellers are Tan's mother, Kingston's mother, and Trinh's last chapter is called "Grandma's Story."

Storytelling can be a powerful means of politics because -- like polyvocal laughter -- it is an acting out of multiplicity in a negotiation of conflicting events and sometimes contesting identities, always crossing emotions to twist together laughter, anger and desire in new ways. "The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity." [Trinh:2]

The ironic politics that Riley suggests comes out best in stories, perhaps because the fluid identities of characterization of which she speaks can come out best in characters. In stories characters must be multi-faceted to be workable, even more so in folk tales than in modern novels. (For example, Thai folk tales abound in what now would be called extraneous characters and settings, the narrative rarely progresses in a linear mode, yet the stories keep being told and retold. They work, but in different ways.)

Both Walker and Trinh manipulate the genre of storytelling throughout their work negotiating their multiple identities, as well as trading in old "selves" for new ones, different ones. In this way they write heterochronically as well as heterotopically. Trinh moves out from her identity as a Vietnamese-American woman, breaking out of the North-South or East-West relation to consider South Africa, India and the balance of Southeast Asia. Walker leaves her home in the South to write a rich tale of race, of Afro-americans, Africans, Chicanas, and whites. Of women and men, gay and straight. Both of their tales spin around multiple oppressions and multiple resources
for empowerment, contesting what Trinh calls the common plight of a woman of color who writes [6]: "she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color?"

This is where the genre of stories is useful. Stories can serve to manage these multiple identities for a purpose, for Trinh stresses again how "Writing [h]as a social function -- as differentiated from the ideal of art for art's sake." [10]

The social function concentrated on here is what I choose to call "remythologizing." With heterochronia writers can recraft the past to serve the present, analogous to Riley in her call for a renegotiating of the situation using extant materials. As one of Walker's characters says of her father -- a playwright -- in a critical and suspicious way: "Perhaps this is simply the way it is with writers. It is when they don't see you that you matter. Because then you can belong to them in a way that permits them complete possession. You are determined by them. You are controlled. You are, generally speaking, exaggerated." [259]

Yet as a social function what the "writer" does is much more than scribbling plays or words as in this character's work. With the story, people as well as characters can be empowered to script and re-script their lives -- reread the past and open up the future to different configurations of laughter, anger and desire.

It is this aspect of storytelling that Alice Walker excels at, remythologizing the History of the World into herstories of many worlds. Time is utilized in warped ways, juggling moments with millennia, while casting the dice to see which lifetime the next story
will tell. Chance; fruitful disorder. Like Riley's temporal ironies, Walker "historicizes" her utopias to write in terms of heterotopias and heterochronias -- of different times and places.

In *The Temple of My Familiar* Walker juggles identities and spins the wheel of time in at least two distinct ways, through two distinct characters. Fanny travels through time to meet other characters; Lissie composes time through recalling her various lives in various times. Both characters engage in an ironic politics that dances around time and identity.

Fanny rewrites history as she travels through time, landing on long forgotten spirits who become "real people" of the past, people who have been buried by mainstream history. As Trinh writes [121]:

> The worlds earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination.

A case in point is the affair Fanny has with the ironic hero Chief John Horse, a black Indian chief among the Seminoles of Florida: an escaped slave who became a warrior, eventually drifting along the border between Mexico and Texas. Walker writes of people who have become empowered, of heroes who come out of a mixed background to do ironic things: Chief John Horse worked as a soldier for both the Mexican and U.S. armies, serving whomever could give him the best deal.

And these heterochronic experiences are directly empowering to Fanny as she rescripts her own life. When asked what these experiences do for her, she replies:
"They open doors inside me. It's as if they're keys. To rooms inside myself. I find a door inside and it's as if I hear a humming from behind it, and then I get inside somehow, with the key the old ones give me, and as I stumble about in the darkness of the room, I begin to feel the stirring in myself, the humming of the room, and my heart starts to expand with the absolute feeling of bravery, or love, or audacity, or commitment. It becomes a light, and the light enters me, by osmosis, and a part of me that was not clear before is clarified." [185-6]

The new mythology empowers Fanny the way a story or an innovative theory empowers Trinh's characters. Fanny is empowered because with the spirits she can map out her own desire by creating her own images. Stories here are not restricting, for she can wander/wonder around the cosmos to find a "historical" situation that she likes, a circumstance that brings out new aspects of herself that she wants to explore.

Even though Fanny's experiences are intensely personal, in the novel the practices and problems of the history/mythology distinction are taken as a family affair as opposed to a binary opposition: each family member comes at the task from a different angle, yet they all share something. Walker pits such creative storytelling and remythologizing directly against History with Fanny's husband Suwelo. He is a historian who struggles personally and professionally with Fanny's historical romances. "Suwelo was again surprised, as he often was, that even though he was a historian he had heard nothing of this." [184] Teaching the American history of the settlement of the West, Suwelo had heard nothing about figures such as Chief John Horse. Eventually the new mythology prevails;
Suwelo quits his job because he decides that he just can't teach a history that excludes him anymore.

Fanny's father Ola also likes to play with history as a playwright from a fantastic African country named Olinka. Rather than pulling obscure heroes out of the utopica imagination of the past, Ola remythologizes present stars. Ola talks of writing a play to re-write Elvis into a hybrid that many people could identify with. A hybrid "whose lineage is hidden even from [him]self.... According to Ola, Elvis Prestley and Johnny Cash are both Indians. A foreigner sees this immediately, he says; Americans do not. He says this explains Elvis's clothing style. His love of buckskin and fringe, of silver, and of course, he was as black as all the other white people in Mississippi...

Suppose that little bump-and-grind the crowds loved so was originally a movement of the circle dance... Suppose that little hiccupy singing style of his was once a war whoop. Or an Indian love call." [188-189]

Ola writes this to play with multiple identities to examine how such ironies can be liberating. For "over time a lot of racial boundaries are crossed and new people [are] created... who don't, after all, have a firm tribal category in which to be imprisoned." [187]³

Getting back to Fanny's habit of falling in love with spirits, one could argue that it is escapist, and thus shows a certain depoliticized romanticism. Fanny is certainly scripting her own desire, but even

---

³Fanny's sister, also named Nzingha, does some more rehistoricizing. When confronted with the Eurocentric histories of civilization while studying in Paris, she becomes very uncomfortable with the discourse that denies Africa. She goes on to tell the story of how civilization started in Africa, how ancient Egyptians were black, how "western" gods came from African dieties.
though she may not choose to live in the conscious world, it goes on living her. Her withdrawl in many ways comes out of the anger that Fanny has for the world, specifically the hegemonic white world. As Suwelo surmises:

perhaps Fanny falls in love with spirits rather than living people because they are the only ones she can trust. Also, spirits can be claimed and cannot reject you, maybe, but living people can and often do. [397]

Fanny goes into the past because she cannot trust the present; much as Ola can only really know someone once they are gone, when he can not only write about them, but write them. But Fanny finally finds three living spirits in the present who she can trust at the end of the book, for a "happy ending:"

"Relax," says Arveyda, taking a sip of fresh grape juice.
"This is serious work, it's true; but you know, most serious work can be fun."

Suwelo thinks of making love to Fanny. How there is always a point now at which she laughs. [382]

A happy ending in which a new order of desire is established, one which questions heterosexism, and laughs in a temporal irony.

While Fanny is constantly struggling with her world and has little chance to laugh, Lissie enters the story as an old woman who has lived countless lives and has confidence in her experience and how it differs from most everyone else's -- much like the wisdom of the Queen Mother of the West who has "already lived forever, over and over again." [239] In her old age Lissie tells the stories of her lives to Suwelo, acting out Trinh's talk-story of empowering process [122]:


In this chain and continuum, I am but one link. The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring.

While Fanny as a stable-self journeys through multiplying history, Lissie in many ways is the mobile and multiple subjectivity that Fanny often enters. Lissie embodies this spirit through her many stories; she literalizes the metaphor of multiplicity by being many people. She even speaks of herself in the plural: "I'm the kind of woman that likes to enjoy herself in peace." [92]

Lissie achieves this multiplicity through the heterochronia of her memory, acting out another metaphor, for "Lissie means 'the one who remembers everything.'" [52] When she was young, Lissie wrestled with these memories and the confusion, or "no certain form" they gave her. Lissie had, as she says, "years of anger and confusion of this, years of fighting everyone! But finally it dawned upon me that my memory and the photographs corroborated each other exactly. I had been those people, and they were still somewhere inside of me." [91]

What she is referring to are series of photographs taken of her which all looked different:

Suwelo remembered Mr. Hal's remark: "Lissie is a lot of women," and expected to see a lot of pictures of the same woman dressed to make herself appear different; and it was true in each picture the chair -- one of those in the picture left behind -- was the same, and the outfit varied greatly. What he saw, though, were thirteen pictures of

---

14 Kathy Ferguson talks about this in terms of Mobile Subjectivity.
thirteen entirely different women. One seemed tall, another very short, one light-skinned, with light eyes, another dark with eyes like obsidian. One had hair to her waist, another had hardly enough to cover her skull. One appeared acrobatic, healthy and glowing. Another seemed crippled and barely ambulatory. [90]

In a photographic way reminiscent of the passage from Zora Neale Hurston reproduced at the head of this chapter, Lissie recounts the history of her lives through storytelling sessions with Hal and Suwelo. Walker masterfully weaves these complex story-spaces into each other in beautiful prose. Lissie tells stories of the beginning of time before there was a sharp border between "man" and animal, before patriarchy in a matriarchal and parallel society. Lissie multiplies her identity on another axis by telling stories of being white and sometimes male as well as being a black woman. [369]

The stories contain anger and joy, vicious laughter as well as joyous smiles. Yet unlike Hurston, Lissie settles in laughter.

The last story that Lissie tells is to Suwelo; it is on a tape that Suwelo hears after her death as her last testament. The tape is punctuated by laughter: "Miss Lissie chuckled. Then laughed and laughed. Suwelo did too. Her laughter was the last sound on that side of the tape." [369]

There is an important shift in the sort of laughter that Lissie utters and the laughter that Annie peals in A Question of Silence. In the film, there is a scene where Janine is going over a tape of a
session with Annie. The tape here also contains long periods of laughter, guffaws seemingly for no reason. Janine does not join in as Suwelo does, perhaps because Annie's guffaws which do not fit into Reason. They are the marks of insanity, of mental dis-ease, the laughs of hysteria.

Lissie has already gone through the crisis of confidence that Janine and "the three women" are experiencing (Perhaps Lissie gave up on mainstream society long ago?); her laughter is empowering. When Lissie found people such as Suwelo's uncle who could understand her -- discover themselves inside her, as Lorde writes -- Lissie can laugh with confidence and with accuracy. As Suwelo narrates [36]:

And the depth of this laughter! The way it seemed to go so deep far down inside it scraped the inside bottoms of the feet. No one laughed like that anymore. Nothing seemed funny enough. When his uncle and his guests finished laughing, they'd seemed lighter, clearer; even their activities appeared to be done more gracefully. It was as if the laughing emptied them, and sharing it placed whatever was laughable and unbearable in its proper perspective.

But Lissie shows that there is still laughter that is both joyous and empowered.

Now we have come full circle, twisting around (with Alice Walker) from the "fictional history" of Zora Neale Hurston at the start of this chapter to the "historical fiction" of Lissie at the end -- and perhaps to another ironic beginning. Maybe Lissie is this essay in metaphor (I'm not sure if it is writ large or writ small). She started off as an
angry child, a notorious bully, but shifts to laughter when she can find people who will listen to her, and desire her as Suwelo's uncle does. Lissie shifts laughter from the "uncontrollable hysteria" of *A Question of Silence*, to a confident act of empowerment through a practice of heterotopia and heterochronia both.

Lissie is a Laughing Warrior.

The Queen Mother of the Western Skies.
"Irony: ya can't live with it; ya can't live without it"

...in the last chapter (especially) I seem to have slipped from laughter into irony, venturing from a physical practice into a rhetorical trope. But rather than endeavoring here to write some critical history of irony which would trace it to escaping from the (w)holy absolute unities of God, Science or more recently Modernity, rather than write that book I would like to talk story a bit -- not too long -- about the dangerous necessity of irony these days.

Laughter and irony are related -- they can be used together to entail a political strategy for addressing the seemingly monolithic discourses of Modernity. Laughter can serve to explode the foundations of hierarchies, and irony can be a tactic for action once one has exploded binary oppositions such as a self/other dynamic: irony offers a strategy which allows for difference outside of hierarchy.

In this afterword, I would like to suggest the politics of irony in everyday practice as well as larger projects of "remythologizing." But this will be an uneasy text, for there are many ways to talk about irony: which is not surprising, for by most definitions, irony is multi-coded.

1Charles Glicksberg [1969] wrote an interesting treatment of irony before it was seized by postmodernists; for a postmodern view of irony, I am waiting for Linda Hutcheon's next book.
Ironic necessity and singular "failures"

I once met a man in Thailand. He lived for unity, and when that unity ended, he went crazy. Or so I was told. This nameless man was the curator of a reconstruction project of an ancient Khmer temple complex. He had been working on this job for twenty-five years -- his only job, coming there straight from college. His entire career had been spent restoring a beautiful shrine brick by brick from a field full of scattered debris. He spent five years alone -- working alone -- to rebuild the central Prasad. And when it was declared done and ready for the Crown Princess to dedicate he went mad. Or so they say. He didn't think it was done. He didn't want to draw a line. He wanted to complete his vision in the imagined Unity, but he didn't have all the pieces. He still had big (and ugly) ideas about vast concrete structures to fill in the pieces that he couldn't find -- so it could be finished to look like other temples in other places. Or would he ever think he had attained the elusive Unity, perhaps he just didn't want his life('s work) to end.

His search for Unity hit me in the face when he asked me to "sum up" Chinese philosophy in One word. I hesitated. I wanted to be a good guy, to show my appreciation of his hospitality, and keep the conversation going. A few words fluttered through my mind "harmony," "brightness." But I settled on "multiplicity." He was dissatisfied. He was what one literary historian of irony, Charles Glicksberg, would call a tragic hero who couldn't become ironic, and therefore went "insane."
Perhaps this is what Nietzsche is alluding to when he repeats this passage in last lines of *The Genealogy of Morals*: "Man would sooner have a void as his purpose, than be void of purpose."² Nietzsche tried to counter such a doomed approach by trying to be "happy, unlike the metaphysicians, to possess in oneself not an immortal soul, but many mortal ones."³ Yet in the end Nietzsche also failed by taking himself and his tradition seriously. He went crazy just as Socrates died when he departed from irony.⁴

Ironizing is one method for maintaining sanity in a multiple world which is full of contradictions. As Glicksberg writes: ancient art is religious, and modern art is ironic. [15] In the twentieth century, it is perhaps no longer lost Gods that are being despaired so much as the violence of the secular world, the world of homo economicus. Irony is taken as a way of maintaining sanity in such a godless world though the ghosts are still there in how the question is posed:

... it is taken for granted that we live in an "industrial world" out of control, that we are inexorably moving toward meaninglessness and oblivion, and that we can't get our bearings by looking to God or Nature for guidance.⁵

---

²Frederick Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City, NY:: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956)
In such an ironic world there are no transcendent standards; we find ourselves in a pluralism which commentators such as Arthur Danto see as directionless, meaningless -- a fuzzy ambiguity. Some maintain their sanity ironically, by accepting things as they are and working within such a world, even encouraging its suicidal processes. Knowing full well that they aren't "righting any wrongs, but re-writing them in ever more elaborate ways."

Sanity is kept, or desperately grasped at, by collapsing an is/ought problematic, by fusing comedy and tragedy, by reconciling laughter and tears. And with this fusion, there is also a fragmentation. The irony comes out in that one wears, or possesses, many faces in a fragmented and schizophrenic identity: "they are uprooted men whose personality is marvelously split, whose loyalty is divided, whose identity is radically uncertain."7

In literature this comes out in what Glicksberg calls the "ironic hero." The term itself quite ironic in that in an ironic situation no one is ultimately "right," for no one is burdened with burdened with the flea-bitten mantle of virtue. The ironic hero is hopeless, but s/he tries to maintain dignity through irony.

Lu Xun's classic short story, "The True Story of Ah Q," is ironic in this way. It is a story of making a hero out of a bum. Stylistically, Lu Xun writes this parody of traditional Chinese life in an ironic tone. The first lines of the story problematize authorship, hesitating before any notion of Realist reflection or public service:

---

6 In Kariel, Desperate Politics.
For several years now I have been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q. But while wanting to write I was in some trepidation, too, which goes to show that I am not one of those who achieve glory by writing; for an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man, the man becoming known to posterity through the writing and the writing down to posterity through the man -- until finally it is not clear who is making whom known.8

The narrator of the story also questions traditional categories of writing in his search for a genre for his text: Official biography, autobiography, unauthorized biography, supplementary biography, legend, family history. He finally settles on the "zhen zhuan - true story" genre because Ah Q lacks a steady position, name, background, native place from which he can write. Ah Q is a floating identity which does not fit into any of the boxes -- although it is up to the reader to decide whether this is "marvelous" or not, as the above passage from Kariel would suggest.

The "true story" is set upon the cusp of China's transition from "traditional dynasties" to a "modern state" -- a national shift of identity. Even the title is involved in this multicoding -- "Ah" is a Chinese character, "Q" is in the Latin script we use in English. The Revolution of 1911 and its confrontation of "traditional China" with "the modern (western) world is one of the events in the "true story." Ah Q, the hero, finds himself on borders such as these in how they work themselves out in the more immediate issues such as his hunger and displacement,. The story is of his struggles to survive in

8 Lu Hsun [Lu Xun] Selected Stories of Lu Hsun (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), p. 65  Hereafter notes be in the text following SSL.
such circumstances. It is a semiotic story in that meaning is produced by the manipulation and negotiation of signs. As an "ironic hero" Ah Q ends up reading every situation to his favor. Every defeat is turned into a "psychological victory." Ah Q loses another struggle, yet

In less than ten seconds, however, Ah Q would walk away also satisfied that he had won, thinking that he was the "foremost self-belittler," and that after subtracting "self-belittler" what remained was "foremost." [SSL, 72] He is a "laughingstock" but he is alive. And when he is sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit, he accepts it in a "dignified" (or dignifying) way: "It seemed to him that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off." [SSL, 110] Lu Xun is perhaps searching for dignity for "China," for the story was written in 1921, ten years after the Republican Revolution, at a time when China had "degenerated" into factional warlordism; the next Revolution -- and its unity -- was only just beginning to be discussed with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in that same year.

ironic politics

Quests for unity are persistant. But rather taking One for granted and dividing unity into fragments of schizophrenia, I would like to switch arithmetic signs to multiply with irony. Instead of having a
fusion or a reconciliation, I would like to appeal to irony "to sharpen one's sense of difference."\(^9\) As Donna Haraway writes:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve themselves into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.\(^10\)

In her classic article "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," Haraway occasionally slips back into unity. But I want to disregard such passages, for as Nietzsche so graphically exemplifies, when one jousts with unity, one will always get impaled on its long, single, usually phallic, point. As Haraway writes elsewhere: "Single vision produces worse illusions than double-vision or many headed monsters." [MC, 72]

But I want to discard unity without doing a simple reversal of either backing into Nihilism -- God is not such an issue for those of the television generation -- or an acceptance of Modernity as all we have. Put still another way, rather than looking at irony negatively or in terms of paralysis as many do, I want to look at it in terms of positive values. Following Foucault's concept of power, I want to discard a repressive view of irony for one that can account for its production and its productive aspects. To switch from the division of schizophrenia, and the fuzzy ambiguity of pluralism to a struggle among difference found in multiplicity.


\(^10\) Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" *Socialist Review* (1985) #80, 15:2, p. 65. Hereafter notes will be in the text following MC.
I would like to talk of irony as a practice for action which is attentive to difference and multiplicity. Relentless irony is like juggling. It is a skill; something capable of being learned, one which some do well, and which others may never be able to do at all. But also something that is temporal. Timing is crucial for skillful juggling. And most importantly, one cannot do it all the time. Everyone needs a rest, a break from the trying struggle of ironic identity. To settle into one of its facets as a (mobile) home.

Ironic juggling is active in that it challenges participants and contests the situation: it is a strategy not just to maintain the mind, but to maintain the body -- it is for survival. And this is a maintenance of struggle both within and against the situation as the juggler finds it.

Last time I juggled publicly was when I was asked to give a presentation on "survival skills" for first semester Asian Studies M.A. students as I was finishing up my degree in 1988. This was hostile terrain, for I was (and still am) suspicious of the use of Area Studies: to understand is to control, and how Asian Studies in particular is involved in neo-colonial projects of "market expansion." I wanted to express some of my reservations in this official space, but with professors looking on -- wielding sword-like pens -- I only felt comfortable moving ironically.

So for the presentation I brought a bag of tricks -- although I foregrounded that it was an illicit, imperialist bag of tricks stolen from Canada Post. Among other things, I pulled bean bags out of this sack, and started juggling them, simultaneously explaining that this what one does in Asian Studies. Juggling disciplines, discourses,
cultures, peoples, identities. And, as jugglers sometimes do, I dropped the bags. When I dropped them, people could see how they were inscribed; that they were indeed "alive" -- they were cat bags.

In Asian Studies (as in any social science) one is engaged in juggling people's lives. I then goaded the audience to look more closely and see that these bags were actually Siamese cats -- we were in a Southeast Asian Studies Proseminar, so it hit "home."

I could go on and on with such corny arguments, talking-story about my dinosaur bags -- the prickly bags of out-dated imperialist discourse. But I think that it suffices to state that I see juggling as mixing of metaphors: not a fuzzy shrug of the shoulders of pluralism, but an active struggle of multiplicity there it is a question of asserting agency, if not taking control of irony. As Haraway writes: "pleasure in confusion of boundaries and responsibility for their construction."[MC, 66]

Haraway's article suggests another ironic political space: that of women of color who could be said to be professional jugglers. They are pregnant with identity -- race, class, gender, age, region and so on. For ironic juggling doesn't deal with just two bags which could be dialectically synthesized, but at least three things in continual motion.

The category "Women of Color" again foregrounds another difference between the juggling of plurality and the juggling of multiplicity. In the juggling of multiplicity, things that are juggled aren't all the same -- they are of different weight, i.e. race, class, gender each have different weights at different times. And there is
also often a struggle between these identities in the "hybrid person" as well.

This could be said to be a question of the special skills of timing. The importance of timing which I emphasized in the last chapter is expressed well by a character in "My Beautiful Laundrette" who declares that "I am a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani."¹¹

dangerous and unwieldy multiplicities
But as the Professional Pakistani will tell you, engaging in such ironic politics is easier said than done. There is an intense struggle involved in irony, on playing with the borders that one does not necessarily draw or control. Thomas Berger's Little Big Man exemplifies this struggle of irony in many ways.¹² Structurally, like Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q," it is an ironic document -- at the same time it is an amateur anthropology text and an adventure story. The forward and epilogue are signed by "A Man of Letters," to frame a text transcribed from a tape of the Frontiersman Jack Crabb's oral history. Notwithstanding Berger's authorship altogether. But even with all this mediation, it is a seamless text: once reading one can easily forget about the man of letters who only invades the story at the beginning and end. Yet with this ironic framing makes reading the story heterotopic and heterochronic: the reader is in at least three

¹¹ Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 16.
¹² Indeed, there is irony in the very title: Little Big Man.
spaces at once: the text was produced in Jack's living it, his telling it, and "the Man of Letters" transcribing it.

In eloquently spoken ungrammatical English, Jack Crabb tells stories about life on the border of Cheyenne "Indians" and white "settlers." And the brutal ironies of it:

It was pretty early on that I come to realize that most serious situations in life, or my life anyway, were like that time I rubbed out the Crow: he spared my life because I was White, and I killed him because I was Cheyenne. There wasn't nothing else either of us could have done, and it would have been ridiculous except it was mortal.13

In short, this passage shows how one does not know whether one is juggling or being juggled. Language often speaks people rather than people speaking language; just as Winnie-the-Pooh does not write his poems, but waits around for them to catch him:

"But it isn't Easy," said Pooh to himself, as he looked at what had once been Owl's House. "Because Poetry and Hums aren't things which you get, they're things which get you. And all you can do is to go where they can find you."14

You have to have the geography right sometimes, and place yourself where things will happen.

Even if you are in the right place, the structure can also undermine any politics of possibility. In this dissertation I have been utilizing Zhang Xianliang's text Nanrende Yiban Shi Nuren as an example of both laughter as resistance and a persistant multi-

---

14 [A.A. Milne, find reference 147-8]
ordering of Chinese society. That is the message when the text is read linearly, yet as Milena Dolezelova and Alison Bailey argue, classical Chinese novels are heavily structured in a parallel mode where the multi-ordering framed by prologues and (often hidden) epilogues where cosmological Order is reaffirmed. Zhang's text fits neatly into this model with its cosmic preface, parallel plots of (failed) seduction and the final chapter which begins with an application for divorce headed by a Quotation from Chairman Mao. Zhang's story reproduces the Order at the end, even though it is not a comedy with the hero getting married. The linear narrative seems to be liberating, but the poetics involves an intricate structuring which reestablishes the status quo at the end. The structural irony undermines possibility.

other dangers

Juggling is dangerous because there is a whole lot of misunderstanding goin' on. Irony requires participation, an active personal involvement of an audience where meaning is produced. When one questions one's position, ideally it should lead to others questioning their own position, not defensively lashing out at one's. Yet all too often ironic statements are read as "literal." For example, while some saw my juggling act as "performance art," others kept insisting on my telling them what my thesis was really about. Power relations are foregrounded here: students could appreciate the irony of my statements, it was the professors who kept pushing for hard facts, about what the thesis was about: "about 175 pages."
A newspaper column from the San Francisco Chronicle shows how easily Modernity and the forces of normativity can absorb irony and wipe out difference in the defense of pluralism. The columnist, writing in support of U.S. English -- the organization which wishes to make English the sole official language of the United States -- states: "In a pluralistic nation such as ours, government should foster the similarities that unite us, rather than the differences that separate us." When someone named Bill Callahan responds to this in an ironic way, playing out the racisms of the U.S. English movement, the answer is "Good Spoof, but it evades the point." Modernity has very good self-preservation skills, and can reabsorb most anything.

Put another way: the trouble with irony is that it is hard to juggle without being juggled into the position of the court jester -- an uneasy position where one is required to please, yet when one jokes too close to home, one risks execution. Or the vitriolic criticism that Erasmus received after he published *In Praise of Folly*. Though I find many of his arguments both engaging and distasteful, his text stylistically is very interesting. Erasmus assumes the role of "Folly" to parodically criticize the serious way in which, people, especially theologians, act and write. Yet many read *In Praise of Folly* straight, as shameless ridicule. As Erasmus later writes in response to a critical letter from his friend and colleague Martin Dorp [143]: "I intended to admonish, not to sting."

\[15\] No relation.
This letter to Dorp is quite revealing of the problems of utilizing irony. Erasmus was so frustrated with the response to Folly that he wrote "I am almost sorry myself that the "Folly" was published." [140] It was not what Erasmus wrote that Dorp reports as the problem, but the ironic mode of representation that was the issue. Erasmus responds: "In the 'Folly' I had no other aim than I had in my other writings, but my method was different." [140] Yet it was this method that was crucial, that made Folly special. As Erasmus writes to Dorp [144]: "I thought I had found a way to take the minds of spoiled men by surprise, as it were, through this artistic technique and even to cure them by means of pleasure." But the theologians apparently did not find it pleasurable.

I have had similar experiences with the "Section I: Special Issues" segment of Chapter 1; though I hoped it would show both the evasiveness of analyzing laughter and the power of laughter in critique, I am not in control of mis/understandings. Some readers see it only in terms of "disrespect." But unlike Erasmus (!) I still think it is important enough to keep in the text. And here we are back to the problems of style that Edwin Gerow has with Lee Siegel's Laughing Matters, the problems that jump-started the first chapter.

endings
I want to end this afterword and dissertation by comparing the different endings of Little Big Man its book and film representations. The quote at end of the novel addresses the need to maintain sanity
that concerns us here. Old Lodge Skins and Jack Crabb climb up a mountain because Old Lodge Skins has decided to die. His last request of the Great Spirit is:

"Take care of my son here," he says," and see that he does not go crazy." He laid down then on the damp rocks and died right away. [437]

And at this point in recounting his story Jack Crabb also dies. In the movie this same passage is uttered, yet Old Lodge Skins does not die. He is frustrated, but not too upset saying: "Sometimes the magic works; sometimes it doesn't." And then he goes down the mountain to eat some boiled dog, and continue his life.

Sometimes the irony works, sometimes it doesn't; yet rather than seeing this as a problem which needs to be solved, perhaps by ironing out the wrinkles of Modern life, I want to irony them in. For as Audre Lorde remarks in a passage useful for ironizing, we must "learn how to take our differences and make them strengths." [112]

Perhaps there is cause for refiguring the title of this afterword away from its double-bound despair, to something more positive, but still barbed: I want to have my cake and slice it too. For as Kathy Ferguson once remarked: "promise and danger are wound together, and every opportunity is a trap; but every trap is an opportunity."
Bibliography


Allen, Woody [1984] *Zelig*


Brooks, Peter, director [1970] *King Lear*.


Clifford, James and Marcus [1985] *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*


De Broca, Philippe [1966] King of Hearts


*Earth First! Tabloid* [manifesto].

Eco Umberto and Stefano Rosso (Fall 1983) "Correspondence" *Boundary* 2, 12:1, pp. 1-13.


Falk, Pasi (August 1985) "A rose is a rose is ...Umberto Eco, the double agent" *Economy and Society* 14:3, pp. 350-361.


Graham, A.C. [n.d.] "Chuang-tzu and the Rambling Mode"


Hall, David [1989] "To be or not to be: the postmodern self and the wu-forms of Taoism" mss.


*Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], Beijing.

Riley, Denise [1988] "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


Setterburg, Fred [May/June 1987] "The wild bunch: Earth First! shakes up the environmental movement" Utne Reader, pp. 68-76.1


Skocpol, Theda [1979] States and Social Revolutions Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Varon, Charles [June/July 1989] "Seven Ways to Bring Humor to Your Environmental Group" *Alternatives* 16:2, pp. 16-23.


*Wen Hui Bao* Shanghai.


Zou Xuan, ed. [1952] *Minjian Xiaohua* Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service.