

# Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails

William Cheng

Eighteen days after 11 September 2001, a new season of *Saturday Night Live* premiered on schedule, making big headlines given how most other television programs were getting replaced by round-the-clock news coverage. The NFL and MLB called off games, the Emmys were doubly postponed, Rockstar delayed the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* (set in a fictionalized New York City), and Disney's parks closed their doors.<sup>1</sup> Entertainment across the United States—sitcoms, sports, rollercoasters—screached to a halt, ground to zero. For *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels to reboot his laugh factory was saying something.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, Michaels wanted the host Reese Witherspoon to say “fuck-ing.”<sup>3</sup> He told her to work the word into the opening monologue’s punchline, declaring he would happily pay whatever Federal Communications

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1. See Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York, 2014), p. 52; Chris A. Kramer, “An Existentialist Account of the Role of Humor against Oppression,” *Humor* 26 (Oct. 2013): 629–51; Trevor J. Blank, *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age* (Madison, Wis., 2013), pp. 38–56; and Bill Ellis, “Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster,” in *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Narváez (Logan, Utah, 2003), pp. 35–79.

2. A well-known portion of this *SNL* premiere was the appearance of Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, to whom Lorne Michaels posed the question: “Can we be funny?” Giuliani deadpanned: “Why start now?”

3. Witherspoon’s tame joke featured a baby polar bear repeatedly asking his mom whether he’s really a polar bear. When the mom inquires why he keeps wondering this, he replies,

Commission (FCC) fines came their way. Although Witherspoon chickened out at the last minute (replacing the teleprompter's *fucking* with the word *balls* for her joke, leaving the audience none the wiser), Michaels's original plea conveyed how the arbitrary taboo of an F-bomb could feel ridiculously immaterial compared to the fire and brimstone a few miles away. With the world crashing down, a little uncensored *fucking*—scandalizing everyone but, really, no one—would have rhetorically embodied what all of the talking heads were claiming anyway: the country had been forever changed, no going back, no take-backs. After abundant media jabber about the death of irony, Michaels wished to send the message that, for at least one night, all bets were off and all laughs fair game.<sup>4</sup>

Fast-forward to 18 June 2015, the night Jon Stewart ran out of jokes on *The Daily Show*.<sup>5</sup> As Stewart told a stunned audience, he couldn't bring himself to write funny material in the wake of the previous afternoon's massacre of nine black worshippers at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. Stewart's silent treatment made loud news. The moratorium on comedy flashed across the internet as sagacious testament to the stupefying effects of tragedy.

At the time, the respective acts of foreign and domestic terrorism sent shocks through the citizenry's collective funny bone, exploding entertainment's permissions and proclivities. *SNL* dared to make 'em laugh; *The Daily Show* dared to desist. Lorne Michaels wanted to *take back* laughter (to retrieve it and return it to the nation's viewers); Jon Stewart sought to *take out* laughter (solemnly hushing the audience and flipping the studio soundscape on its head). Opposite tacks, yet both got away with it, snatching praise and publicity for good measure . . . funnily enough.

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"Because I'm fucking freezing!"—or, as Witherspoon told it, "Because I'm freezing my balls off!" ("Reese Witherspoon / Alicia Keys," *Saturday Night Live*, 29 Sept. 2011).

4. See Eric Randall, "The 'Death of Irony,' and Its Many Reincarnations," *The Wire*, 9 Sept. 2011, [www.thewire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298](http://www.thewire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298)

5. See Ed Mazza, "Jon Stewart Says He Can't Tell Jokes after Charleston Church Shooting," *Huffington Post*, 19 June 2015, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/jon-stewart-charleston-no-jokes\\_n\\_7618110.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/jon-stewart-charleston-no-jokes_n_7618110.html)

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### Laughing out of Court

Remember the last time someone told you to lighten up? It's a gut punch, a low blow. Accusations of "why so serious?" feel like *serious* attacks, striking at a core failure of character in societies ruled by laugh tracks, witty tweets, and punny headlines.<sup>6</sup> Even (or especially) in times of strife, humor should presumably serve as fantastic armor against no-good realities. But this armor is not so much iron as it is ironic; for within neoliberal logics, people who endure systemic oppression (blacks, queers, crips)—who might have the *least* reason to lighten up arbitrarily—tend to be the ones who are *most* exhorted to gain a sense of humor, to take a joke, and to laugh things off. A quotidian illustration involves men who goad women to smile, as if an unhumored female countenance (Resting Bitch Face) were an affront to physiognomic aesthetics and social mores.<sup>7</sup>

Yet when disenfranchised people do appear overpeppy or do laugh out loud, they can get slammed anyway. On 22 August 2015, eleven women (ten black, one white), part of a book club called Sistahs on the Reading Edge, were kicked off the Napa Valley Wine Train because they allegedly made too much noise while celebrating a member's birthday. For the record, when the laughers asked the maître d' whether passengers had voiced complaints, he replied: "Well, people's *faces* are uncomfortable."<sup>8</sup> In other (or no) words, the maître d' addressed the noise violation by reading into the passengers' silent expressions. The incident birthed the hashtag #LaughingwhileBlack, a spin on #DrivingwhileBlack. For a persecuted population to laugh, this meme suggests, risks circumstantial vulnerability and sanctions. Because minoritized individuals bear higher evidentiary loads for propriety, mirthful outbursts can sound amplified to suspicious or envious ears. Laughter may be damning not only for the chronically marginalized but also for anyone in temporary hot water—a child being lectured by parents, a student in detention, or a defendant on trial.

Consider the 1988 appellate proceedings of *State v. Parker*, in which the court found the defendant unremorseful based on his laughter during the

6. On stereotypes of the humorless feminist, see Mary Ann Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11 (Fall–Winter 1988–89): 50. See also Judith Butler, "Feminism by Any Other Name," interview by Rosi Braidotti, *Differences* 6 (1994): 27–61; Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary* 2 26 (1999): 19–27; and Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8 (2010), sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print\_ahmed.html

7. See Jessica Bennett, "I'm Not Mad. That's Just My RBE," *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/fashion/im-not-mad-thats-just-my-resting-b-face.html?\_r=0

8. Victoria Bond, "Dear White People, Laughing Is Not a Crime," *Al Jazeera America*, 28 Aug. 2015, america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/dear-white-people-laughing-is-not-a-crime.html, emphasis added.

prosecutor's statements. Although laughter can bubble up from all kinds of feelings and conditions—nervousness, despair, incomprehension—this court's litigious hearing of the defendant's laughter pegged the act as evidence of impenitence or even evil.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, take the case of Sgt. Robert Bales, currently serving a life sentence for murdering sixteen Afghan civilians in 2012. During the trial, prosecutors played a phone recording of Bales and his wife laughing as they discussed the case—again, a putative blow to claims of remorse.<sup>10</sup> In these instances, courts assumed that laughter spills secrets, always saying something. To extrapolate from Miranda warnings, anything you say—and any laugh let loose—may indeed be used against you in court. Most recently, the public doubled down on its vilification of former pharmaceutical CEO Martin Shkreli, who, when testifying before Congress in February 2016 (on charges of price-gouging drugs), repeatedly pleaded the Fifth Amendment while smirking and looking “as if he were about to burst out laughing.”<sup>11</sup> Here, just the *look* of suppressed laughter—no less so than any sound of laughter—sufficed to cement Shkreli's reputation as “the most hated man in America,” racking up accusations of immaturity and douchery to boot (fig. 1).<sup>12</sup>

Or rewind to the biblical story about the birth of Isaac. God tells Abram and Sarai, who are one hundred and ninety years young respectively, that they will bear a child. Incredulous, Abram falls facedown and laughs, enacting the first ROFL in Hebrew scripture. Later, when God repeats this prophecy, Sarai laughs to herself. God asks her (rhetorically, since He obviously knows the answer), “Is anything impossible for the LORD?”

“I did not laugh,” says the fearful Sarai.

“Yes, you did laugh,” God replies. [Genesis 18:14–15]

It's a classic case of He said, she said, except there's little room for negotiation here; the He in this case *is* the final Word, the divine rule of law. Although Sarai tries to retract her laugh, God operates under the schoolyard principle of no take-backs. “Once laughed, a laugh persists,” points out Anca Parvulescu in her reading of this Bible passage. “God would not hear

9. See Bryan H. Ward, “Sentencing without Remorse,” *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 38 (Fall 2006): 151. The case was *State v. Parker*, 373 S.E.2d 558, 559 (N.C. Ct. App. 1988).

10. See Lewis Kamb, “Bales Faces Survivors of His Afghan Rampage,” *Seattle Times*, 20 Aug. 2013, [www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bales-faces-survivors-of-his-afghan-rampage](http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bales-faces-survivors-of-his-afghan-rampage)

11. Linette Lopez, “Martin Shkreli Could Not Stop Laughing during His Testimony to Congress,” *Business Insider*, 4 Feb. 2016, [www.businessinsider.com/live-martin-shkreli-the-ceo-of-valeant-and-others-face-congress-2016-2](http://www.businessinsider.com/live-martin-shkreli-the-ceo-of-valeant-and-others-face-congress-2016-2)

12. Zoe Thomas and Tim Swift, “Who Is Martin Shkreli—‘the Most Hated Man in America?’” BBC, 3 Sept. 2015, [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34331761](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34331761)



FIGURE 1. Martin Shkreli testifying before Congress.

of it.”<sup>13</sup> (Or, rather, God would not *not* hear of it.) Notably, both Abram and Sarai laughed, but God gave the latter a harder time. Gender politics aside, this discrepancy may owe to how Sarai laughed quietly (whereas Abram LOL-ed), as if attempting to get away with it. And if there’s one thing God can’t stand, as the Old Testament certifies, it’s people who underestimate his omniscience.

Such stories about laughter’s liabilities run counter to more common portrayals of laughter and humor as subversive, free, and empowering.<sup>14</sup> Comedians and laughers, after all, often demand get-out-of-jail-free cards by professing something to be just a joke.<sup>15</sup> The *just* in *just a joke* serves double duty, meaning not only *only*, but also *fair*, as in “all’s fair in love” and comedy. A homophobic punchline or an act of sexual harassment might dodge censure if the case can be made that it was performed in good

13. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), p. 18.

14. Gaëtan Brulotte, for example, insists on laughter’s wholesale subversiveness in this grandiose manner: “With laughter, the social machine creaks, its herd-like unanimity falters, its habitual cohesion breaks up, and its mechanical reactions break down” (Gaëtan Brulotte, “Laughing at Power,” in *Laughter and Power*, ed. John Parkin and John Phillips [Oxford, 2006], p. 15).

15. See Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offenses of Art* (London, 2002), pp. 25–26. Closely related is what I’ve termed the “ludic alibi,” the excuse used by offenders who claim that they’re just playing a game, just horsing around; see William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (New York, 2014), pp. 6–8, 130–32.

fun.<sup>16</sup> This is comedy's signature alibi. *Alibi* hails from Latin's *alius* and *ibi*, roughly meaning "someplace else." With a license to kill, comedians are expected to boast, "Oh yes, I went there!"—*there*, meaning "someplace else," out of bounds and beyond the pale. Comedy's anything-goes exemptions conjure the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, a state of upheaval where "serious matters are suspended, things do not count, absolution is offered *ex ante*."<sup>17</sup> Comedic alibis can be so powerful that they drag errors and faux pas into the realm of respectability, enabling even the most egregious ethical or aesthetic *failing* to pass for . . . well, *passing*.<sup>18</sup> Given how critical alchemy can turn just about any catastrophe into comic gold, the arena of risibility in today's media appears virtually boundless.

For how many of us can claim immunity to comedy's exculpatory rationales? Even Christie Davies, who has spent decades researching jokes and humor (in effect, studying why jokes matter), peppers his work with disclaimers concerning how jokes might *not* matter, noting that they do not "have any significant social consequences or express profound moral or existential truths."<sup>19</sup> Against the familiar notion of rapier wits, Davies insists that most jokes neither embody nor engender antipathy.<sup>20</sup> A set-piece joke, he says, "cannot be used as a sword; it is merely decoration on the scabbard. Jokes are entertainment only, a mere laughing matter."<sup>21</sup> This said, excuses about levity don't always succeed. Telling someone to "lighten up!" or "take a joke!" can fetch the killjoy retort that "you can't joke your way out of this!" (an appeal against effectivity) or "you hurt my feelings!" (an appeal to affectivity). So while comedic alibis have potential to excuse failings of aesthetics and ethics, they might fail unto themselves—not least in the face of a hostile jury.

16. See Julie A. Woodzicka et al., "It's Just a (Sexist) Joke: Comparing Reactions to Sexist versus Racist Communications," *Humor* 28 (May 2015): 289–309; Elise Kramer, "The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments," *Language in Society* 40 (Apr. 2011): 137–68; and Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Critique of Humour* (London, 2005), pp. 1–6, 11–21.

17. F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005), p. 35. See also Muhammad A. Badarneh, "Carnivalesque Politics: A Bakhtinian Case Study of Contemporary Arab Political Humor," *Humor* 24 (Aug. 2011): 305–27, and Lisa Gabbert and Antonio Salud II, "On Slanderous Words and Bodies-out-of-Control: Hospital Humor and the Medical Carnivalesque," in *The Body in Medical Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Klaver (Albany, N.Y., 2009), pp. 209–27.

18. See J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956–1957): 1–30.

19. Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Indianapolis, 2011), p. 2.

20. See Egon Larsen, *Wit as a Weapon: Political Joke in History* (London, 1980), and Hans Speier, "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Power and Laughter" (1975), trans. and ed. Robert Jackall, *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (Mar. 1998): 1354.

21. Davies, *Jokes and Targets*, p. 267.

A familiar saying is that “against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand,” a Mark Twain gem uttered today in inspirational contexts (despite the lesser-known fact that it’s spoken by Satan in Twain’s novel).<sup>22</sup> Beyond its advocacy of using mirth against malevolence, however, this quotation can be read another way: that when our bodies are assaulted by our own impulsive laughter, we show our cards and lose our moral credibility, leaving no leg—nothing—to stand *on*. If you snicker at a comedian’s racist joke, it becomes that much harder for you to scramble onto high ground because, listen, you laughed; the evidence is in the vibrations, *right here* (not *someplace else*, no alibi). Yes, you may argue after the joke that you were laughing cynically and knowingly at the structural racial injustices that fuel such cruel comedy, but by this point you’re necessarily on the defensive, carrying the burden of proof. In any case, having to say something was just a joke already implies that court is now in session, that some possible offense lies in need of retraction or explication. Complicating every aspect of the comedic alibi, furthermore, is the fact that people don’t always know (how to describe) why they laugh.<sup>23</sup> And just as people hate explaining jokes, most loathe having to rationalize their laughter out loud.

In this article, I perform an acoustemology of comedy’s alibis in contemporary media. I listen for means by which laughter—its emission, contagion, suppression—can serve as audible barometers of how alibis either fly or bomb. A paradox emerges from the ways spontaneous-sounding laughter can simultaneously free us from societal scripts while shackling us within our own telltale, tittering bodies. A laugher’s accountability poses a moving target precisely because so much of comedy’s generic success relies on procedures of failure, impropriety, and breakage. Through three progressive cases, I delve into modern technologies of taking back laughter via the breaking and hacking of cultural texts. Each case features a do-it-yourself (DIY) phenomenon that exposes the stakes and choreographies of comedy’s consumer sovereignties: first, television fans who, through techniques of editing and recomposition, remove laugh tracks from comedies (*The Big Bang Theory*, *Friends*) or, inversely, add laugh tracks to dramas (*Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*), using the silence or surplus sound to break the show’s original mood; second, a YouTube game show that tries to make

22. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* (New York, 1916), p. 142. Immediately preceding this line, Satan says: “Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast” (ibid.).

23. See Peter Jelavich, “When Are Jewish Jokes No Longer Funny? Ethnic Humour in Imperial and Republican Berlin,” in *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Martina Kessel and Patrick Merziger (Toronto, 2012), p. 24.



contestants break into smiles or laughter by presenting them with outrageous videos; and, third, Apollo Theater audience members who, through brash laughter and boos, use their collective judge-it-yourself authority to make or break the dreams of hopeful performers on amateur nights. All three of these examples hinge on the breakage of norms and the breaking in of new normals, embodying or eliciting laughter that may variously sound ambivalent, uncomfortable, or out of line. Lending a musicological ear to laughter's stubborn materialities and technical hackability opens resonant perspectives into some of comedy's funniest alibis. I conclude with a tribute to laughter's Debbie Downer cousin: the groan.

### **Hacking Laughs: *Big Bang* Bombing**

*Bombing* is the sonorous metaphor for the devastating silence that greets a floundering comedian. A maw of muteness engulfs the performer, turning an atmosphere of optimistic joybringing into cringe-worthy desperation. Just as bombs blast away landscapes, so bombing demolishes the ideal soundscapes of comedic call-and-response.

One domain of comedy where bombing remains virtually impossible is a television show with either a laugh track or a cued-to-laugh studio audience. So long as there's no audio malfunction or audience reticence, every gag and punchline should fetch reliable, lively chuckles. But although producers have historically used laugh tracks to bestow this sense of liveliness and liveness, the tracks can strike a deadening tone. Slavoj Žižek says he experiences both catharsis and unease when he watches a show with canned laughter. "Even if I do not laugh," he declares, "but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nevertheless feel relieved after the show . . . : my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized; I can literally 'laugh and cry through another.'"<sup>24</sup> Canned laughter—or, as Ron Rosenbaum calls it, "Mirth Muzak"—is as flat as funny gets.<sup>25</sup> Ontologically, a recorded or synthesized laugh track is all surface, a veneer of jocund artifice; amplitudinally, decibels for canned chortles versus canned guffaws vary minimally, since television audio requires volume equalization according to the FCC, the European Broadcasting System, and comparable national broadcast-safe standards. Even at live tapings for sitcoms and stand-up comedy specials, audiences face flat-out restrictions in terms of how they're supposed to sound. Audience members may be instructed to laugh and cheer as they normally would rather than in attention-grabbing

24. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 2008), p. 141.

25. Ron Rosenbaum, "Kanned Laffter," in *Media Culture: Television, Radio, Records, Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Movies*, ed. James Monaco (New York, 1978), p. 137.



ways. At a shooting for *The Big Bang Theory*, a producer told the audience, “Your mission is simple tonight—all you need to do is to sit back, relax; please do *not* identify your laughs.”<sup>26</sup> This audience’s task was to mesh like a musical ensemble, to produce an orchestrated simulacrum of a laugh track (recorded, remixed, refined) for the benefit of home viewers, whose patronage remains, of course, what really matters in terms of ratings and revenue.

With either obedient studio audiences or synthesized sound files, a sitcom can opt for laughter as a formatted failsafe. No need for alibis, no risk of comic failure. But similar to Žižek, Jean Baudrillard has expressed bemusement at how “laughter on American television” resembles “the chorus in Greek tragedy,” such that “it is the screen that is laughing and having a good time.”<sup>27</sup> For some critics, a laugh track already embodies affective alienation and failure. It epitomizes the potential falsities of laughter more generally, masking the fault lines of the homogenizing pleasure industry and its ransom promises of happiness. Technically, sounds of other people laughing in no way preclude ourselves from doing likewise. Yet this laughter, if heard as distracting or paternalistic or counterfeit, can seemingly yank the laughs out of our own mouths. Like a flat soda, a flat laugh track might leave a weird feeling on our tongues—all sugar and no pop, empty calories for the ingratiated body.

Although Žižek’s and Baudrillard’s hifalutin criticisms sound like familiar brands of Adornian spoilsport commentary, canned laughter has, since its inception, polarized popular audiences as well.<sup>28</sup> One of the most picked-on sitcoms today is none other than *The Big Bang Theory*, which contains frequent and over-the-top laughs. Pushing against the show’s egregious laughter, fans (or hate-watchers) have lately experimented with taking out this laughter through basic sound editing and scene splicing. These tinkerers scrub out the laughter while leaving the visuals and narrative progression intact. The result of this DIY *détournement* is that

26. “The Big Bang Theory—Live Show Taping HD 720p,” YouTube, 1 Mar. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEKm54STV2Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEKm54STV2Q)

27. Quoted in Mike Gane, “Baudrillard’s Sense of Humour,” *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories*, ed. David B. Clarke et al. (1986; London, 2009), pp. 171, 172. See also Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley, 2008), pp. 15–49; Parvulescu, *Laughter*, pp. 146–48; and Darragh McManus, “No Laughing Matter: Silence Is Golden When It Comes to Comedy TV Shows,” *The Guardian*, 24 Mar. 2010, [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/mar/24/canned-laughter-track](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/mar/24/canned-laughter-track)

28. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, (Stanford, Calif., 2002), p. 112, and Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory, and the Avant-garde* (London, 2002), pp. 178–79.

characters' japes crash into silences. A YouTube user named Sboss has released a series of such videos with the explanation: "Due to my hatred for the television show 'The Big Bang Theory,' I expose how unfunny the show actually is when you take out the laugh track."<sup>29</sup> According to Sboss (essentially a *Big Bang* truther), canned laughter *is* the shoddy alibi for the show's comedic failings, both breeding and excusing unfunniness with a sonic smokescreen. Below is the transcript of a clip made by Sboss, a scene involving a drunk Raj on a horrendous first date with Lalita, an acquaintance from childhood.<sup>30</sup>

RAJ. [*Smiles.*] I can't believe I'm sitting here next to little Lalita Gupta. [*1 second of light laughter replaced by 1 second of silence, and so on.*]

LALITA. [*Smiles.*] Well, you are.

R. [*Smiles.*] Little Lalita. That's kind of fun to say. Little Lalita, little Lalita, little Lalita. [*1 second of light laughter removed.*] You should try it.

L. [*Smiles.*] No, it's okay. [*2.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*]

R. You have lost *sooo* much weight! [*2 seconds of loud laughter removed.*] It must have been difficult for you because you were so, so fat! [*2.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*] Do you remember?

L. [*Smiles.*] Yes, I do.

R. [*Smirks.*] Of course you do. Who could forget being *that* fat? [*1.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*]

L. [*Smiles.*] Well, I've been trying. [*Half second of light laughter.*]

R. So you're a dental student. Are you aware that dentists have an extremely high suicide rate? [*Half second of light laughter removed.*] Not as high as, say, air traffic controllers, but then, there are far more dentists than air traffic controllers, so in pure numbers, you're still winning! [*Half second of light laughter removed.*]

L. [*Smiles.*] Yay, me. [*1 second of medium laughter removed.*]

Especially for viewers who have seen the original episode, this minute-long segment's omission of a laugh track can be earsplitting and mindbending. In total, thirteen seconds of laughter-turned-silence (almost a quarter of

29. "The Big Bang Theory—No Laugh Track 1 (Avoiding the Shamy)," YouTube, 2 Jan. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKS3MGriZcs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKS3MGriZcs)

30. "The Big Bang Theory—No Laugh Track 2 (Raj Is a Dick)," YouTube, 4 Jan. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfcCSb1JCo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfcCSb1JCo)

the clip's runtime) blow a lot of dead air, a conversational vacuum made all the more awkward by Raj's clueless giggles and Lalita's politely rueful smiles. Without the noise of loyal laughers, Raj's quips about obesity and suicide sound downright cruel. Barbs wither on the vine, and any imagined alibi of *just joking!* fails because no one is laughing. The gaping silences, however, cause the scene to fail so spectacularly that it stands to become funny on another level. No longer an aesthetically sensible text, the scene can tease laughter anew from the YouTube viewers who may find the metatextual manipulation absurd and subversive. Rather than laughing with the drunk Raj, we laugh at the laugh-deprived show. A taken-out laugh track enables viewers to take back their laughs, to reassert sovereignty over the choice of laughing and, moreover, to find humor in the bleak laughlessness.

On *The Big Bang Theory* and other laugh-heavy shows, part of what makes laughter sound fake is the rigidity with which it punctuates on-screen events: a character will say or do something funny, and laughter ensues (then stops); another character replies, and more laughter follows; and on it goes. Producers cannot afford to let laughter drown out the dialogue or excessively stall a scene's pacing. Yet in real-life scenarios, people do not pause for laughter every five seconds, nor do laughers perfectly synchronize their outbursts. (Granted, if a friend tells a truly hilarious joke, it might cause everyone to crack up for a prolonged period of time, requiring people to catch their breaths; the point is, however, that these moments of dramatic hysterics are *rare*.) Tightly edited (or, with studio audiences, thoroughly instructed and choreographed), the laughter that erupts from sitcom one-liners boasts a sonic cleanliness in homogenized start-stop motions. At the same time, it is exactly these neat starts and stops that easily enable a sound-hacker to snip out the laughs without interfering with dialogue.

Even easier than removing a laugh track from a show is adding a laugh track using sound superimposition. One user did just this for the drama *Breaking Bad*. Besides interjecting laughter, the DIY video "Breaking Bad as a Sitcom" includes an upbeat musical intro, whooping cheers, a sentimental *aww*, genteel applause, and a cheery outro.<sup>31</sup> The original scene is supposed to be unfunny, with Skyler White calling the cops on her estranged drug-dealing husband. Solely through sonic reframing, the affect short-circuits. Just a dash of well-timed laughter makes the scene funny. People have similarly added laugh tracks to shows and films such as *The*

31. See "Breaking Bad as a Sitcom," YouTube, 12 Sept. 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6v-ApehVbc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6v-ApehVbc)



FIGURE 2. Serious moments overlaid with (and undercut by) laugh tracks on (left) *Family Matters* (season 2, episode 20) and (right) *The Wire* (season 4, episode 3).

*Wire* and *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993), as well as to touchy scenes in sitcoms: Laura Winslow finding a racist slur spray-painted on her school locker in *Family Matters*; Will Smith getting reabandoned by his father on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*; and little Stephanie Tanner mourning her deceased mother on *Full House* (fig. 2).<sup>32</sup>

Popular descriptions of laughter as a contagious force break down in instances where others' laughter (canned tracks) make us less inclined to laugh or where we laugh largely in response to nonlaughter (redacted tracks).<sup>33</sup> Such affective flip-flop bears out in an episode of the dramedy *Ally McBeal*, when Ally goes on a first date with a man named Dennis, who, it turns out, has a low threshold for what he finds funny and, what's worse, sports a massive braying laugh. In fact, during the date, he laughs and snorts so loudly that he draws the attention of nearby diners, who stop their conversations to stare. Ally, meanwhile, doesn't laugh; she is embarrassed. The next day, Ally tells her friend Elaine, "I spent the rest of the date either talking about AIDS or the Holocaust or Linda Tripp, the most unfunny, horrible things I could think of: anything just to make him not laugh again."<sup>34</sup> Ally, in sum, was trying to use her words to *remove the laugh track*—the overbearing sounds of Dennis's inexplicable (and admittedly machinelike) vocalizations. Alas, she failed to mute or hack him. His automatic mirth had no off switch. So later, in the company of Elaine and another coworker named Nelle, Ally finds Dennis and tries

32. See "Inappropriate Laugh Track," YouTube, 16 Apr. 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZjP\\_IoxCHU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZjP_IoxCHU), and "Inappropriate Laugh Track 2," YouTube, 13 Nov. 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSvkkTWRG0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSvkkTWRG0)

33. Various recent videos show everyday people transmitting laughter to one another, typically in enclosed and resonant spaces such as subway cars (effectively, viral videos about viral laughter); see the humorously titled "Contagious Laughter Is Contagious," YouTube, 29 Nov. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM45JMTpkBU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM45JMTpkBU)

34. "In Search of Pygmies," 14 Feb. 2000, *Ally McBeal*.



FIGURE 3. Dennis, Nelle, and Elaine in *Ally McBeal* (left to right).

to do the next best thing—goad him into laughing so that her skeptical friends can at least hear firsthand how terrible he is. After the women tell several jokes—eliciting several fake outs along the way, leading Dennis to chuckle only lightly—he finally lets loose his obscene, gargantuan laugh. As Dennis howls, the three women are stunned into silence, albeit with mouths likewise agape (fig. 3). Dennis’s dramatic exhalations (laughs) and inhalations (snorts) suck up all the oxygen in the room, while Ally, Elaine, and Nelle remain motionless, breathless, speechless. The three women fail to stop his outburst once it starts, yet it is also this very failure that’s intended to tickle the show’s viewers, who stand to be moved, like Dennis, to laugh out loud.

For Ally, Dennis’s laughter turns out to be a deal breaker—unsurprising given that he breaks with conventions of polite conduct, breaks up flows of conversations, and sounds broken when he’s guffawing. Canned laugh tracks are bad enough. But a walking, talking laugh track? Inexcusable.

### Laughable Games

Ally disapproved of Dennis not because he happened to laugh at offensive or discriminatory jokes (a would-be moral flaw) but rather because he laughed *offensively* and *indiscriminately* (apparently a far worse crime in the games of courtship). Confronted with Dennis’s outbursts, Ally and her friends understood neither what he found so funny nor why he laughed so much. Laughter indeed doesn’t always reveal accurate or actionable information. Its alibis and liabilities depend on legibility. A “laughing face,” says Murray Pomerance, “can indicate not mirth or release but secrecy, darkness, surrender, derision, and improbability.”<sup>35</sup> Yet the point remains

35. Murray Pomerance, “Introduction: The Great Corrective,” in *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema*, ed. Pomerance (Detroit, 2013), p. 1.

that when people laugh, their sonic and physiognomic excess tends to draw attention and thus to invite scrutiny. Because laughter can be hard to stifle, its leakages purportedly speak volumes, gurgling with confessional authenticity. The assumption is that people who are laughing may do so despite themselves, unintentionally revealing something in the process.<sup>36</sup> For even when someone appears *about to* laugh (say, Martin Shkreli testifying before Congress), we might presume to know what they're all *about*. Imminence of laughter telegraphs immanence of character . . . or so believed the tweeters and YouTube commenters whose hatred for Shkreli intensified at the mere sign of his smirking face.

Leave it to none other than YouTube—Broadcast Yourself!—to popularize the recursive spectacles of stifling laughter. Fine Brothers Entertainment's *React Channel* initiated a recent series of YouTube videos called Laughing Challenges, which task contestants with suppressing smiles and chuckles while watching trending clips *on* YouTube. The slightest grin or chortle gets you booted from the competition. The winner is whoever keeps a steely face against the onslaught of humorous prods. For each contest, the camera cuts between twelve contestants and keeps an inset display of the footage that they are required to watch. Although, for the sake of fairness, all contestants watch the same series of videos, they will sometimes defiantly shout, "That's not *fair!*" upon breaking into grins or laughter at an irresistibly (unfairly) uproarious video. In one challenge, the contestants are shown a YouTube clip of a young man shrieking with laughter; some contestants manage to maintain a stony expression, but others don't last long. The off-camera producer coyly accuses a young contestant: "Sydney, you smiled!" And like the Bible's defensive Sarai (responding to the likewise disembodied voice of authority), Sydney tries to get away with it, protesting: "No, I didn't! I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!"<sup>37</sup> Pleading to no avail, she is removed from the competition (fig. 4).

The bankable purpose of these challenges is primarily to attract and to amuse YouTube viewers, who are encouraged to laugh at contestants attempting—and failing—to refrain from laughing. Watching someone aiming desperately to preserve a straight face can be a funny yet disquieting experience. As the Laughing Challenge contestants try to keep from smiling or laughing, they show bulging eyes, flaring nostrils, quivering cheeks, pursed lips, and other compensatory contortions (think of sci-fi scenes where an alien is about to burst out of someone's face). The gestural

36. See Mikita Brottman, *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor* (New York, 2004), p. 66.

37. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #2," YouTube, 23 Apr. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxjjhQcODUE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxjjhQcODUE).



FIGURE 4. We (YouTube viewers) are invited to laugh at Sydney trying not to laugh at an inset video of a man laughing. Besides the laugh factor, the *mise-en-abyme* operates medially and geometrically (rectangular screen within screen within screen).

excesses born of suppressed laughter end up visually sonifying this laughter anyway, as pressures that normally would escape from one's throat find weird release from alternate orifices and pores. But for all of their funny fails, contestants may occasionally astonish us with how adeptly they *succeed* in curating a staid, blank expression. "I seem like a really cheerful person," a winner named Becca declared darkly, "but when I want to, I can be dead inside."<sup>38</sup> If Becca took any aesthetic pleasure in the carousel of funny clips, she let nothing show.

In the age of YouTube, remarks Sianne Ngai, "what we might call Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures have become folded into the heart of the artwork."<sup>39</sup> Affective responses refract and percolate through a palimpsest of spectators and spectacles. Ngai parses the case of the famous *Double Rainbow* video, in which the natural wonder of a double rainbow became upstaged by the effusive response of Paul Vasquez, who recorded it; Vasquez's response was subsequently upstaged by millions of delighted YouTube viewers, parodists, and media commentators. "Aesthetic artifact and affective response," Ngai points out, "were thus conflated in a way that ended up doubly short-circuiting the original object of aesthetic appreciation and leaving it behind."<sup>40</sup> Watching a Laughing Challenge, we likewise redistribute our attention and affects among a panoply of funny things. Were we to describe the laughing game with the stock preamble, "The funny thing about this *is . . .*," we would fail to pin down a singular subject. But in this carnivalesque melting pot of recursive laughter, would we really care to explain why we're laughing anyway? Or might we feel content to let this resonant laughter, like a good joke, stand on its own and speak for itself?

38. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #5," YouTube, 16 July 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss39UktpXko](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss39UktpXko)

39. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. 28.

40. *Ibid.*



A Laughing Challenge on the *React Channel* appears to be just a game, just for laughs: safe spaces to frolic and fail in the name of entertainment. As contestants suppress laughter, or laugh at themselves for laughing, or make a YouTube viewer laugh at the laughability of nonlaughter, the spectacle of heavy-handed levity is both positively intense and intensely positive. But the chronic bright-sidedness of these games belies the possibility that the stakes can creep higher than their ludic façades. Predictably, many of the laughable videos shown to contestants involve, to riff on Ngai, Other People's Epic Fails: falls, face-plants, notorious groin hits, and the sorts of obvious painful acts long featured on clip shows (*America's Funniest Home Videos*), stunt shows (*Jackass*), game shows (*Wipeout*), and Tumblr blogs. These are physical injuries and sometimes near-death experiences. They are serious insofar as there might be visible evidence of maiming and trauma. In one Laughing Challenge that showed a montage of various people getting hit on the head, a young contestant named Anita proclaimed (while keeping her eyes obligatorily glued to the screen): "You know these people can *die*, right? I don't laugh at that kind of stuff." Now, maybe Anita truly found nothing funny about sadism. Or maybe she said this out loud in order to stymie her own impulse to laugh. (At the end of the challenge, after learning that she had won, Anita asked: "Can I laugh now?"—then undammed a huge guffaw.)<sup>41</sup>

What's revealing here is that even when an epic fail does involve injury, its outrageous goals of knee-jerk amusement tend to stamp out a spectator's long-term concerns. Viewers do not lose sleep wondering whether a crotch-smacked jackass has gone on to suffer permanent testicular damage or whether his health insurance will pick up medical fees. By subscribing to the comedic alibi that epic fails are all in good fun, viewers banish the inconvenient specter of killjoy consequence. In order to justify our externalized laughter at someone else's expense, we may have to internalize—conjoining Lauren Berlant and Susan Sontag—a certain cruel optimism regarding the pain of others.<sup>42</sup> Comedy's alibis effectively make the very *genre* of epic fails possible.

Sure, we might feel mildly ashamed when laughing involuntarily at a video showing a skateboarder's agonizing pratfall. We might even wish we could take back our laugh so as to disavow guilt over *schadenfreude*. Yet the advent of YouTube has complicated the power gradients in spectacles

41. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #16," YouTube, 4 Feb. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed7BhyZrGaA&index=1&list=PL73YndQawY3PB6odG3R5ThUElhxBw8xaS](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed7BhyZrGaA&index=1&list=PL73YndQawY3PB6odG3R5ThUElhxBw8xaS)

42. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 3–6, and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, 2004), pp. 95–103.

of harm and victimhood. Especially when a laughable injury goes viral, the viewers can plainly see its stratospheric page hits and up-votes, which convey not only that many other people must be laughing at the same thing (moral absolution via mass participation) but also that this epic fail has already become *too big to fail* (with the subject's fifteen minutes of fame compensating for whatever damages enabled this lulz-mongering celebrity to begin with). Alibis of permissible laughter therefore become that much tighter when there's safety in laughers' numbers and when we assume, whether rightly or wrongly, that notorious butts are willing subjects who are handsomely paid for their troubles.

To nuance these assumptions, let's eavesdrop on a Broadcast Yourself venue that preceded YouTube, an infamous stage where performers have sought fame, risked humiliation, and funnily bombed time and again: the Apollo Theater.

### **Judge-It-Yourself**

In the Apollo Theater, Harlem's house of boos, comedians and musicians perform for a jury of their peers. Marion J. Caffey, producer of *Amateur Night* at the Apollo, sets the scene:

We offer [audience members] what no one else offers them—the power of the boo. . . . When you watch little old ladies, Eurocentric ladies and African ladies and Asian ladies, man, power up their boo? And they've never booed a person in their lives? And the freedom that comes over them, when it's like, "Is it OK?" To watch that transformation in the audience where, by the last person or second-to-the-last person, they feel like, "Hmmm . . . I'm gonna try this! Boo!" And it's a timid boo! Yet, it is a boo from deep within.<sup>43</sup>

Caffey's gleeful synopsis of the Apollo audience's internal monologue makes the people sound akin to the metamorphosed participants of the Stanford Prison Experiment or Stanley Milgram's shocking tests. Apollonites' boos burst forth as if exposing an impish, repressed drive to judge and condemn. On *Amateur Nights*, an audience's prolonged razzes will summon the Executioner, the Apollo's tap-dancing avatar who uses a shepherd's crook or a broom to usher struggling performers off the stage.<sup>44</sup> If you watch any video recording of the Apollo's jubilant spectators booing an amateur performer, what you hear and see is, yes, booing (out of

43. Quoted in Christopher R. Weingarten, "Amateur Night at the Apollo: Behind the Boos of America's Toughest Crowd," *Rolling Stone*, 11 Mar. 2015, [www.rollingstone.com/music/features/amateur-night-at-the-apollo-behind-the-boos-of-americas-toughest-crowd-20150311](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/amateur-night-at-the-apollo-behind-the-boos-of-americas-toughest-crowd-20150311)

44. Earlier incarnations of the Executioner included the Porto Rico and the Sandman.

puckered lips and oval mouths). What you also see—yet cannot hear—is people laughing at this spectacle of humiliation. Funnily enough, an acoustemology here requires sharp eyes; the staccato laughter is visible but virtually mute, drowned out by the wall of sostenuto boos.

Amateur Nights at the Apollo operate under the yays and nays of spectatorial DIY. With considerable sovereignty, audience members take adjudication into their own power-tripping hands and, if dissatisfied, use their vocal cords to terminate a performance and to hit Play Next on the night's set list.<sup>45</sup> But despite the garish sights and sounds of the Apollo's apparent mob mentality, audience members do not always agree. A performance can sometimes split a jury, especially at the outset. A famous yet frequently mischaracterized example is the 1988 debut of a thirteen-year-old Lauryn Hill, who, on the televised *Showtime at the Apollo* (featuring amateur artists along with more established performers), sang "Who's Lovin' You," the 1960 Motown standard by William "Smokey" Robinson. Most click-bait websites emphasize that Hill was booed, a delicious outrage given that she would go on to win eight Grammys. Few writers mention, however, that if you listen closely to the full performance, the audience's response undergoes several changes over the course of just two minutes.

HOST. Well, come on, Lauryn, we're going to love you! Sing for us!  
[*The audience cheers and applauds; applause fades as Hill begins to sing.*]

LAURYN HILL. [*Singing.*] When I had you, I treated you bad [*audience boos immediately*] and wrong my dear. And boy since you been away, [*boos crescendo but are counteracted by a bit of applause*] dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*Boos and applause mix and jostle; both die down by the end of the first verse, leaving only some isolated cheers and jeers. In the three beats of rest between the first and second verses, someone from the audience shouts, "Move up to the mic!" Hill heeds the advice and keeps singing.*] I should have never, ever made you cry, and boy since you been gone, [*smattering of boos and cheers; cheers grow louder as Hill takes mic off its stand*] dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*Audience vocalizations begin to die down, replaced by people clapping along to the song's second and fourth beats.*] Life without love is oh so lonely. I

45. On the declines and renaissances of audience sovereignty, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 57–65; Danilyn Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 10–22; and James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 228–35.

don't think I'm gonna make it. [*Clapping continues; there are no more audible boos by this point.*] Dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*With ritenuto in the song's final line, the clapping stops, then turns into full-on applause and a standing ovation.*]<sup>46</sup>

Although Hill persevered through her performance and won the audience over, she reportedly cried afterwards backstage.<sup>47</sup> And who could blame her? Belated applause doesn't erase the horrors of initial boos, which must have felt particularly traumatic for a thirteen-year-old. Simply from watching this video, you would also never know that an unofficial rule prohibits Apollonites from booing children.<sup>48</sup> The rule shows a vague institutional acknowledgement that even comedy's alibis and free passes should have limits. The fact that this rule isn't enforced, however, implies the existence of certain limits *to* these limits.

Seeing as how the term *amateur* (*amator* in Latin) connotes a person doing something out of love rather than for monetary gain or fame, the boos and jeers during Amateur Night may come across gratuitously dissonant. But this gratuitousness is the point. Within the magic circle of the Apollo Theater, politesse has no place. Entering the Apollo is like entering a video game or a carnival, as players and performers acquiesce to an otherworldly domain that rewrites codes of conduct, re choreographs bodies, and rehearses trials by fire. Granted, Amateur Nights resemble mock trials rather than real ones. Juries and judges (audience members) and executioners (*the Executioner*) exhibit high-and-mighty personas that, by virtue of their overblown kitsch, signal the relatively soft stakes of the performances at hand. This doesn't mean that boos can't sting; it means that, in a colosseum where boos are part of the game, the consequences can seem diminutive because they operate *prima facie* under the comedic alibi, a vindication predicated on the phenomenal pleasures of aesthetic judgment and the consensual funniness of a booed, bombing artist.

As with Laughing Challenges, epic fails, and quandaries of sadism, the comedic alibi draws strength from the assumption that *if enough* people are laughing—if something is sufficiently funny by consensus—then the burden of responsibility becomes diffuse, soothing moral qualms along

46. "Lauryn Hill at 13 Dings Who's Lovin' You (Amateur Night at the Apollo)," YouTube, 6 Feb. 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdwhGmvB7aA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdwhGmvB7aA)

47. See Touré, "The Mystery of Lauryn Hill," *Rolling Stone*, 30 Oct. 2003, [www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-mystery-of-lauryn-hill-20031030](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-mystery-of-lauryn-hill-20031030)

48. See Robert Smith, "Harlem's Apollo Theater Gets Its Own Show," NPR, 13 Feb. 2011, [www.npr.org/2011/02/13/133729700/Harlems-Apollo-Theatre-Gets-Its-Own-Show](http://www.npr.org/2011/02/13/133729700/Harlems-Apollo-Theatre-Gets-Its-Own-Show)

the way. Beyond the Apollo Theater, audiences' cheers and laughter have long resounded as beacons of populist metrics. A clap-o-meter on the 1950s game show *Opportunity Knocks* claimed to measure audience response, though the machine was operated by a hidden person who manually turned the dial according to his own estimate of applause volumes. On *America's Got Talent* (now in its eleventh season), the audience can boo and flash thumbs-downs to encourage judges to terminate a contestant's audition. Off the live stage, there's the well-named example of Funny or Die, a comedy website (founded by Will Ferrell and Adam McKay) that shows humorous videos open to viewers' votes. If a video receives ample votes, it is deemed "funny" and stays on the main site; if it receives insufficient votes, it "dies" and descends into the website's Crypt.<sup>49</sup> Like Reddit and other judge-it-yourself sites (along with, more generally, any online content algorithmically curated by search engine optimization), the game here is natural selection, where nonspreadability means virtual death. On a site such as Funny or Die, the binary system of up-voting or down-voting comes with the added benefit of obviating the need for anyone to elaborate on why a video passes as funny. If a video lives or dies, it is because the people have spoken and, in turn, because the humorous intricacies of the video need *not* be spoken. Systemically, the humor goes unexplained—which is, of course, how good jokes are said to remain.

Even as consumers today vote with their laughs, majority opinions leave room for dissent. *Boos!* might bump against *Bravos!* in the Apollo Theater, while trolls make their obligatory clamor on comment threads of beloved viral artifacts. In comedy reception, there's also a sound that, within itself, personifies ambivalence and contradiction—laughter's abject countersign: the groan.

### Coda: Fade to Groan

Midway through the documentary *Saturday Night Live in the 2000s: Time and Again*, we see clips of past *SNL* sketches that pushed the limits of political correctness. One sketch involved Ben Affleck yelling at a "mentally challenged guy" (Fred Armisen) to shut up; another featured Jon Hamm encountering a grown-up trick-or-treater (Will Forte) "dressed up" as a sex offender.<sup>50</sup> Former cast member Horatio Sanz reflected on the studio audience's mixed reactions to these edgy moments: "What it would take to

49. "About Funny or Die," *Funny or Die*, [www.funnyordie.com/about?\\_cc=\\_\\_d\\_\\_&ccid=lzzifg.nvrnjz](http://www.funnyordie.com/about?_cc=__d__&ccid=lzzifg.nvrnjz). If a video receives an exceptionally high number of "funny" votes, it attains the status of "immortal."

50. *Saturday Night Live in the 2000s: Time and Again* (Kenneth Bowser, dir., 2010).

offend us [the cast] is a lot higher than I think most people. So when we hear groans in the audience, we kind of like it. If the laughter stops, then we don't like it. But a groan and a laugh is probably the best thing you could ever ask for!"<sup>51</sup> Groans mixed into laughter is like spice added to something nice, signaling affective equilibrium or illusions thereof.

For all of the critical thought devoted to laughter, it's funny that groans have received almost no consideration. Groans are a regular and vital component of audiences' responses to stand-up comedy, *SNL*, and talk show monologues. Superficially, a groan voices moral or aesthetic disapproval, suggesting that the comic has stepped out of bounds or failed to land a punchline. But as with the Apollo audience's reactions to Lauryn Hill, the time-lapse soundscape is complicated whenever groans are involved: typically, a foul joke or bad pun will draw sharp laughter, followed by *some* groans (from audience members realizing belatedly that such material might not merit laughter), then *more* groans (with recognition of faux pas catching on), and then finally yielding a reuptake of laughter at the situational humor of this very quandary.<sup>52</sup> These reactions launch a boomerang of affective display, a graceful A-B-A ternary form that affirms the comedy's success, after all. In short, the game of groans is long exposure. A groan can't erase a prior laugh but demonstrates an effort to take back the laugh—that is, not through subtraction but through the addition of a neutralizing or mitigating agent. Short of being able to turn back time (or to snip out a laugh track with the click of a mouse), a groan is the next best thing.<sup>53</sup>

So that you have a sense of your own body, try this: force yourself to laugh (it will likely sound artificial), listening as you do so, and then attempt to stop abruptly. How did your body feel at the moment of cessation? Probably uncomfortable, even vaguely painful. Now laugh again, but this time, let it give way to a groan, as if you've just heard someone's joke, chuckled instinctively, then realized a second later that the joke is misogynistic and that you better stifle your outburst lest nearby people judge you. Chances are you found this second routine far easier on your lungs, throat, and mind. Physiologically, this is because a laugh-turned-groan

51. Ibid.

52. For an example of the laugh-groan-laugh boomerang, see Louis C. K.'s 2015 *SNL* monologue (first aired 16 May 2015), in which he made fun of child molesters.

53. Just as people have taken out and added laugh tracks to television clips, so someone has replaced all laughter with groans for an episode of *Two and a Half Men* (to portray disparagingly that perhaps the show's jokes are more groan-worthy than laugh-worthy); see "Laugh Track from 'Two and a Half Men' Replaced with GROAN Track (Video)," *Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/19/laugh-track-from-two-and-n\\_469362.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/19/laugh-track-from-two-and-n_469362.html)

involves a guttural quick-change with respiratory continuity. (Groaning merely takes the pulsations out of laughter's exhalations.) It's an awkward yet manageable transition, an exercise in glottal backpedaling that oozes apology and ambivalence. Admittedly, no less funny than the *feeling* of a groan is how groans *sound*. We stylize groans as monotone; while the utterance fades from loud to soft, the pitch stays mostly the same. A person groaning can thus sound almost nonhuman, like a machine emitting an error tone (indicating uncertainty over how to process the input of a joke). Maybe, then, groans have flown under our critical sonar in part because they come off as literal noise, plain and simple. Unlike bubbly laughter (music to the ears), groans sound and feel flat.

Any time we laugh, boo, or groan—inappropriately, inopportunistically, involuntarily—the utterance vibrates stubbornly in the air, admissible as exhibit A to all who care to judge. Like touchy speech acts or an embarrassing text message that you regret immediately upon hitting Send, take-backs are technically impossible. Life isn't a courtroom. We can't officially ask to strike a line or a laugh from the record. Yet in the wake of offensive jokes, injuries, or even national catastrophes, people have simultaneously found reasons to laugh and not to laugh (recall the contrasting cases of post-9/11 *SNL* and post-Charleston *The Daily Show*) because with laughter, reason isn't necessarily the point. Not only can laughter signify generously, but its verdict is also rarely final. Appeals abound, for even though the echoes of a laugh cannot be materially retracted, its hermeneutic terminus remains a shifting target.

Laughter isn't always overflowing with intense secrets. Anyone claiming that a joke is just a joke could likewise insist that a laugh is just a laugh—a syntactic tautology working double duty as moral alibi. Minding the sociopolitical stakes of laughing out loud means recognizing how different people shoulder differing burdens of sonic, gestural, and physiognomic propriety and, by extension, how people face variable charges and convictions amid the difficulties of taking back a laugh. Given how laughing bugs can infect any of us, we *should know* that we *don't always know* why people laugh. Modern hackers of laughter are producing humorous artifacts and performances that make such uncertainties wilder than ever. If laughter both begs inquiry and calls for interpretative forfeit, then it perpetually pleads alibis through its own semantic promiscuity. From one moment to the next, auditors of laughter might be tasked with condemning or forgiving a laugher, choosing between austere suspicion and benefit of the doubt. Resonating in our collective chuckle huts may be the funny feeling that, when we opt to humor others' laughable excuses, we stand to be humored in kind.