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ARTICLE

Foucault, Laughter, and Gendered Normalization*

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ABSTRACT: Thus far, little attention has been paid by Foucauldian scholars to the role of laughter in our subjectivation and normalization, nor to the possible roles of laughter practices in political resistance. Yet, there is a body of references to laughter in both Foucault's own work and that of his contemporary commentators, subtly indicating that it might be a tool for challenging normalization through transgression. I seek to negotiate the different functions (both transgressive and disciplinary) that our laughter practices can have, proposing that laughter is a worthy site of exploration for Foucauldian feminists in particular. Examining the differential norms, requirements, and sanctions around laughter shows that we are shaped as gendered subjects through the regulation of laughter's timing and its bodily presentation. I argue that the contemporary state of laughter practices works to uphold docile femininity, using tools such as compulsory happiness and labelling feminists as killjoys. In brief, this article interrogates the ways in which cultivating different laughter practices can function as a path for Foucauldian-feminist political resistance.

Keywords: Foucault; feminism; gender; laughter; transgression

Near the end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault states that "to all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence [….] we can answer only with a philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one." [1] This paper considers the political functions of laughter within the context of a Foucauldian framework. I figure laughter as a valuable phenomenon for Foucauldian theorists and specifically for Foucauldian feminists to analyse, despite its absence from the foreground of Foucault's own work. First, I will argue that laughter is revealed as significant when placed within Foucauldian frameworks of power and politics. Second, I argue that Foucauldian feminists in particular should attend to laughter's disciplinary

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 342-3.

and resistant functions. To do so, I build upon the work of the many Foucauldian feminists who have analyzed practices of normalization and proposed sites of resistance, as well as draw from contemporary feminists outside of the Foucauldian tradition. I hope to show that laughter practices have untapped subversive and resistant potential. The guiding question of my paper is: how might we use laughter practices to transgress the limits of our current experience as gendered laughing subjects?

The key moves in this paper are as follows: I perform a close reading of some of Foucault's references to laughter (and commentary on them by feminist scholars) and relate them to the concepts of transgression and discourse; I examine how laughter is both a normalizing force and itself normalized, particularly upon gendered bases; and I explore what it could mean for feminists to 'laugh differently' as a mode of resistance.

I. Foucault's laughter

Although Foucault gives neither an explanation nor a genealogy of laughter, he does mention it several times. Most famously, he begins *The Order of Things* by explaining that the 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, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces […] and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. […] In the wonderment of [Borges' fictional taxonomy of animals], the thing we apprehend in one great leap […] is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. [2]

This is a shocking moment for Foucault as a reader. Later, in his 1974 lecture series *Abnormal*, he notes that "discourses of truth that provoke laughter and have the institutional power to kill are, after all, in a society like ours, discourses that deserve some attention. […] These everyday discourses of truth that kill and provoke laughter are at the very heart of our judicial system."[3] In line with these comments from *Abnormal* and *The Order of Things*, Chloë Taylor argues that many of Foucault's non-philosophical publications, such as memoirs and appendices, are examples of such "everyday discourses of truth" that function to create laughter in the reader.[4] Taylor takes the laughs of readers to be significant, adding that "the work of discipline also works at the level of the body and thus can be undone only through the body, through shifts in its pleasures and affects and practices, and not merely through the acceptance or examination of philosophical ideas."[5]

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[2] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, edited by Valerino Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 6.

[4] Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 135.

[5] Ibid.

As a third example, laughs litter many of Foucault's interview transcripts.[6] During what was published as "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," James O' Higgins asks Foucault whether lesbians desire relationships similar to the long-term stable heterosexual relationship, in contrast with gay men.[7] Foucault responds by laughing and then saying, "All I can do is explode with laughter." In her discussion of this interview in *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler suggests that Foucault laughs "precisely because the question instates the very binary that he seeks to displace"; it came loaded with an understanding of sexuality that he did not accept.[8]

These references don't constitute an argument, but they are evidence that Foucault considered laughter to be significant and political. How should we think about laughter, given these mentions of it in Foucault's writing and life (as well as their uptake by feminist theorists)? There are two functions of laughter here that I want to highlight. First, laughter can function, as it does in at least the first example, to desubjectivate the person who is laughing. Anne Parvulescu speculates that this laughter is something that *happens to* the subject: "It is not Foucault […] who laughs. […] Laughter laughs Foucault's thought. […] Foucault is disappropriated; his thought is not his property. He is at the mercy of laughter, engulfed in laughter."[9] Second, laughter bears some sort of edge relationship to discourse. Laughing is not exactly discursive, but neither is it wholly divergent; in these examples discourses *provoke* laughter. Furthermore, the fact that they provoke laughter is not an accidental correlation but an indication of something about the discourse itself.

I would like to situate these instances of laughter within Foucault's discussion of transgression. Transgression is a concept that he defines in contrast to dialectics/dialectical philosophy.[10] In his view, dialectical philosophy conceives of resistance as direct negative opposition to an external object or force, with both the resistance and the force having a shared background/set of assumptions. Dialectics take for granted the conceptual schema or paradigm within which the debate is happening, and so dialectical challenges dispute the internal workings of a system rather than the framework itself. If we wish to perform an overhaul of a political system, in contrast, we need to alter our conception of resistance. I suggest that we can take up Foucault's notion of transgression as a resource for developing different forms of resistance.

In transgression, instead of accepting the limits of our current discourses and *episteme*, we expose them as contingent. Transgressing, therefore, involves fundamentally challenging the terms, concepts, and discourses that structure our daily lives. However, transgression

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[6] Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, edited by Sylvere Lotringer, translated by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996).

[7] Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 163-73.

[8] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 140.

[9] Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 13.

[10] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in Donald F. Bouchard (ed. and Trans.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

must be a constant and dynamic project, since Foucault would argue that it is never the case that we discover some ultimate, universal *a priori* concept underneath. Rather, any way of thinking is constructed and contingent. In this movement, the boundaries we typically hold are revealed as impermanent and porous—challenging not only our categories, but our sense of self. Our subjectivity is, as it were, shattered.

We can transgress in at least two ways. The first is by interrogating our own limits through critical philosophy, doing "a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond" critiquing and understanding our historical limits, and how we define ourselves by specific historical events.[11] Second, transgression can *happen to us* as a limit experience. A limit experience is distinctive because "[n]o form of dialectical movement, no analysis of constitutions and of their transcendental ground can serve as support for thinking about such an experience or even as access to this experience."[12] In other words, a limit experience is neither intelligible nor fully expressible within our discourses. Limit experiences range from the extreme, drug-induced, and sexually explicit to the 'mundane' and everyday, like Foucault's experience of reading Borges, or perhaps our own of reading Foucault.

I find it helpful to compare Foucault's concept of transgression to Ladelle McWhorter's concept of "opposition." In *Bodies and Pleasures*, she reserves the term "resistance" for dialectics, stating that resistance "is merely negative, a no to domination. Opposition involves something positive, a departure from dominating networks […] the production of a different sort of self and a different sort of community."[13] In addition to this distinction between types of resistance, McWhorter not only acknowledges but insists that transgression or opposition has conditions of possibility. In order to be able to transgress, we often first need to enact some dialectical resistance, a violent "counterattack" against practices and institutions "to force them to allow us to do our self-transformative work."[14] This distinction is helpful when thinking about what instances of laughter practices are resistant, and how they can work together.

The three laughs I started with can be understood as either instances of transgression or as the dialectical work that often precedes transgression. Classifying them as either dialectical or transgressive laughs is vague and messy; even in cases when laughter might seem to be dialectical (as in the O'Higgins example), we can trouble such a classification. Foucault's laugh at that moment not only critiqued what O'Higgins said, but *refused to engage* with the discourse (thus, the assumed backdrop of the conversation). I will put my energy, however, not only into categorizing specific instances of laughter as dialectical or transgressive, but primarily into interrogating the transgressive potential of the examples. To do *only* this, however, would be to ignore the ways in which laughter itself is constructed, disciplinary, and normalizing.

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[11] Ibid., 42, 47.

[12] Ibid., 37.

[13] Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 191.

[14] Ibid., 191.

II. Laughter and Normalization

The examples of laughter I cite above show Foucault speaking of laughter not as a set of practices that is normalized, but as a potentially resistant force.[15] However, I contend that it is a highly normalized and normalizing phenomenon, in particular as it relates to gender. In order to demonstrate this, I will expand upon Sandra Bartky's analysis of discipline as it applies to 'contemporary' femininity—using disciplinary power, and its primary mechanisms of surveillance and normalization, as my framework.[16]

Bartky famously explicitly connects femininity and docility, arguing that femininity is disciplined through control of women's body shape, decoration, and "gestures, postures, and movements."[17] How does laughter interact with docility and femininity? I hold that moments of laughter, and the ways that we laugh, often either stem from or function to reproduce docile femininity.

I contend that much laughter today is a normalizing, disciplinary force. Laughter can reinforce norms of appearance, of disciplinary boundaries, and of oppression. When we fail to meet a norm we may be subject to ridicule: for example, laughter normalizes those who don't perform gender 'properly' or 'normally.' Several scholars have proposed that in the mouths of the sexist and racist majority, laughter works to maintain oppression rather than challenge it.[18] The phenomenon of 'laughing-at' even extends to disciplinary boundaries in another sense: Women's and Gender Studies is commonly presented as "risible [i.e. laughable], something that the students should not take too seriously, in contrast to […] other approaches mentioned, all of them presented in a balanced, admiring and non-mocking tone."[19] This laughter keeps gender studies at the margins, distancing it from other disciplines and isolating it as non-scholarly.

However, laughter does not only work as a tool to support other normalizing practices; *laughter itself* as a practice is normalized. There are 'normal' ways to laugh, which vary according to many factors, such as class, race, and gender. Many sociological and psychological stud-

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[15] Just as Foucault held that resistance is often generated by the exercise of power itself, we can view involuntary resistant laughter as a result of laughter's thorough normalization.

[16] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977).

[17] Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power," in Lee Quinby and Irene Diamond (eds.), *Feminism and Foucault: Paths of Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 65; Bartky also observes that "a woman must not allow her arms and legs to flail about in all directions; she must try to manage her movement with the appearance of grace" (Ibid., 69). These tactics and comportments are "part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity—and hence the feminine body-subject—is constructed" (Ibid., 71).

[18] Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005); Diana Elena Popa and Villy Tsakona, "Humour in politics and the politics of humour: An introduction," in Diana Elena Popa and Villy Tsakona (eds.), *Studies in Political Humour: In Between Political Critique and Public Entertainment* (Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 2011).

[19] Maria do Mar Pereira, "Dangerous laughter: the mocking of Gender Studies in academia," *OpenDemocracy.net* (March 8, 2013). Available online at: http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/maria-do-mar-pereira/dangerous-laughter-mocking-of-gender-studies-in-academia

ies note laughter's gendered trends: women laugh more often than men, and more often at men's jokes, though rarely *at* men; men find women more attractive the more they laugh; and while women laugh with a high-pitched voice, men emit more grunts.[20] On my interpretation, these differences are not innate but reflect significant ways through which femininity and masculinity are constructed and lived. I assert that the normalization of women, and thus part of their constitution as gendered subjects, takes place through the disciplining of their laughter. There are two major ways in which women's laughter is disciplined: its form is governed down to small details, and its timing is regulated.

Iris Marion Young, in her phenomenology of women's' comportment, argues that there is a "typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, [and] hitting like a girl."[21] I insist that there is a distinctive way of *laughing like a girl* produced through discipline and normalization.[22] The gendered differences between giggling and guffawing, or laughing with your body still and knee-slapping, reflect norms of feminine embodiment. Women who don't meet these norms—who move around too much, slap their knees, clap hands, shake shoulders, embrace a belly laugh, make too much noise, or laugh too long—are deemed unfeminine or abnormal. Furthermore, the enforcement of these norms is performed by everyone and no one, including one's self.[23] For example, in August of 2015 a book club made up primarily of black women was evacuated from Napa Valley Wine Train in California because a white passenger complained that they were laughing too loudly, prompting discussion about the dangers associated with #laughingwhileblack.[24]

Laughter plays into gender normalization in a second way: laughter is often compulsory. Feminists and critical race theorists have argued that commonly, oppressed individuals are required to appear happy, docile, and upbeat as a way of showing deference to those in power.[25] Sara Ahmed focuses this concern upon what she calls 'compulsory happiness,' arguing

[20] Jo-Anne Bachorowski, Moria J. Smoski, and Michal J. Owren, "The acoustic features of human laughter," *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America,* vol. 110, no. 3 (2001); E. Bressler and S. Balshine, "The influence of humor on desirability," *Evolution and Human Behavior,* vol. 27 (2006); K. Grammer and I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, "The ritualization of laughter," in W. Koch (ed.), *Naturlichkeit der sprache und der kultur: Actacolloquii* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1990); Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000). These studies are culturally and socially bound, the majority using young college students in the United States and Canada as their subjects.

[21] Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies,* vol. 3 (1980), 143.

[22] This does not negate other ways of 'laughing like a girl.' See Chisholm for a theorization of a liberating way of 'climbing like a girl.' Dianne Chisholm, "Climbing like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology," *Hypatia,* vol. 23, no. 1 (2008).

[23] Bartky's and Young's analyses are situated in twentieth-century, white 'Western' Anglophone middle-class society, and are both now several decades old. I believe that on the whole their analyses apply today, though a more nuanced analysis of how comportment is influenced by racialized and queer identities is needed.

[24] Eliora Katz, "Black Women Kicked Off Wine Train For Laughing Too Loudly," *The Daily Beast* (August 24, 2015). Available online at: http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/24/black-women-kicking-off-wine-train-for-laughing-too-loudly.html

[25] Laura Green, "Stereotypes: Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-

that women are held to a higher standard of performing happiness than their male counterparts.[26] Compulsory happiness does not express one's own delight or joy, but is a duty a woman bears to others. Ahmed states that "happiness is not so much what the [happy housewife archetype] has but what she does," so that "any deviation from gender roles in terms of women being trained to make men happy is a deviation from the happiness of all."[27] The norms of compulsory happiness have prompted backlash, as evidenced by movements such as Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's series of posters entitled "Stop Telling Women to Smile."[28] This series consists of portraits of victims of street harassment, featuring women of colour in order to highlight the differing forms of street harassment that are plied against them and the additional pressure on racialized women to perform happiness.

Alongside the demand for smiles comes what I will call *compulsory laughter*. Examples of compulsory laughter are present in our daily lives: a woman might be expected to laugh when someone with power over her makes a joke, to treat her own achievements as ridiculous, or to 'laugh off' street harassment. The ideal woman must laugh in order to facilitate the laughter and happiness of all those around her: refraining from laughter lets others down. This functions not only to please men, but to please other women: for example, a female employer might expect her nanny to laugh along with her. In complying, the employee would both 'prove' her affective bond to the employer and 'prove' her own satisfaction in her job. In each case, compulsory laughter is part of a woman's responsibility for all others' happiness above her own. The pleasing of privileged subjects has a dual role here, since it also reinforces norms of femininity linked to selflessness, nurturing, martyrdom, hyper-politeness, subservience, and docility.

Both of these modes of laughter regulation—the control of its expression and of its timing—normalize us as gendered subjects. For example, the mocking of individuals who fall outside of the gender binaries (or who even perform gender-subversive acts) is a "laughing-at" whose goals is to punish these individuals and force them back into 'normalcy.' Furthermore, *how* we laugh results in others reading our gender(s) in a certain way, as more 'properly' feminine or masculine, and as more or less rational.[29] *The regulations around women's laughter function to support and construct an unrealistic archetype of femininity: docile, subservient, and selfless above all else.*[30] The degree to which one's laughter is successfully normalized has ripple effects in terms of heterosexual desirability, competency in the workplace, and possibilities for

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Americans," *Perspectives on Multiculturalism and Cultural Diversity,* vol. 11, no. 1 (1998). Web: http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/links/VCU.htm

[26] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[27] Ibid., 55. Furthermore, Provine speculates that laughter is regularly "performed by a subservient individual, most often a female, as a vocal display of compliance, subordination, or solidarity with a more dominant group member" (Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, 29).

[28] Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, "About," *Stop Telling Women to Smile*. Available online at: http://stoptellingwomentosmile.com/About

[29] Women, and other subjects stereotyped as more "bodily" and less "rational," are often expected to cover their mouths, restrain their limbs, and laugh quietly.

[30] Examining laughter reveals the inconsistencies of these norms of femininity, and the delicate balance necessary for a subject to approximate them.

friendship.

III. Un/Laughter as Resistance

How then can we reconcile these normalizing and gendering functions of laughter with the transgressive functions that I have laid out so far? An explicit example of women taking up laughter as anti-normalization occurred during the summer of 2014. After the Turkish prime minister decried women laughing in public, many Turkish women began the #direnkahkaha ('resist laughter') movement, posting photos of their own public laughter on social media in protest.[31] In addition to this instance of an explicitly trangressive/anti-normalizing use of laughter, I therefore outline three more subtle ways in which laughter can produce anti-normalizing effects: i) laughing when we usually wouldn't; ii) changing our comportment during laughter; and iii) disrupting compulsory laughter (unlaughing). Accomplishing these practices in non-disciplinary ways is certainly tricky, as there are no clear rules. Because feminine laughter is at times demanded and at other times prohibited, resistance will be contextual rather than systematic.[32] I thus aim to aid the reader in thinking through new laughter practices, or what I will call 'laughing differently.' How are women already (thinking about) laughing differently?

Women laughing when we are disciplined not to can be powerful in countering normalizing discourse. Nisha Susan suggests that 'feminist laughter' can be a key response to openly sexist or otherwise offensive jokes.[33] Laughing sarcastically might be effective in interrupting the norms of joke-telling, in particular if you laugh *at* the joke-teller. However, if your laughter isn't hyperbolic enough (and there is no clear bar to hit), it might be interpreted as complicity. The *LOL @ MRA* blog is "dedicated to laughing at the ridiculous things 'Men's Rights Activists' say and believe."[34] A close friend told me that she "once laughed in the face of a philosopher who told [her] that he always wondered what sex with a feminist would be like." Laughter in the form of mocking is also being used already by many women in order to deflect assault. Susan proposes we use a "warning laugh" against men who expose themselves or grope others in public. An academic mentioned to me that the tactic of laughing at an offender was taught to her as a strategy for public humiliation and recruiting bystanders. Hélène Cixous, among others, has pointed out that women's laughter is seen as a danger that must be quelled else it fatally damage masculinity: "it's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation.[35] In these examples, laughter involves a non-discursive refusal, but can also function to discipline others to conform to current social norms (for example, the norm prohibiting public exposure). Alt-

[31] EsmaAkyel, "#Direnkahkaha (Resist Laughter): 'Laughter is a Revolutionary Action'," *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2014).

[32] See also Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter," *Social Research*, vol. 79, no. 1 (2012).

[33] Nisha Susan, "So you thought feminists don't laugh?" *The Times of India: Crest Edition* (April 13, 2013). Available online at: http://www.timescrest.com/coverstory/so-you-thought-feminists-dont-laugh-10118

[34] *LOL @ MRA*, *Tumblr.com.* Accessed January 22, 2014. Available online at: http://lolatmra.tumblr.com.

[35] Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" translated by A. Kuhn, *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1981), 42-3.

hough these laughs are disciplinary and perhaps dialectical, they are both useful for combating micro-aggressions and make room for transgression to occur.[36]

We can also change *how* we laugh. Allowing our bodies and voices to have free rein during laughter can counteract many of the pressures that Bartky and Young identified.[37] Laughter can be a way of taking up space: either physically by moving your limbs or by projecting your voice loudly across the space. Laughing in gender-nonconforming ways, or doing so intentionally, makes others aware of the contingency of norms. Alternatively, we can laugh in a hyper-feminine, exaggerated manner. As Bordo and McWhorter point out, women are asked to control their 'hysterical' natures to gain proper or accepted femininity.[38] In the face of this, laughing hysterically could be a feminist act, as it is excessive, loud, and lacks the defined control of posture and movements. Accomplishing these changes in our micro-practices, though, is entangled with the problem of habit. I will return to this task in a later section, proposing laughing differently as an *askesis*.

Feminists have also been addressing compulsory laughter, some under the umbrella of 'killjoys.' The feminist killjoy stereotype persists in part because practices of unlaughter have *already* been taken up.[39] Social scientist Michael Billig coined the term 'unlaughter,' which I borrow here, to mean "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded."[40] There are a myriad of ways to unlaugh. You might remain silent in the face of a normally accepted joke or comment, having a lack of reaction "speak for itself." However, in certain contexts silence implies complicity, and so it is necessary to *verbally point out our own lack of laughter*.[41] Bell hooks experienced this at a viewing of the drag-ball documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). She and her friend were:

> disturbed by the extent to which white folks around us were 'entertained' and 'pleasured' by scenes we viewed as sad and at times tragic. Often individuals laughed at personal testimony about hardship, pain, loneliness. Several times I yelled out in the dark: 'What is so funny about this scene? Why are you laughing?' The laughter was never innocent.[42]

Unlaughing interrupts what individuals might 'normally' see as funny, exposing the presuppositions behind laughter and showing that humour itself is contingent. In hooks' example,

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36 Microaggressions are "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Derald Wing Sue, "Microaggressions: More than Just Race," *Psychology Today* (November 17, 2010). Available online at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race

37 Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power"; Young, "Throwing Like a Girl."

38 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 10th anniversary ed.); McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*.

39 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness,* 87. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule,* 192.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 193.

42 Bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 154.

the audience's laughter was only possible due to their already privileged standpoint.

As several scholars have pointed out, the examples that Foucault gives of resistance in his own work are not per se 'successful' or 'satisfactory.' For example, Foucault's *College de France* lectures *Psychiatric Power* and *Abnormal* illustrate some moments of collective and involuntary resistance which were imported into the systems of power and ultimately used to strengthen the organizations (nuns and hysterics).[43] The worry that instances of resistance can result in punishment or worsening of situations for individuals involved is, therefore, a real and legitimate concern for Foucauldians invested in political revolution.[44]

Just as Foucault's work demonstrates that resistance has no guarantee of success, there are risks to all these strategies of 'laughing differently': unlaughing might mean further dismissal as a killjoy, or, as in hooks' case, as an 'angry-black-woman'; laughing inexplicably might mean the ascription of total irrationality, particularly in academic or formal political spaces; and changing our tone of voice or posture might result in sanctions for violating gender-binarist norms. Social consequences abound with any of these. Embarking on the project of laughing differently, then, may be impossible for many women and most accessible only for those who already hold significant privileges in other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, as Bartky acknowledges, giving up some of the practices that constitute our gender can result in a lost identity for many individuals—the prospect of losing the self is a particularly terrifying one for contemporary subjects.[45]

Another hurdle is determining *how* we cultivate different laughter. In particular, how do we cultivate spontaneous or non-intentional laughter? Involuntary, spontaneous laughter is what comes through most clearly in the references from Foucault's work. However, this is a tricky path to take to resistance, since we cannot directly will it to happen—leaving agents to feel powerless, and resistance dependent upon contingent whims of fate that may or may not occur. As any limit experience, it is impossible to predict or 100% manipulate the occurrence of transgressive laughter—even though we can try and cultivate an open environment. I propose that individuals might develop an ongoing cultivation of conditions for possibility of spontaneous, unbridled laughter.

IV. Our laughter, our selves

Laughter that functions through transgression, then, can be useful for feminist politics. Laughter and unlaughter might be part of a project of transgression through critique, incorporated into everyday actions. For example, refusing to laugh at a socially sanctioned moment can be a way of pointing out the demand for compulsory laughter, the norms around comportment in laughter, and oppressive assumptions in humour. Laughing on purpose or intentionally can

[43] Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*, edited by Jacques Lagrange et al., translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006) 137, 253, and 254; Foucault, *Abnormal*, 222, and 227.

[44] These examples don't rule out resistance, however; in particular these two examples were highly institutionally-focused, whereas laughter is one of the more diffuse and disparate of examples that suffuse non-institutional contexts.

[45] Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power," 77.

also be a way of invoking critique: it can *expose* the limits of rationality (and its insufficiency) while also reminding reason of its contingent, embodied form.

In particular, feminists can use transgressive laughter to shatter categories and concepts that have been used for oppression. Butler explicitly suggests that "laughter in the face of serious categories [such as the medicalization of women's bodies] is *indispensable* for feminism" (my emphasis).[46] In Beauvoir's view, for the girl "scoffing at the female body, ridiculing men, [and] laughing at love, are ways of disavowing sexuality; this laughter that defies adults is a way of overcoming one's own embarrassment; one plays with images and words to kill the dangerous magic of them."[47] These categories break up not only when we explicitly discuss them and laugh (as in Foucault's interview mentioned earlier), but also more subtly; changing the ways that I laugh may provide me with a different lived experience of my own gendered embodiment.

Instead of establishing new rules for how feminists "should" laugh, I propose that we experiment with transgressive laughter to highlight the contingency of norms and practices, while avoiding positing new normalizing standards. Laughing differently can be a project of care of the self, by which we transform our subjectivities. Foucault demonstrates the ethical potential of self-transformation in *The History of Sexuality volume 3: The Care of the Self*.[48] He addresses forms of *assujettissement* that do not result in docility or normalization through the example of the "care of the self": practices (and arguably a way of life) performed in ancient Greece. In brief, he argues that whereas in the twentieth century, Western societies thought about the self as something to know and/or discover, the ancient Greeks saw the self as something developed through caring for it. This care often involved governance, strict regimens, and training, around aspects of life such as sexual activity, diet, and physical exercise, but was not normalizing. [49]

Foucault divides a regimen of care of the self into *askeses,* or 'technologies of the self,' actions that:

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.[50]

One ancient *askesis* that Foucault explores is *parrhesia* (frank speech), a form of truth-telling

[46] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxviii.

[47] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011[1949]), 365.

[48] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 3: The Care of the Self,* translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

[49] Because care of the self required considerable free time and resources, in ancient Greece it was only upper-class men who could truly 'cultivate' their selves at the time. Women, slaves, and children did not have the privilege to care for themselves in these ways.

[50] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self," in Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988), 18.

that changes your self-relation: you come to see yourself as one who speaks the truth, rather than being defined in terms of your status. In *parrhesia* "access to the truth entails exercising freedom [as a speaking subject] and doing so, moreover, in ways that both generate and promote confrontation with uncertainty and risk."[51] Today, many Foucauldians are searching for alternative *askeses*, taking *parrhesia* and dietetics as models for ethics. In particular, several Foucauldian feminists examine the micro-practices of power and resistance in our ordinary activities, considering practices as diverse as gardening, line-dancing, cosmetic surgery, body-building and grassroots anti-rape campaigns.[52] Although these acts might seem very minor, Dianna Taylor holds that:

> Foucault is trying to get us to see […] the potential of seemingly mundane actions to provoke. He also makes clear that this reality is simultaneously discouraging and heartening: it illustrates not only that the effects of normalization are extensive, but that insofar as this is the case what has not been thought or imagined is equally so.[53]

I argue that changing our practices of laughter can be a freeing *askesis* for feminine subjects, a way of expanding our capacities without increasing docility, a self-transformative ethical project. For example, changing the way I laugh in an open and experimental manner**,** as I suggested earlier, loosens the grip of normalization on our bodies. Intentionally using discipline to change my laughter habits might eventually lead to my unconscious laughter becoming more unpredictable. Laughing differently as a feminist *askesis* changes my self-relation, opening me up to new possibilities of behaviour and action. I can use laughter as a tool for "influencing others while (and as a part of the practice of) caring for one's self."[54] I can directly influence them as in mocking, but subtly changing my gendered self-relation also reveals to others that they too can participate in these transformations.

In addition, changing laughter practices challenges essentialist models of sex and gender in a transgressive way. Rather than presenting an argument against gender binaries and/or essentialism, the laugher undergoes a different lived experience of sex and gender. As such, we can view it as an everyday form of 'genderfucking' along with other gender-subversive acts.[55] Thus feminist laughter practices can be seen as practices intimately involved with the care of the self, as *askeses*, as technologies of the self. When we undertake laughter as a new form of *assujettissement*, we both become different subjects and become subjects differently.

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[51] Dianna Taylor, "Resisting the Subject: A Feminist-Foucauldian Approach to Countering Sexual Violence," *Foucault Studies,* vol. 16 (2013), 95.

[52] Megan A. Dean, "When Knowing Better is Not Enough: Experiencing Bodies, Feminist Critique, and Foucault," Master's thesis, University of Alberta, *Proquest Dissertations and Theses* (2012); Cressida Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*; D. Taylor "Resisting the Subject"; Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (eds.), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[53] D. Taylor, "Resisting the Subject," 103.

[54] McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*, 211.

[55] See for example Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Conclusion

Through the disciplined docility of the contemporary feminine body, subjects have adapted to suppress transgressive laughter as quickly as possible, limiting our possibilities. I think that the restrictions on the laughter of women foreclose *most of all* transgressive laughter.

This paper has made the case for laughter as a set of practices which merit attention from Foucauldian feminist theorists in particular. Foucault himself spends little time discussing laughter, and in those rare discussions he portrays it as having transgressive functions. However, I argue that contemporary laughter practices are both highly normalizing and highly normalized. Examining the norms around laughter demonstrates their entanglement with our constructions of gender. Changing our laughter practices ('laughing differently') may therefore be a way to combat the subjectivation that laughter is tangled up in a form of micro-political resistance.

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