

# A Certain Laughter:

## Sherwood Anderson's Experiment in Form

Judith Brown

Consciousness of brown men, brown women, coming more and more into American life – by that token coming into him too.

More willing to come, more avid to come than any Jew, German, Pole, Italian. Standing laughing – coming by the back door – with shuffling feet, a laugh – a dance in the body.

Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter*

We must affirm this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance.

Jacques Derrida, "Différance"

### I

#### Simple Living, Simple Laughs

A guy named Sponge seems an unlikely hero for a novel with modernist pretensions. But there he is amid the Paris artists and orgy-goers, the Chicago intelligentsia, the impotent industrialists and the shattered veterans of Sherwood Anderson's 1925 novel, *Dark Laughter*. He's just a factory worker with a good attitude, a wiry old wife, and a thirst for the moonshine that keeps the happy couple soused along the muddy banks of the Ohio River whenever the mood strikes. Sponge simply lives, absorbing the shocks of the modern world, a man at peace with the limited means available to him – no romantic aspirations, no great call to art, no seeking after a lost god, no worries. Give him a plug of chewing tobacco, a fishing line and the company of his liquored up wife and he's happy enough to forget the children he's lost, the business that's been taken away. As his name suggests, Sponge lives at the bottom, adapting to the prevailing currents and finding sustenance in the bits that fall to him. He's a man capable of comedy, a ready-made buffoon, but he doesn't even serve that purpose in this novel; instead he is strangely respectable for the smallness of his vision, the absence of his ambition, his ability to go on enjoying a simple laugh.

It's Sponge's ability to laugh that interests me here, his smiling forbearance in the face of the onslaughts of modernity. Anderson creates Sponge as a side-note, a smiling secondary character who supports the novel's main interest. Sponge, as it turns out, will only serve as an occasional side-kick for Bruce Dudley, *Dark Laughter*'s real protagonist (though hardly its hero), who abandons his big-city life and big-city wife in search of something indefinable and more recognizably modernist, as he imagines himself explaining: "I'm cutting out. To tell the truth I haven't thought much about where I'm going. I'm setting out on a little voyage of discovery. I've a notion that Myself is a land few men know about . . . I guess I'm a primitive man, a voyager, eh? . . . Maybe I'll turn out to be a poet."<sup>1</sup> Maybe, although it seems doubtful, with his limited attention span and imaginative power. His journey takes him to southern Indiana, where he works alongside Sponge who becomes an important foil and smiling version of primitive simplicity, unencumbered by the desires that define modern man; but Bruce seeks more complicated laughs than satisfy his assembly-line friend. Laughter he finds in abundance in New Orleans, wrapping him in the warmth of nostalgia for Mark Twain's America, for his own dead mother, and for the simplicity of earlier times. The laughter is scenic rather than comic,

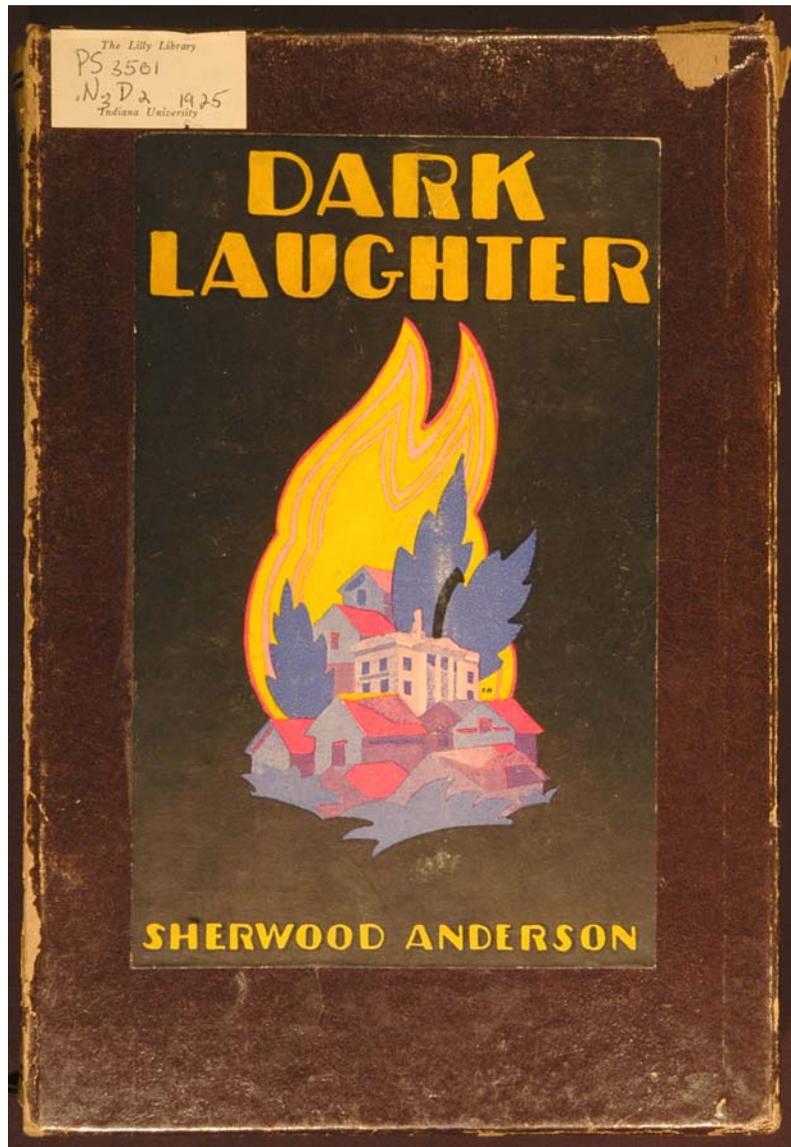
ready-made rather than spontaneous, as Bruce travels over the body of America, a body that will be signified by the changing face of the Mississippi River marking its movement from an agrarian to an industrial economy.

But one thing doesn't seem to change and that is the wide-smiling faces of the African American laborers that people the novel's margins, providing the dark laughter of the novel's title. The country's dark racial history barely enters the story; rather this is a story about a white man's fantasy that is somehow bolstered by the darkly sensual and expressive body, unfettered and able to laugh freely, without inhibition, and without the complications of social mores and conventional morality that weigh on day-to-day life in the city. Bruce's fantasy, then, will traverse a landscape of amusement that takes him from the demands of a modernized and professional world, softened it's true by Sponge, to a garden where he will find love and fulfillment against the soundscape of black laughter.

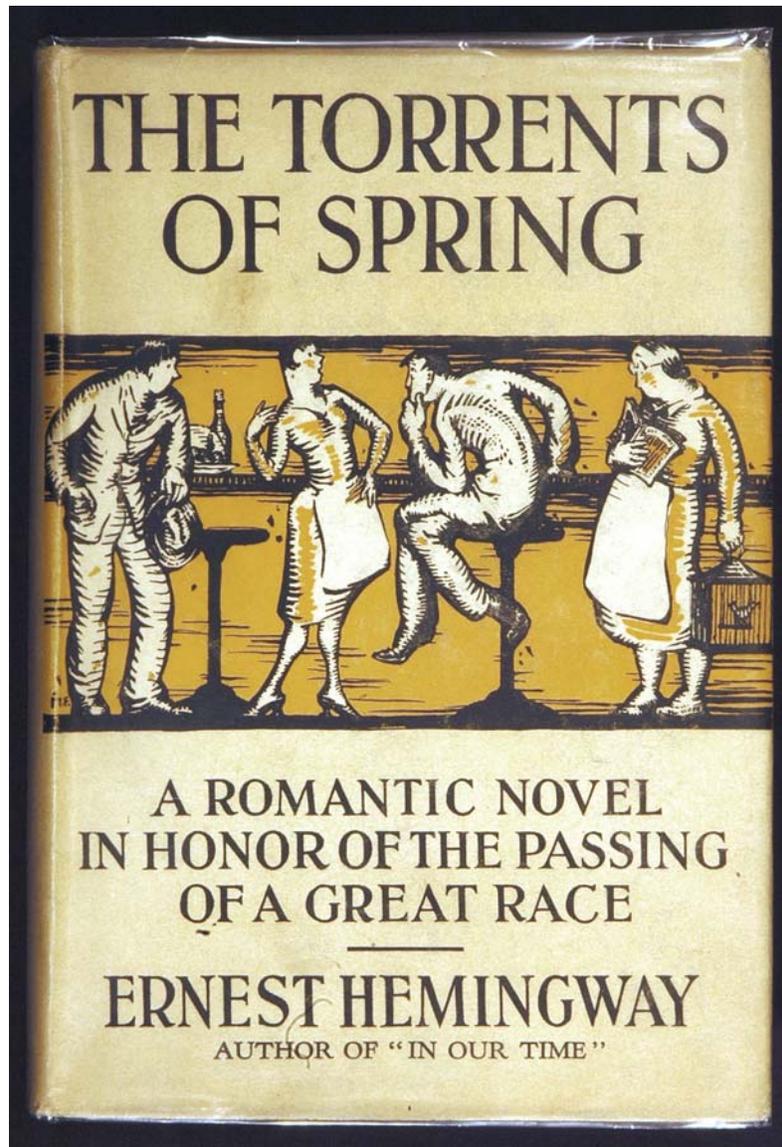
Of course, this is laughable. Anderson's bestselling novel, while it earned him popular success (it was his only bestseller), also elicited critical derision, and a fictional parody by a young Ernest Hemingway (*The Torrents of Spring* emphatically did not draw a laugh from Anderson). The novel's fantasy life, though embarrassingly familiar (ditch the successful wife, hook up with the babe, tend her garden), isn't without irony. And its laughter isn't wholly simple: while on one side of the ocean, blacks are laughing softly, on another bank, this one in Paris, the laughter comes from the decadent white body, the figure of modernism, the expatriate whose roots have been blasted by war and from whose body also emanates dark laughter. What connects these two expressions of mirth? Does this novel tell us anything about modern modes of laughing? The ambivalence regarding laughter, laughter that is represented in both primitive and decadent forms, I argue, suggests a growing cultural concern with the modern capacity to laugh and, further, to represent laughter. Anderson depicts the moderns – and consequently, himself – as entirely without humor, as creators of a bleak and crippled literature, constantly reminding the reader that an authentic relationship to the body lies elsewhere. Twentieth-century writers had only a junkheap of "stale jokes piled up" for material and, if the great humorist Mark Twain had lived, the novel's protagonist muses, he might have written an epic of "laughter killed" (*DL*, 18). Twain didn't live and instead we have Sherwood Anderson, who reflects on past and contemporary writers and installs himself as a cultural translator, producing black bodies, or bodies on the fringes of society, whose ability to laugh positions them in relation to a primitive past that holds some promise for the future, or at least the future of white modernists. However stale this vision of the primitive future is, the articulation of laughter, itself inarticulate, tells us something about the modern understanding of its own ability to laugh. And what is that something? Laughter, conceived as outside the boundaries of language and the rigid posture of the modern subject, emerges as a useful though uncontrollable form, a form compatible with modernist literary experimentation and its aesthetics of formal violence.

Anderson's novel will attempt to structure laughter into the form of the novel itself, making it carry some weight – a serious task, then – and thus assume some responsibility for the rehabilitation of a culture defined more by dying than by laughing. It may be tempting to dismiss Anderson's novel as a failed modernist experiment: his fractured narrative, unworthy protagonist, and chorus of minor laughing characters arguably add up to nothing beyond a medley of clichés. Yet Anderson nevertheless attempts something significant in *Dark Laughter* in his experiment to intertwine narrative form and laughter. Laughter, with its unpredictable disruptions, its gaps in meaning, its illegibility, provides the shifting foundation for the novel, and for its depiction of middle class experience. Anderson, though he appears to employ familiar tropes of the laughing outsider, offers laughter as a way to disrupt linguistic codes and those cultural narratives that confine human experience. Laughter, in its combination of aggression and pleasure, legibility and illegibility, inclusion and exclusion, plays an important discursive role in numerous modernist texts; more importantly, however, laughter emerges in Anderson's novel as fluid and unpredictable *form*. It is, therefore, the (anti-)formalism of laughter that motivates Anderson's novel and my reading. As form that undoes itself, or as a kind of harnessed aggression, laughter has profound aesthetic *and* discursive possibilities: thus all social and cultural categories in Anderson's novel become radically unstable, offering a renewed ground for reconceiving not just the lines of character, but also those of modern subjectivity. In using laughter as a structuring device for his novel – a background that insists itself into the foreground – Anderson

suggests that laughing may be the key for breaking free of old forms, to force an eruption from the ties that bind him to writing that reflects a Continental heritage, fed by different social forces and irrelevant to the contemporary reader. Using the novel as the quivering ground of experimental laughter, then, Anderson draws a picture of the modern subject as an object of laughter, the butt of the joke, and, like the modern novel, in dire need of reformulation.



**Cover of *Dark Laughter***



Cover of *The Torrents of Spring*

## II

### The Object of Laughter

Early twentieth-century philosophers and social scientists were, it would seem from the publishing record, particularly fascinated by the complications of laughter. In the decade (or so) during which Anderson wrote his novel, several book-length studies of laughter were published, among them *The Sense of Humor* (1921), *Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (1923), *The Nature of Laughter* (1924), *The Springs of Laughter* (1928), *The Paradox of the Ludicrous* (1930), *The Secret of Laughter* (1933) and *The Psychology of Laughter* (1933), each providing its own classificatory system for understanding laughter.<sup>2</sup> Most of these writers draw from and comment upon the twentieth-century

work of Sigmund Freud (*Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905; English trans. 1916), Henri Bergson (*Laughter*, English trans. 1911), and James Sully (*An Essay on Laughter*, 1902), and look to the rich tradition of studies in laughter from classical philosophy through to the present: “the literature of laughter, in its extraordinary variety, represents an abnormally well-worked field by expert explorers,” writes child specialist C. W. Kimmins in the introduction to his book (Kimmins, v). Greig’s view is more comically aware of the mines that litter the “well-worked” field: “Most of the philosophers and psychologists who have addressed themselves to the subject of laughter, have dashed boldly into the midst of it, and there dealt about them manfully with the weapons that came to hand. I am, I confess it, of a fainter heart, and would lay out and take the measure of the weapons to be used in the fray. For in truth the subject of laughter is a battle-ground, strewn with the bodies of heroes and encumbered with the debris of many a brave system of philosophy” (Greig, 11). Laughter, as a critical concept, may be a bloody battlefield; it is also a crowded one: the decade following the first world war saw an explosion of these studies, as if participating in a collective act of reconstruction from the emotional devastation of war.

This attempt at renewal would rely on abstraction, on the theorizing of bodily pleasure in the aftermath of the physical and historical trauma of war. The metaphor of the battlefield, with its suggestions of carnage and fallen heroes, offers one view into the complications of producing a coherent reading of laughter: the reading would be blown apart, dismembered, maimed by the competing systems of philosophy that would demand their own interpretations. Sherwood Anderson enters into the “minefield” in *Dark Laughter* and forges his own literary use of laughter: while the novel centers on the peregrinations of a not-particularly-admirable middle class man, its explosive force comes from the margins where Anderson positions those “simple” characters who laugh easily and are untroubled by the complex realities of the modern world. For the contemporary reader, the challenge lies in the positioning of the characters like Sponge, or the unnamed and laughing African Americans: are they the objects of Anderson’s derision, or are they laughing subjects exercising their own agency?

Much critical discourse published during the period in which the novel appeared indirectly concerned these issues as they meditated on the *object* of laughter, both in the sense of its purpose and the thing at which one laughed. Writers inevitably addressed, and frequently challenged, the superiority theories that largely dominated accounts of laughter until the twentieth century: “The sloppy theorizing that created and sustained the Superiority Theory has troubled the whole history of thought on laughter and humor,” writes John Morreall in a relatively recent collection, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987). Max Eastman corroborates this view in his 1924 book, citing Thomas Hobbes as a particularly egregious purveyor of the theory: “Thomas Hobbes was so much impressed by this joy of the hostile stroke, which he described with true barbaric appreciation as a feeling of ‘sudden glory,’ that he made it the basis of a general explanation of laughter. And long before Hobbes – indeed, ever since the birth of psychology – philosophers have been informing the world that the essence of humor is ridicule, that laughter is always *at* somebody, that jokes are always *on* somebody, that comic emotion is the same thing as scorn or the feeling of one’s own superiority” (Eastman, 33-34). Theories of laughter, for Eastman, reflect merely the sadism of the authors who dominate the field. J. C. Gregory also sees a certain pleasure in others’ pain when he argues that “there is an unquestionable brutality in the ancestry of laughter,” but will make the case that laughter has become more sympathetic and less contemptuous over the centuries (Gregory, 13, 18-19). The theories proliferate, moving from superiority theories, to theories that see laughter as a response to surprise or incongruity, to relief from some sort of cultural or physical restraint, or the joyful release of energy that serves no useful purpose. Yet theories of superiority persist into the present: recently, F. H. Buckley, in *The Morality of Laughter* (2003), has argued that superiority is a necessary pre-condition for laughter to emerge in the social encounter, and in *The Pleasure of Fools* (2005) Jure Gantar claims that laughter is always unethical: “even those types of laughter that have traditionally been seen as kinder and gentler are not necessarily ethical. In fact, they are often simply more subtle in their foregrounding of differences and discriminating against the Other . . . . Laughter undermines any kind of structure, including the structures of ethics and morality.”<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, Bergson's influential account addresses the social uses of laughter; what occasions laughter here, rather, is "that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter."<sup>4</sup> Laughter serves a disciplinary function in this account as we laugh at those people who remind us of things; our laughter serves then as a way to undo the "something mechanical [that is] encrusted on the living" (Bergson, 84). Tyrus Miller shifts the focus from the communal whole to the individual psyche when he theorizes the "self-reflexive" laughter in the work of Wyndham Lewis. Referring to the grisly laughter that follows details of gruesome death, Miller writes: "This laughter, like the laughter of dying bodies and of soldiers driven mad by the sight of them, a laughter utterly unrelated to any spiritual response, is strictly a limit-experience. It is what Lewis calls 'perfect laughter.'"<sup>5</sup> Perfect laughter addresses the individual rather than the socius, and provides a protective barrier between the fragile psyche and the damaging world. Lewis views laughter, then, as "a defensive function against a threatening 'outside.' Laughter may turn back self-reflexively on the subject, 'stiffening' the self against danger, marking that minimal 'spatial' difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature: a difference that preserves the subject, however diminished, in situations of adversity" (Miller, 51). Laughter doesn't require or produce mirth in this analysis; instead it produces a minimum of self-consciousness, a self-confirmation that preserves some element of the human subject in the face of death and dying.

Laughter, in these broad theoretical strokes, stems both from animosity *and* the relentless will to survive. One might argue, following the superiority theory and contemporary critics such as Gantar and Miller, that modern laughter operates always at the expense of others (thus bringing together aggression and self-preservation), and in Anderson's novel the body that contorts in amusement must be the body of an outsider, an American expatriate in a morally compromised position, a simpleton living on the edges of civilized society, or an African American, understood to be unbothered by morality. This would be laughing *at*: the simple expression of superiority through the snicker of one subject at the expense of another, the "educated insolence" that Aristotle once decried and that, undoubtedly, many moderns practiced. A contrary view might argue that the laughter in Anderson's novel is another expression of the primitive, that compelling fantasy for so many Western writers in the early decades of the century. Within the fantasy structure of primitivist discourse, one might learn from, learn to laugh like, and thus share in the primitive laughter of far-flung cultures. This would be laughing *with*: the prepositional distinction assumes an exclusion inherent in the act of laughing itself. Yet, this would still suggest that someone is necessarily the object of our collective scorn; the trick is to be *with* the group, then, rather than outside of it, to position oneself strategically, if that choice is available. What, then, is the object of the novel's dark laughter? It is, for the most part (and I'll come to the exception), laughter without object, laughter that operates as gesture, as an expression of mood, rather than laughter that responds to a specific joke or action. The laughter of African Americans signifies both their status as picturesque objects and, later (and this is the exception), as their derision for the foolishness of the dominating class. Laughter, then, will demonstrate both superiority and the instability of this stance – but there is nothing particularly modern in this, as the teachings of Aristotle and his successors should remind us.



Inside Back Cover of *Dark Laughter*

### III

#### Black Laughter

To what degree does Anderson, and all those modernists who draw on the figure of the laughing black man, engage with the superiority theory? What is it about the laughter of African Americans that so profoundly moved the white writers of the early twentieth century? Why is the image repeated enough times to attain the stolid predictability of cliché? Bruce's impressions on reaching New Orleans rest upon worn visions of the languid south: "A slow dance, music, ships, cotton, corn, coffee. Slow lazy laughter of niggers. Bruce remembered a line he had once seen written by a negro. 'Would white poet ever know why my people walk so softly and laugh at sunrise?'" (*DL*, 79). Bruce doesn't reflect on this line, beyond the simple reporting of it, thereby answering the writer's question. White writers, of course, had made black people the subject of their often liberal-leaning poetry and fiction, particularly through the early decades of the twentieth century. Take Carl Sandburg, for example, who wrote of the "breaking crash of laughter" in his poem "Nigger," or DuBose Heyward's depiction of the "loose heady laughter" that opens his volume *Jasbo Brown*, or Gertrude Stein's memorable description of "the free abandoned laughter that gives the warm broad glow to negro sunshine" in "Melanctha."<sup>6</sup> These writers chose to create images of the jovial African American, as if to draw on the buoyancy they imagined lifting the black race from the world of mundane concerns.

The laughing black man was certainly a familiar image to 1920s readers and theatre-goers, and appears as both target and agent of laughter. Jessie Fauset, with some exasperation, writes in *The New Negro*: "The black man bringing gifts, and particularly the gift of laughter, to the American stage is

easily the most anomalous, the most *inscrutable* figure of the century."<sup>7</sup> Popular images of the comic black man "submerge" his "true character" and falsify his experience: "no genuinely thinking person, no really astute observer, looking at the Negro in modern American life, could find his condition even now a first aid to laughter. That condition may be variously deemed hopeless, remarkable, admirable, inspiring, depressing; it can never be dubbed merely amusing" (Fauset, 162). Fauset doesn't deny the comic response to pain, but challenges the reduction of the black man to a singular feature, characterized by his laugh. The black man may be the most "inscrutable figure of the century" because so entirely unknown to the white population who are simply uninterested in his further dimensions. Nella Larsen thinks more about the issue of inscrutability, or illegibility, and what people are willing to know in her story *Passing*, and produces a complicated notion of race in Clare, who has every appearance of whiteness but a genetic and cultural affiliation with blackness. Yet Clare, positioned now outside the black race, thinks nostalgically about the naturalness and warmth in black voices: "you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh."<sup>8</sup> Clare does not share in this laughter. Instead her laughter marks her as different: "[She] laughed, a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal; a tinkling" (Larsen, 18). Whiteness is manifest in the mechanism of her voice, metallic and sounding like money (the echo of Daisy Buchanan's voice rings clearly). Langston Hughes also takes the familiar trope, utilizing it to humanize the struggles of poor blacks in his novel, *Not Without Laughter*: "To the uninitiated it would seem that a fight was imminent. But underneath, all was good-natured and friendly – and through and above everything went laughter. No matter how belligerent or lewd their talk was, or how sordid the tales they told – of dangerous pleasures and strange perversities – these black men laughed."<sup>9</sup> Laughter provides the common and humanizing bond here, whatever the context or experiences of these men.

Yet laughter, in Sterling Brown's satiric poem "Slim in Atlanta," is anything but humanizing. In fact, Brown will align laughter with disruptive form that threatens the structures of power. The uncontrollable black laughter in the poem is subject to the violence of white law that would suppress and thereby contain it: "Down in Atlanta," he writes, "De whitefolks got laws / For to keep all de niggers / From laughin' outdoors."<sup>10</sup> Blacks are made to do all their laughing "In a telefoam booth" and so hundreds of people line up to get inside in order to release their forbidden and irrepressible laughter:

Den he peeked through de door,  
An' what did he see?  
Three hundred niggers there  
In misery. –

Some holdin' deir sides,  
Some holdin' deir jaws,  
To keep from breakin'  
De Georgia laws. (477)

The repressive laws have removed any possibility of deriving pleasure from laughter – instead laughter is an instinctual and therefore uncivilized display that must be painfully quelled, or here suffocated within the confines of a telephone booth, a communicative box that works to snuff all expression that falls outside of language. The form of the poem underscores the rigidity with which one must remain within a proper boundary, and the law and communications technology in Brown's poem work in conjunction to stifle the life that is associated with the laughing, or physical needs, of the black population.

Anderson seems to draw from a deep reservoir of racial images, some of which derive from minstrel shows, but which also surely draw from white and black modernists, when he creates the background of black laughter in his novel. His biographer Kim Townsend writes: "he wanted whatever this was that came 'out of the Negro' to appear in works of art in its purest form. He didn't want it to be just 'Negro art,' he wanted it to make for art, he wanted it to be available to *him* . . . in writing *Dark*

*Laughter* he was confident that it danced the way Toomer's writing danced and that he himself was inward with the ways of blacks."<sup>11</sup> Impressed with the way that Jean Toomer joined modernism with the black body, Anderson believed he too could make the bridge, producing a full-bodied reflection of the men he saw working along the Mississippi. Voice, for Anderson, would express that "pure thing" coming "out of the Negro," the vitality of the body, the lack of its mechanization, its proximity to nature and thus sensation:

From the throats of the ragged black men as they trotted up and down the landing-stage, strange haunting notes. Words were caught up, tossed about, held in the throat. Word-lovers, sound-lovers – the blacks seemed to hold a tone in some warm place, under their red tongues perhaps. Their thick lips were walls under which the tone hid. Unconscious love of inanimate things lost to the whites – skies, the river, a moving boat – black mysticism – never expressed except in song or in the movement of bodies. The bodies of the black workers belonged to each other as the sky belonged to the river. (*DL*, 105-106)

These ragged black men are closer to poetry than Bruce, or any of the whites represented in the novel, yet it is a poetry expressed in voice and physical movement, as if the artificiality of text on the page itself would compromise the life they express. Rather than have the page, they have the mouth, the warm, red interior caressing the tones, producing the resonant beauty of the song. The bodies of the men are not individual, but appear as a collective, undivided and whole; in this sense, they belong to an idealized past, neither alienated from their environment nor from themselves. Bruce puzzles wistfully over the undifferentiated group as he thinks about the loss of his mother when he was still a boy: "Could the bodies of people be so lost in each other?" (*DL*, 107). This, of course, is primitivist fantasy with an Oedipal underside that continues to haunt Bruce, despite his acknowledgment that this version departs radically from the everyday reality endured by the men (most explicitly realized in the boat captain's nostalgic reverie about knocking troublesome men overboard).

Bruce is, throughout this scene, trying to understand the bonds between people, the emotion that connects them, the unspoken sign or feeling that reduces one's general experience of isolation. He thinks about the man who seems connected to his mother on board the boat, although they don't speak; he thinks about his own unspoken connection to a stranger; he thinks about the bond that links the working men. If Bruce has a notion that "Myself is a land few men know about," he is in the process of discovering that Myself is not somewhere he really wants to be. And this new consciousness comes from those people in the south whom he can't see outside of stereotype, but whose idealized image nevertheless revises his own subjective boundaries: "Consciousness of brown men, brown women, coming more and more into American life – by that token coming into him too" (*DL*, 74). The consciousness of other people inhabiting the American landscape has the power to broaden his narrow experience and open his limited emotional range. Bruce's body itself is making room for other ways of being; a knowledge is coming into him as if through a welcome physical incursion that revises the boundaries of "Myself." Does laughter have any bearing on this territory, on the subject's carefully guarded limits? Will Bruce move from the singular (Myself) to a more expansive or plural understanding of himself? He considers a list of possible ethnic and racial affiliations as he imagines the sources from which he might draw: "More willing to come, more avid to come than any Jew, German, Pole, Italian. Standing laughing – coming by the back door – with shuffling feet, a laugh – a dance in the body" (*DL*, 74). The back door (as opposed to the front) certainly suggests the limits of his engagement with others, although he is dizzy with the possibilities of a new sort of consciousness that will break into his narrowly defined world. The dance suggests that the body still lives, unbeaten by the cultures identified with the Jew, German, Pole or Italian. The African American is the exuberant figure that Bruce imagines altering his own consciousness rather than anyone of European descent who must be necessarily dark, that is, cynical, beaten, and suffering from a pernicious cultural malaise.

#### IV

### The Death Rattle of White Modernism, or, The Lame One

When Bruce meets a new woman, the factory boss's wife, the novel expands to include her story, one that comprises a trip to Paris and an encounter with the bohemian set with which she is involved – a lesbian and gay man masquerading as married, a degenerate crowd reeling from the collapse of meaning following the war, their activities including a licentious ball where women invite, it would seem, their own sexual assault. Here we meet a correspondent for an American newspaper, Rose Frank, who is herself emptied of any humanity, and here we learn that dark laughter isn't solely an expression of American blacks: "Rose Frank laughed, a queer high nervous laugh – dark laughter that" (*DL*, 176). This laughter, though, signifies darkness differently; here it stands in for the deathliness that characterizes European culture at the war's end. The crowds who populate Rose's parties might laugh gaily and raucously, but without vitality: "The Armistice – release – the attempt at naked joy . . . . The war for righteousness – to make the world Free. The young men sick, sick, and sick of it. Laughing, though – dark laughter" (*DL*, 192). The repetition in this sentence of "sick" and "laughter" holds them together in a diseased alliance: laughter in the urban and sophisticated circles of the modernists is plagued with irony; its deathliness is thus counterpoised to the authentic and living expression that Bruce witnesses on the shores of the Mississippi.

Of course, Anderson is hoping to harness that expression in the form of his novel, which he likens to jazz. Writing about his novel in a letter dated August 29, 1925, he declares: "I believe the jazz rhythm has come off."<sup>12</sup> The form of the novel, in its fragments and sometimes giddy movement, is a contribution to modernism, one he sees in line with the likes of Joyce, alongside the likes of Toomer. Anderson had claimed that "Joyce's *Ulysses* had been his 'starting place for the prose rhythm of the book'" (Townsend, 225). Yet in the novel, Bruce reflects on the questionable power of *Ulysses*: "There were certain pages . . . . Realism in writing lifted up sharp to something burning and raw like a raw sore. Others coming to look at the sores" (*DL*, 120). Modernism reflects the fascination with the open wound, a culture in its moment of rupture and burning; the pain is nevertheless mesmerizing to the consuming public who come to look in wonder, awestruck by its intensity. An American writer, with some experience of the spontaneous and exuberant rhythms of jazz, would reflect a different social reality: "The figure of Bloom had seemed true to [Bruce], beautifully true, but it had sprung out of a brain not his. A European, a Continental man – that Joyce" (*DL*, 120); European culture, he recognizes, doesn't reflect his history, his landscape, or his approach to life. Anderson, instead, creates in *Dark Laughter* a portrait of the failed artist, whose ambivalence about art itself arrests any artistic possibility. Bruce writes a poem, dedicates it to Joyce, and calls it "A Lame One." This is a poem, presumably, based on the European model as its dark images depict an exhausted urban culture (the first stanza: "At night when there are no lights, my city is a man / who arises from a bed to stare into darkness" (*DL*, 121).) One assumes that Bruce directs the title of his poem to its author (that is, himself): he is the lame one as he attempts to mimic the poetic line of a European movement that has little to do with his experience. Like Whitman before him, Anderson is seeking an authentically American voice and this he chooses to discover in the combination of American landscape (the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers), an American musical culture, and the American body (the latter two located in the African American); for Bruce, perhaps, the discovery fails, but Anderson – who imagines himself to be the real artist here – turns to the sound of embodiment, the promise for a future, in black laughter. To reiterate an earlier point, laughter as a structuring device produces internal violence that turns the novel against itself, undoing its own form and thus undoing European models that offer nothing to modern American readers. Laughter, in this formulation, offers some liberation from old forms, even as it reproduces old forms in its representation. A nagging question remains, however: is there any way to read the novel's dark laughter, indeed its disturbing laughter, without stopping at its discomfiting use of stereotype? Might the interruption of laughter open a gap in which a different ethical relation could appear?

## Laughter Projected

It is here that I want to interject a reading of the twinned dark laughters (light-skinned characters laughing darkly and dark-skinned characters laughing lightly) in order to move outside of the simple dialectic of black vitality and white deathliness that appears with alarming and mechanized regularity in so much writing of the period: the formality of laughter (and this is a funny expression, given laughter's status throughout history as bad form, as an embarrassing eruption from the body) offers Anderson the basic framework on which he hangs his novel. Laughter as narrative form, then: first, laughter may be understood as an expression of recognizable convention; that is, there is a familiarity in the forms that laughter takes (social laughter, polite laughter, embarrassed laughter, derisive laughter, etc.). Laughter frequently inserts us into a structure or form that is readable and readily comprehensible. Second, laughter may be viewed as a rhetorical trope that is itself anti-rhetorical: a representation of laughter may serve any number of ends, but it will always be represented by its idea rather than by its sound, demonstrated by the inadequacy of "ha ha" or "tee hee" or "ho ho" to approximate anyone's experience of laughter. Laughter is not available to us in words, although it will be made to signify through words. This explains, to some degree, the power of Sterling Brown's poem in which laughter is punished because it is not articulate, because it defies representation and is, therefore, threatening to our systems of meaning – tolerable from whites, but certainly not from blacks, according to the laws of Georgia. Finally, laughter serves to collapse the distance between us: it is the social bond that brings the members of a group together, as sympathies momentarily congeal in a moment of laughter. These sympathies, however, must be tightly bound within the narrative (as within the phone booth); stepping outside, one might find oneself in a more hostile climate of exclusion from the group.

The formal conventions of laughter are readily visible, but equally important are those uncontainable elements of narrative, the ways that gaps or silences open up, the ways its effects are impossible to predict, and the ways that from laughter, as from narrative, innumerable strings resonate – some resounding immediately, others lingering in the figurative distance, vibrating softly. One is tempted to think in terms of sound, whether cacophonous, melodious, resonant, or soothing. The audible world is certainly the one where we place laughter. Yet, what happens when we introduce the complication of language, and the combination of race and laughter that I've been speaking about? The laughter in Anderson's novel functions in at least two ways: one simply inserts local colour through the vision of laughter that is clichéd and therefore comfortable for a popular readership in 1925 and less so for a popular readership today. But laughter serves a second, and ultimately more interesting, purpose: it also allows bodies to merge, subjectivities to shift, for Bruce to imagine his ability to laugh through a kind of emotional relocation, or emotional recovery of something lost, a fantasy of presence. Laughter in narrative form provides a spatial dimension, room for expansion, a shifting of boundaries that doesn't eclipse other subjectivities, but allows and invites them to eclipse the boundaries of "Myself" instead, that is to imagine presence through the body of another, in another landscape. When he wonders wistfully about bodies being lost in each other, he disturbs his own quest for discovery, and at the same time interjects laughter, the chorus of bemused sound that might hasten the loss of one into the confusion of many. And here is where I want to return to my second epigraph, the certain laughter referred to by Jacques Derrida at the end of his essay, "Différance."

This essay sketches the shadowy concept of *différance*, that inaudible element of language that silently bespeaks its complicated weave. Unpredictable, darkly embedded in the structure of language, *différance* operates through uncertainty, through calling into question the certainty of meaning, of presence, of our hold over the words we use. *Différance* is the wandering term located in and "as the strange space . . . between speech and writing"; it prevents the sign from becoming full presence, that metaphysical fantasy, and calls time and space into question.<sup>13</sup> Yet Anderson doesn't invoke *speech* so much as *voice*, the bodily presence represented by the warm interiors of the speaking organ, the mouth. Voice will stand for presence in the novel, uncorrupted by the written systems of language. We might reflect on the fantasy of presence that is signified, by Anderson, in African Americans: they are the novel's grounding force, standing in for the immediacy of sensation, and the reality of truth. Under the

shuffling feet of African Americans is the steadiness, the certainty of solid ground. As he concludes the essay, Derrida writes:

There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without *nostalgia*, that is, outside of the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought. On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance. (Derrida, 136)

What he isn't affirming – the lure of authenticity, the belief in a pure space, a pure language, a true home – is clear enough and here Derrida's terms are striking in relation to Anderson's, whose novel seems to seek these very things through the figure of the African American. Yet what *is* Derrida affirming? What is "this"? Derrida suggests affirmation in a *certain* laughter connected to the body's movement: does he mean a certain *kind* of laughter, or the *certainty* of laughter in its unmistakable expression? Laughter is the other side of *différance*, the unmistakable articulation, the gap that is expressed rather than simply operative at any given moment. Yet it is still a gap, a dislocation of meaning, an opening where the body enters without the systematic structuring of language. Meaning might lapse, but in an audible way (unlike the inaudibility of the difference of *différance*, at least in spoken French). This offers some way to read the novel's ambivalence regarding laughter, its seeming reliance on racial stereotype while merging it into something else, something more promising, though hardly utopian. A *certain* laughter suggests, of course, the certainty of substance, of security, of comfort, or it asserts a caveat, that only a *certain* laughter, a certain sort of laughter, may be comprehensible.

To provide an example of this certain *and* inscrutable laughter, I turn to the last page of Anderson's novel. Fred, the factory owner, has learned that his wife has run off with Bruce to what, the reader can only assume, will be likely failure. Nevertheless, Fred is the cuckold, perhaps the oldest joke in the book, and the novel ends with this paragraph:

Why couldn't Fred laugh? He kept trying but failed. In the road before the house one of the negro women now laughed. There was a shuffling sound. The older negro woman tried to quiet the younger, blacker woman, but she kept laughing the high shrill laughter of the negress. 'I knowed it, I knowed it, all the time I knowed it,' she cried, and the high shrill laughter ran through the garden and into the room where Fred sat upright and rigid in the bed. (*DL*, 319)

The woman laughs perhaps out of disdain and ridicule and a sense of superiority over the powerful man. Or she laughs in sympathetic approval, a happy recognition of the immorality that drives other people's lives as well. There is nothing certain about the finale of this novel, except the ground beneath the feet of these two characters, and the humiliation of Fred: the protagonist has moved off-stage into a questionable future and the laughter – signifying the moral or immoral body? – resounds in the present. Whatever the joke, it's not a very good one, but it unsettles the status quo and thwarts our desire for either a punch-line or the relief of a clean ending. A woman laughing ends the novel: is this an expression of superiority or a recognition of her inferiority? Is this an instance of racial stereotype or human agency? Before attempting an answer, I want to turn to another representation of black laughter, one that *certainly* posits laughing black subjects as agents of free will.

## VI

### **Am I Laughing?**

How does modernist laughter operate differently from any other expression of laughter? The 1941 film *Sullivan's Travels* offers a non-modernist counterpoint to the formal possibilities of laughter. The Preston Sturges film projects another journey South, another story of relocation and laughter at the

margins. Yet this narrative presents a vision of restored morality and laughter revived, at least for its protagonist: in this telling, Depression-era deprivation continues to hang on, another world war is raging and another search for Myself is underway. This time it is a successful Hollywood director, Sullivan (played by Joel McCrea), whose fat bank account feeds his liberal outrage prompting him to go out among the poor to learn about real suffering. Over the course of his travels, he learns of the power of laughter which offers the greatest social bond. The film is punctuated with slapstick humor, as if to prepare its audience for the final recognition that laughter is truly a force of social good. Sullivan (or Sully) decides to leave Hollywood with just ten cents in his pocket to experience real poverty for himself and thus to furnish the research for his next film grounded in principled social realism, to be called *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* His journey takes him into a landscape of utter squalor – he spends days and nights in the dark spaces of humanity as well as the brightly lit institutions meant to contain it – and at last, as he forages into a garbage can for a bite to eat, he decides the experiment is no longer tolerable. But Sully chooses to make one more fateful excursion among the homeless, a final goodwill tour, where he beneficently plans to distribute five dollar bills. During this final tour, Sully is mugged, knocked unconscious, pulled into a boxcar and, on recovering consciousness, finds himself somewhere in the South. He is, at last, a real vagrant: without a name that he can recall, he falls into trouble with a railyard worker and is subsequently jailed. The wildly successful Hollywood man has achieved his dream borne of Hollywood riches: he is now any man, working hard labor under the angry authority of a shotgun.

The film provides us with one of Hollywood's most famous scenes of laughter: here, though, laughter is not understood in its ambivalent or disruptive dimensions, but is presented as a healing agent, a salve for the harsh conditions of life on the margins. The film thus offers laughter as a comforting and shared cultural force, not innovative but tied to the sacred and enduring truths of humanity. There is, by contrast, no comfort in reading Anderson's novel – the laughter there is not healing, but disruptive, uncomfortable, and tied to the formal innovations of modernism. Like laughter, the novel offers no stability, no place of comfort from which to view its events. The film's climactic scene occurs when the men are offered some respite from the back-breaking labour that comprises their days: they are taken to see a movie at a local church. The setting is important: the sequence is framed by exterior shots, showing the church behind a veil of Spanish moss, reminding us that we are in a remote location in the South. The audience enters the church before the men, and finds that it holds a black congregation, being exhorted to welcome the less fortunate into their midst. The preacher (Jess Lee Brooks, although his name won't appear in the credits), whose voice is remarkable for its depth and resonance – one is tempted to say its *presence* – leads the congregation in "Let My People Go" as the men enter. They enter with a beautiful and tragic choreography, the men walking down the aisle, two by two, footsteps in rhythmic unison, chained, beaten, and dragging their feet to the words and mournful melody of "go down, Moses." There is no jazz, no dance in these footsteps, instead they shuffle along, almost lifelessly, without volition, without emotion, without individuality as they move in a collective chain. Yet the experience in the church will be, at least momentarily, transformative as the lights dim, the film rolls, and an animated cartoon begins. Ted Sennett explains: "Sullivan is virtually destroyed as a human being, until an evening when he is led with other convicts into a Negro church where they watch a Disney cartoon. As the hard-bitten convicts dissolve in hysterical laughter, Sullivan perceives that the laughter supplied by movies is a soothing balm for the wounds of the wretched and downtrodden of the earth."<sup>14</sup> In the space of the black church, the message is clear, the men will find momentary transcendence that will lift them from their bondage.

The object of the hilarity is Pluto and his misfortunes as he encounters fly paper. The laughter begins almost immediately, as if in anticipation of the comedy that will be projected, and quickly escalates to loud guffaws, bodies bent over with the exertion of their laughter as Pluto's body flies through the air, slams into a dresser drawer, and spins in the tightly-wound coil of a window blind. Any differences among audience members – whether social, racial, regional, or economic – are overcome in the emotional release, the exhilaration, of watching the cartoon dog's repeated and failed attempts at escape from the sticky paper. This is the laughter of the undifferentiated body: the fantasy of bodies bonding over comedy, erasing class, race, and their moral positioning within society. One is struck watching this scene at the extremity of the laughter in relation to the comedy on screen: the

laughter seems out of proportion, as if one must share in the communal experience of the audience, feeling the mimetic exigency where one is pulled into laughter by the sheer force of a shared group response. Sully appears, at first, resistant to the unfolding hilarity, but he eventually laughs stiffly and asks his neighbor: "Am I laughing?" His question suggests the degree of his isolation; hardship has deprived him of any emotional experience beyond the exhausted will to survive. The question is, as it turns out, rhetorical as his neighbor collapses in further laughter, unable to process anything beyond the movie screen: Sully, in that moment of self-questioning and recognition of larger group emotion, lets go of his subjective differentiation from the group for the pleasure of mimesis, here succumbing to and matching the loud guffaws of the audience. Like the men in *Not Without Laughter*, these men laugh despite the hardships and humiliations of their lives. They are lost in each other, lost in the dark space of the theatre/church, just as they are "lost men." Yet, like the expression of those characters in "Slim in Atlanta," laughter is contained within a sanctioned space; it is intolerable on the grounds of their everyday lives. The congregation seated in the back of the church are the reflection of human kindness, charity, faith and tolerance, but like the lost men, they soon will be left behind.

Sully will find a way out of the prison (although he was sentenced for a violent crime that he did indeed commit), and back to Hollywood with a new zeal for the comedy he had earlier scorned. Like Bruce, through his journey he has happily lost one unsatisfactory wife, found another one (younger and more attractive in both cases), and strived to find a new self. Sully's deprivation, however, is over by the end of the film, while Bruce's presumably has just begun. Sully returns to the Depression-era fantasy of wealth: English butlers, swimming pools, shimmering gowns, spectacular mansions, movie stars, a fleet of people caring for his every comfort. The film ends, essentially, where it began, except that Sully has substituted one set of earnest proclamations for another (from social realism to comedy). The film's last frame shows a kaleidoscope of faces laughing: the faces of Sully and his next wife (Veronica Lake, whose character is known only as The Girl) are at the center, superimposed with numerous laughing faces revolving around and behind theirs, leaving no room for the disruption of absence, or any kind of uncertainty. This is an insistent kaleidoscope that organizes its principals at the center, and leaves the laughter of strangers on the margins: the structure indeed holds in this frame, as in the film's narrative. There is little ambiguity here, as the film sends home its message.

Both *Dark Laughter* and *Sullivan's Travels* highlight laughter and share many common elements; yet in the end the laughter they project functions very differently. Anderson's modernist attempt to dislocate character and open up new terrain through the representation of laughter unsettles old form through the unpredictable and sometimes unreadable eruptions of laughter as he sends his protagonist off with the distinct possibility, even likelihood, of failure; in his wake resounds the laughter that has somehow made his failure possible. Anderson's leap might end in failure (as many of his critics sneered) but at least it was a leap into uncertainty, into the ungrounded space opened by laughter. Laughter as a form in Anderson's novel threatens itself, shatters any concept of Myself as a singular and meaningful entity, undoes its own production of meaning and opens complications in the representation of the laughing African American. *Sullivan's Travels*, on the other hand, uses laughter to seal something, to enforce a social bond in a sanctioned (and sanctified) space – not unlike the phone booth – and ultimately replaces Sully back at the top of the heap, happily returned to the land of Myself (appropriately situated here as Hollywood).

And what about old Sponge? As it turns out, Sponge's pleasures may be simple, but they include the humiliations of others which fuel his fun: the joke is a lame one, the players hardly heroic. Bruce doesn't become a poet, but runs off with a woman in an act of mutual escape, and the reader is left, recalling Sponge and his life of primitive pleasures at the river's edge. No, this isn't a heroic ending, but then neither is the factory owner's, nor really Bruce's. The joke's on us, it would seem, for our desire for a seamless ending, a joke ably told and rewarded by anything like simple laughter. Sponge wouldn't ask "am I laughing?": his limited interests wouldn't allow for such self-inquiry which leads only to "laughter killed." The novel's last laugh, hysterical, shrill and unreadable, belongs to an unknown woman at the side of the road, her pleasure inscrutable. Is this the laughter of modernism? I would venture to say yes: here, the unreadable figure, positioned on the edge, the outsider and object of fascination, whose articulation itself blends the howls of pleasure with those of pain. Anderson's experiment in form does not, perhaps, produce great art, but it offers up laughter as a formal device

implicated in its own undoing; for modernism, the representation of laughter undermines any alleged superiority, racial or otherwise, through the side-clutching, rib-splitting laughter from the fringes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), 61. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the main body of the text as *DL*.

<sup>2</sup> Max Eastman, *The Sense of Humor* (New York: Scribner's, 1921); J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1923); J. C. Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924); C. W. Kimmins, *The Springs of Laughter* (London: Methuen, 1928); Samuel Seward, *The Paradox of the Ludicrous* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1930); Anthony Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (New York: Viking, 1933); Ralph Piddington, *The Psychology of Laughter: A Study in Social Adaptation* (London: Figurehead, 1933).

<sup>3</sup> F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Jure Gantar, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 150-151.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Sandburg, "Nigger," in *Chicago Poems* (1916) (New York: Dover, 1994); DuBose Heyward, *Jasbo Brown and Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1924); Gertrude Stein, "Melanctha," in *Three Lives* (1909) (New York: Bantam, 1992), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925) ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) (New York: Penguin, 1997), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter* (1930) (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998), 185.

<sup>10</sup> Sterling Brown, "Slim in Atlanta," in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 476.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1987), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Letters to Bab: Sherwood Anderson to Marietta D. Finley, 1916-33*, ed. William A. Sutton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 230.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida. "Différance," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 122.

<sup>14</sup> Ted Sennett, *Lunatics and Lovers: A Tribute to the Giddy and Glittering Era of the Screen's "Screwball" and Romantic Comedies* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1973), 239.