RHETORIC OF RIDICULE

by

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Abstract

Ridicule is a means of affecting change. Issuing an interpretation of a subject’s relation to an ideological formation or social norm as an argument to change behavior, language-use, belief, or the like, ridicule can be used both to affirm and to contest prevailing hierarchies. As a discursive function, this dissertation theorizes, ridicule can be either monological or dialogical. Monological ridicule often takes the form of a demand or directive and usually commands its subject to comply with some ideological formation or social norm. Used in this way, it is a norming tool. In contrast, dialogical ridicule generally invites or encourages negotiation or mediation. As such, it is often used to contest or challenge prevailing hierarchies, with the ultimate aim of creating conditions that can allow for transformation. In six chapters, this dissertation offers a theory of ridicule, traces conceptions of it through western history, examines both monological and dialogical applications of it, and, lastly, explores its use on the Internet, where it has flourished. If the aim of rhetoric is to please, to instruct, or to entertain, then ridicule may be the master rhetorical trope as it can achieve all three simultaneously.
Ridicule—whether in the form of teasing, heckling, mocking, taunting, or
derision—has become a pervasive feature of contemporary US culture, affecting
private, public, and political life. From politics to literature, from sport to music,
from school playgrounds and classrooms to family dinners and gatherings, ridicule
permeates nearly every facet of US culture. It has saturated media, especially
television sit-coms, reality shows, talk-radio, and more recently comment-sections
of online blogs and of social websites, among other social public spaces. Like
rhetoric for much of rhetoric’s existence, ridicule pervades every field of study yet
does not itself constitute a field of study. Thomas O. Sloane notes similarities
between humor, of which ridicule is considered a type, and rhetoric: “Humor is
elusive, for many of the reasons that rhetoric is elusive. The nature of both is
culturally dependent, and their effectiveness is linked to place, time, and occasion”
(359). As elusive as humor and ridicule are, both are universal, common to all
cultures, even if what passes as humor and as ridicule may vary according to
cultural preferences. Furthermore, anyone reading these words has been exposed to
humor, has laughed, and moreover has experienced ridicule, whether as ridiculer, as
ridiculed, or as witness or audience to acts of ridicule. If the aim of rhetoric is to
please, to instruct, or to entertain, then ridicule may be the master rhetorical trope
as it can achieve all three simultaneously.

Yet what humor—and particularly ridicule—are and how they work remains
largely a matter of speculation. In his 2005 book *Laughter and Ridicule: Toward a*
Social Critique of Humour, the only recent book on the topic of ridicule, Michael Billig observes, "the historical discussion [of humor] suggests that no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humour" (175). The case is even more poignant with that type of humor called ridicule: "the historical discussion has also suggested that there is no complete theory of ridicule that can be pulled off the shelf, dusted down and then applied to the relevant phenomena" (Billig 175). Although "no single theory" can account for humor’s complexity and "no complete theory of ridicule" presently exists, psychologists nonetheless have endeavored to measure ridicule’s effects. Educators warn against the use of ridicule as a means of “correcting” behavior and have gone to great lengths to reduce the form of ridicule called bullying, while business experts recommend that humor and slight mockery can be effective in managing subordinates, as evidenced by Donald Trump’s toupee. Fat studies scholars abhor ridicule. Philosophers, social scientists, and historians have labored to understand and trace it throughout history. Those in women’s studies and those who study racial constructions and race theory have examined ways it has been used to belittle, oppress, and maintain asymmetrical power relations, while some few such as Leon Rappoport contend that the ridicule of “racial-ethnic humor” is useful "as a playful form of entertainment that can have significant social benefits" (151). Only those in humor studies claim some ownership of the term “ridicule,” as a sub-category of satire, yet most humor scholars tend to ignore ridicule or only mention it briefly in passing. After all, ridicule as a type of humor does not fit neatly and only within any one of the main three main theories of humor—superiority,
incongruity, and relief—since a given instantiation of ridicule can both operate according to the tenets of any one of the three theories and slip among them. Nor can humor studies contain or try to account for excessive ridicule, ridicule that is not humorous but hurtful or harmful.

Pervasive as it is in US culture, ridicule as a concept and act well precedes the formation of the US. Categorized by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* as an element of ethos, ridicule includes “laugh[ing], mock[ing], or jeer[ing]” as a means of both “show[ing] contempt” to “inflict injuries” and “stir[ing]” people “to anger” (62-63). Ancient Greece and Rome were rife with ridicule, and Greek and Roman philosophers and citizens were well aware of the power of ridicule. According to Patrick Hurley, citizens of Alexandria learnt this point after they mocked the second-century Roman Emperor Caracalla for claiming the murder of his brother was in self-defense. Not humored, Caracalla ordered troops to massacre the Alexandrians he found offensive. So prevalent were satire and ridicule in ancient Greece that the god Momus was said to embody them. In *Gorgias*, Plato’s characters Callicles and Socrates both engage in acts of ridicule. *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* ridicules Sophists. Before either Plato employed it in his plays or Aristotle attempted to categorize ridicule, Aristophanes’ play *The Clouds* mocked a caricature of Socrates, which in later eighteenth-century debates regarding ridicule became a classic example of ridicule’s ability to cause unjust yet irreparable harm. In Greek culture, Aspasia and those associated with her, along with non-citizen metics and slaves, were often the targets of ridicule. The only joke book to have survived from ancient Greece,
Philogelos, contains some 260 jokes, many of which mock and ridicule ethnicity and ethnic difference. For example, Joke 201, which ridicules patrimony rather than ethnicity, tells of a traveler who returns from a trip and asks a “charlatan prophet” how his family fared during his absence: “They are all well, especially your father.” The inquirer responds, “But my father’s been dead for ten years!” “Ah, clearly you do not know,” adds the prophet, “your real father.”

Greek satirist Lucian and Roman satirist Juvenal, both of whom trafficked in ridicule, were much celebrated by contemporaries, while the Roman poet Catullus often used ridicule to insult. To Cicero, ridicule is a species of eloquence that may be useful in pleading cases before a jury. However, Quintilian warns against the use of ridicule and other punitive measures when educating youth.

Of ridicule’s sundry functions, a primary one is to evoke a response from its target and, whether or not intended, from an audience. Hence, ridicule does not remain neatly ensconced as an element of ethos, as Aristotle would have it, since it also can serve to appeal to pathos. By the eighteenth century, however, ridicule began to receive much critical attention: following a much-debated claim erroneously imputed to Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury—that ridicule functions as a “test” of reasoning or truth—ridicule then shifted from a form of ethos and pathos to one of logos as well. Part of this transformation is due to what some have conceived as a necessity to maintain civil society or polite culture, especially in contexts of liberty and of religion. That is, ridicule can be used to attempt to regulate and control behavior, to deride those who step out of bounds of
what is perceived as proper or acceptable. Regardless of how it is defined, categorized, or used, ridicule remains a highly contentious mechanism for insulting or dismissing and sometimes for challenging people, and thus it is curious both why ridicule is so pervasive throughout contemporary US culture and why it has not received much critical attention in academia or notice in popular culture, the latter of which is so full of it.

Prevalent as it is throughout history, ridicule defies simple definition. The open-source online collaborative encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, for example, does not define it (though, it does contain an entry for “Ridiculousness” as well as for “Appeal to Ridicule”). Most attempts to define “ridicule” merely offer synonyms—*Merriam-Webster* lists “derision” and “mockery” only, whereas *Dictionary.com* lists these and 14 other synonyms—which less define the act than merely enumerate possible forms it may assume. That is, the terms listed in lieu of definition are not synonyms but hyponyms, specific instances of the forms the general category, ridicule, can take. Likely because ridicule defies easy categorization, can be expressed in so many forms, can result in myriad effects, and thus is farraginous in nature, the tendency is not to define but to describe and provide examples of ridicule. Dustin Griffin’s 1994 *Satire: A Critical Introduction* mentions ridicule a handful of times—“to attack vice or folly” satire “uses wit or ridicule” (1)—but does not define it. Likewise, Andrew Stott’s 2005 *Comedy*, though it mentions ridicule much more often, does not define ridicule at all, only implies that it is an excessive form of satire identifiable by its
“degree of viciousness” (153), which is a somewhat odd, humorless rendering given the subject of Stott’s book.

The 1987 edition of the *OED* offers four definitions of “ridicule,” the first of which echoes Aristotle’s conception of the ridiculous, to be discussed in Chapter 3, a conception that contends some entities are in themselves inherently ridiculous: “A ridiculous or absurd thing, feature, characteristic, or habit; an absurdity”; the second definition also assumes that something can be in itself ridiculous and thus justifiably subject to ridicule: “Ridiculous nature or character (of something).” Here, ridicule is a matter of ethos, assumed to be in or a characteristic of some entity. Television sitcoms from *The Three Stooges* to *Three and a Half Men*, among a plethora of others, have played up this definition of ridicule. Whereas the third definition puts the emphasis on those who ridicule and those who are, through an appeal to pathos, exposed to acts of ridicule—“The act or practice of making persons or things the objects of jest or sport; language intended to raise laughter about a person or thing”—the fourth definition draws attention to the logos of or to texts that express ridicule—“A piece of derisive mirth or light mockery.” The farraginous nature of ridicule results in the *OED* enumerating multiple definitions, definitions which allow ridicule to slip among the categories of ethos, pathos, and logos rather than remain the property of any one of the three categories. Yet, the *OED* does not even begin to account for the range of effects that ridicule can achieve, eliding its harmful and hurtful effects in favor of emphasizing, in the tradition of humor studies, only its
more positive aspects—“objects of jest or sport,” “intended to raise laughter,” and the seemingly contradictory “derisive mirth.”

Difficult to define, ridicule comes in many forms, with varying effects. Some acts of ridicule are playful, means of engaging in mirth, such as what’s called sport smack-talk or playing the dozens, performative utterances usually engaged among peers. For some such as Aristotle and Shaftesbury, ridicule must be tolerated since it serves as the bantering, witty part of any good conversation among gentleman of taste. To Cicero, ridicule is a species of eloquence and as such is useful as a red herring or in a legal setting to gain the favor or good-will of an audience, whether judge or jury. Yet, ridicule can also take the form of playground bullying or of cyberbullying—that is, harassment—acts intended to cause pain to or ostracize the recipient as well as inflate the bully’s sense of self-worth. Acts of ridicule intended to hurt or humiliate the target of the ridicule presume the right to ridicule, a “right” authorized by Aristotle and maintained by the OED, on the grounds that the object of the ridicule is perceived as not fitting some normative. Hence, gender (for example, “blond jokes”), skin pigmentation, accents, and body size are often the subjects of ridicule. More so, in a public or political context, ridicule can be used to achieve what is called “character assassination,” an act intended to diminish a person’s ethos or reputation. After former Governor of Vermont Howard Dean failed to win a majority of votes in the Iowa caucus of the 2000 US presidential campaign and let out a yell typical of a sports’ fan, for example, many members of the media wondered aloud whether he was “crazy,” a charge Dean proved unable to overcome.
Such acts of ridicule are meant to rile an audience against the ridiculed, as when political figures are lambasted or malign as a means of rallying citizens against them, or when political and public figures ridicule dissent, such as that aimed at France following that nation’s refusal to participate in the US’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ridicule can be issued by power—with the intent to exert and maintain power—and against power. Yet, to ridicule power can result in consequences, as members of the punk-rock band Pussy Riot learned in 2012 when several were incarcerated for two years after mocking Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ridicule is a slippery subject. It eludes definition. It slips among the categories of ethos, pathos, or logos, depending upon usage and effect. And it has many effects: it can be humorous, harmful, or hurtful, and one instance of ridicule can result in myriad effects depending upon context. As Thomas Preston observed in 1788, ridicule is a relative and subjective entity. The meaning of any given instance of ridicule depends upon “the education, course of life, constitution and temper of the observer, which vary [according to] his [or her] notions of propriety, perfection and order on one hand, and of indecorum, defect and incongruity on the other” (88). While Preston’s configuration concentrates on “the observer” of or audience for an act of ridicule, his observation applies to users and recipients of ridicule as well—the meaning of what one writes or utters and the understanding of such by the recipient are also subject to the factors Preston outlines. That is, the intent of a ridicule act cannot always be guaranteed to be achieved; likewise, the effects of a given ridicule act cannot always be regulated. What one person may
intend as a mild species of ridicule, for example, could be interpreted by another person as just plain viciousness, which is often the case of the failed or bad “joke.” It’s also possible for the subject of ridicule not to realize that he or she is being ridiculed.

Though ridicule may be difficult to define and is able to shift shapes and meanings according to the subjectivities of those involved in an instantiation of ridicule, all or nearly all instances of ridicule have both one characteristic and one effect in common: as with the example of humor, all ridicule refers to human behavior; and, different from some uses of humor, ridicule most often functions as a mechanism for attempting to control and regulate behavior. The assertion that all ridicule refers to human behavior is supported by Henri Bergson, whose largely ignored 1911 theory of humor entitled simply *Laughter* provides the first social theory of humor. Bergson revises the well-known ancient formulation of “man as ‘an animal which laughs’” to man “as an animal which is laughed at” (10). As Bergson observes, “there is nothing comic apart from man” (68). Likewise, ridicule exists because humans ridicule each other, and there is nothing ridiculous apart from humans. What humans ridicule is human behavior.

Throughout *Laughter*, Bergson continually stresses that laughter is not only social, shared among those occupying a society, but also a “social gesture” (17, 48). What laughter as a social act gestures toward is social behavior—particularly, according to Bergson, behaviors that do not conform to social norms. Laughter thus becomes a corrective (48, 84, 96) and as such is a “method of discipline or ‘breaking
And of all forms of laughter, according to Bergson, none is more effective for these purposes than that derived from ridiculing behavior:

[S]ociety holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging’.

(69)

As a means of maintaining social order, then, ridiculing laughter directed at a subject can humiliate the subject into conformity. A means of avoiding being ridiculed is to ensure compliance with social norms by self-censuring behaviors that may be deemed asocial or not conforming to social norms. Just as social norms must be learnt, so too must ridicule. Indeed, the cultural phenomenon known as “playing the dozens” is, among other things, a practice that teaches both how to use ridicule effectively and how to take ridicule without showing offense. Billig puts it, “ridicule is both a means of disciplinary teaching and the lesson of that teaching” (177). A mechanism for affecting, controlling, and regulating behavior, ridicule is thus a means of discipline intended to teach members of a society to conform to its social norms.

As a means of exerting power to maintain power and thus of controlling and regulating behavior, ridicule functions as monological discourse. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes monological discourse as
comprised of language that functions as a “direct authorial discourse,” as language composed of “unidirectional words” (188, 199): it is “[d]irect, unmediated discourse directed exclusively toward its referential object, as an expression of the speaker's ultimate semantic authority” (199). In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin describes the intent of monological discourse:

Language is regarded from the speaker's standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively. [...] Language needs only a speaker—one speaker—and an object for his speech. (67)

Monological ridicule functions as a directive, often as a corrective, and may resort to invective to get its way. As a discursive practice, monological ridicule demands obedience. Identifying the quintessential monological speech act as the monologue, Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Manneheim note that “The speaker of a monologue expects no answer” (1-2). While the speaker who asserts monological ridicule may not want an “answer,” a response is nonetheless demanded: for its subject to comply with the argument issued in and by the ridicule. As a mechanism intended to effect psychological or emotional change, ridicule exerts an interpretation and, in doing so, reveals how a ridiculer interprets a subject's relationship to a norm. The interpretation expressed as ridicule is an argument, an argument for a subject to change. To mock or ridicule a person can be a means, drawing from Aristotle's
Rhetoric, of “urging a course of action” (35)—that is, to act otherwise from that which is ridiculed.

But ridicule can do more than only demand compliance. It can also result in awareness or a realization and, potentially, invite transformation. By “transformation,” which is defined in Chapter 5, I mean radical or profound change from one state of being to another state that is perceivably different from the former state. Transformation thus can be individual, cultural, social, or political. Ridicule that can affect transformation is not monological but dialogical in function. Dialogical discourse, as Bakhtin characterizes it in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, is “[d]iscourse with an orientation toward someone else’s discourse (double-voiced discourse)” (199). Dialogical discourse is syncretic, combining several discourses, which in effect is a means of “sustain[ing] multiple voices” (Tedlock and Manneheim 2). By “discourse” or “Discourse,” I mean that as defined by James P. Gee in his 1995 study Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method. Articulating a theory for and method of analyzing discourse, Gee defines “little d” “discourse” as “language-in-use” (7). Following “little d” discourse is “big D” “Discourses,” which include discourse as language-in-use in a “patchwork” of “ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing, together with other people and with various sorts of characteristic objects, symbols, tools, and technologies” (7). That is, while discourse means active language or “language-in-use,” Discourse refers to various other forms of meaning-making that subjects evoke and perform. By appealing to
and combining several layers of Discourse, dialogic discourse and dialogic ridicule prefigure possibility rather than insist on conformity.

Dialogical discourse can trump monological discourse. As Bakhtin explains, “The weakening or destruction of a monological context occurs only when there is a coming together of two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object” since the two discourses “cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically, regardless of whether they confirm, mutually supplement, or (conversely) contradict one another, or find themselves in some other dialogic relationship (that of question and answer, for example)” (Problems 188, 189). A traditional site at which dialogical discourse held sway was the carnival, a romanticized site at which authority is temporarily suspended to be at least ritually overturned, offering in its stead a new world that “undermines the prevailing institutions of power through its symbols and rites of laughter” (Lachmann 124). Whereas monological discourse is “centripetal,” insisting on “unification and standardization” and conformity with a dominant paradigm, dialogical discourse as a “counter” force if not advocates then stimulates “ambivalence” as well as “openness and transgression” (Lachmann 116). “In the carnival,” Lachmann contends, “dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter” that invite “change” (130). Carnival laughter is thus “generative” (131): “the dialogical, which describes a dynamic confluence of meaning, is positive and reconciliatory” as it results in a “disharmonic chord: the hybrid and the syncretic...
cause the single, consolidated meaning to disperse” (Lachmann 144). Dialogical ridicule, that is, aims for regeneration and, ultimately, transformation.

Dialogical discourse as well as ridicule that functions dialogically challenges or complicates dominant paradigms as an attempt to create if not the conditions for change then the possibility of transformation. The clashing of monological and dialogical discourses, as Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson suggest, can be a harbinger for a “dialogic moment,” which can “result” in “often surprising and even epiphanous or sporadic insight” (Moments 174). Cissna and Anderson characterize a “dialogic moment” as “a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself” (“Theorizing” 186). As will be discussed in Chapter 3, according to Aristotle tragedy and comedy, both of which ridicule subjects, can result in an audience experiencing catharsis (Poetics 288). To Martha Nussbaum, catharsis is a “clarification” (390)—that is, awareness of something previously latent. An epiphany or clarification may be arrived at by creating what Franz Fanon calls “cognitive dissonance,” which occurs when something does not resonate with a subject’s “core beliefs” (42). Thus unsettled, the subject may experience what psychologists Barbara Benedict Bunker and Jacqueline J. DeLisle elaborate as a process of “unfreezing, change, and refreezing” (137). Dialogic ridicule aims towards “unfreezing” core beliefs to beget change and, potentially, transformation. Ridicule that functions dialogically intends to invite its subject and/or audience to realize
something about that which is ridiculed in order to hasten some sort of change or transformation, whether individually and/or culturally.

This study will examine ridicule’s adaptability, its capacity for achieving many various outcomes. While its intent and effects are difficult to manage, any shared ridicule act will nonetheless have some effect, even if just the ridiculer seeming ridiculous. As discussed in Chapter 3, which traces ridicule through western history, for example, one of the main concerns of the use of ridicule was raised by Aristotle and then centuries later in The Great Ridicule Debate of the eighteenth century. To Aristotle, ridicule in the public domain will either be excessive—issued by “buffoons and vulgar persons” to annoy or offend—or will be “witty or tactful” as when used by privileged, “well bred” men of “good taste” as a means of eliciting “pleasure” (*Nicomachean* 108-09). Centuries later, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury echoed Aristotle’s sentiments, authorizing the use of ridicule only among “gentlemen of fashion” who are of “thorough good-breeding” (116, 111). Any who do not meet Aristotle’s and Shaftesbury’s definition—that is, those who are not privileged men—should be barred from using ridicule since, as Hugh Blair puts it, ridicule “when managed by unskilful [sic], or improper hands” may result in much “mischief, instead of good, to society” (542). As Chapter 3 shows concerning historical conceptions of ridicule, a commonplace among eighteenth-century gentlemen of “good taste and breeding” is that ridicule, used rightly by the right people, can be useful, but when it is taken up by the wrong sort of people ridicule is potentially dangerous. The “right” use of ridicule, according to these men, is to
censure improper and encourage proper behavior, whereas “wrong” uses may degrade individuals and even culture.

Despite or in spite of Billig’s contention that “no complete theory of ridicule” presently exists (175), Chapter 2 attempts to articulate a theory of ridicule. As this chapter argues, ridicule is a subjective interpretation of a subject’s relation to some social norm issued as an argument: it thus evokes an ideological formation to point out, according to its issuer’s perception, ways that some subject has transgressed or not complied with the ideology or social norm evoked. The intent of issuing ridicule, then, is generally to insist that its subject change behavior or the like to comply with the ideology or social norm summoned. In this way, ridicule is often a means of controlling or regulating behavior. As such, ridicule is a function of what Michel Foucault calls the Disciplines, which include various tactics to effect efficient “control and use of men” (141) and “techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities” (218) to “enable individuals to become integrated into” the “general demands” of an ordered social body (222). Ridicule is thus one of various tools the disciplines use to achieve the goal of compliance with the master-plan of efficiency. Used in this way, ridicule becomes a function of monological discourse: it demands compliance. Yet, as Chapter 5 will demonstrate, ridicule can also serve dialogical ends.

Chapter 4 further examines ridicule as a monological enterprise, noting that ridicule can be used either to affirm or to contest an ideological formation. As discussed above, ridicule when functioning monologically is a unidirectional
command or demand that only wants one response: compliance. While monological ridicule would seem to be the property of the powerful as a means of exerting and maintaining power, subordinates may also use monological ridicule to demand power to change, though not likely without consequence. Since two common forms that monological ridicule often assumes are insult and humor, this chapter explores ridicule as insult and in relation to the three main theories of humor—superiority, relief, and incongruity. Chapter 4 then examines these uses of ridicule as humor in three different sites—in a recent segment of “The John Stewart Show,” in Aristophanes’ play Women at the Thesmophoria, and in a series of television commercials—to demonstrate that sometimes monological ridicule as humor fails to achieve its intent when some subjects find that the “joke” is offensive. Ridicule of this sort does not always attain the obedience it demands.

Chapter 5 then takes up ridicule as a function of dialogical discourse. As discussed above, dialogical ridicule intends to challenge or complicate dominant paradigms, usually as an attempt to invite or create conditions amenable to transformation. The conditions of carnival as Bakhtin and others have explored are those in which such ridicule flourishes. Tricksters, clowns, jesters and the like often deploy ridicule—generally in the form of word-play such as puns, irony, intentional-indirection, self-ridicule, and other “language games” (Gates, Jr. 52)—to attempt to challenge or subvert preconceived notions. To argue that dialogical ridicule has the potential to challenge dominant formations with the aim of if not creating then contributing to individual as well as cultural transformations, Chapter 5 examines
the cakewalk as it developed in various domains, from the southern plantation of its origin to its adaption by minstrelsy shows and eventual hybridization with other original African American artistic inventions—“Coon” songs and ragtime, for example—on stages across the nation. A specific type of ridicule, self-ridicule, is also examined briefly as a means of potentially defusing conflict to invite alteration of conceptions.

Finally, Chapter 6 evaluates ridicule on the World Wide Web, particularly in comment-sections of social websites, as a form of cyberbullying, and as it appears in memes. As this chapter observes, ridicule as it appears on the Internet is not “new” in function: it is either monological or dialogical. However, given the open-nature of the Web, the use of avatars to effect anonymity or a semblance of it, and the possible permanence of ridicule issued on the Internet, such ridicule can reach a far vaster audience than that issued in a non-cyber public space and can seem even more damaging when it takes the form of cyberbullying: the ridiculed cannot always discern who the bully is or who has observed or been exposed to the act, thus perhaps increasing its intensity. Moreover, the specter of anonymity or its semblance may also mean that the consequences of ridiculing power while on the Web are potentially lessened. Given the open-nature of the Internet, ridicule may also be issued not to affect a target per se but, as Richard Dawkins has expressed, to “influence third parties”—that is, any one surfing the Web may be exposed to an act of ridicule not necessarily intended for that individual, which thus has the potential to alter, as well as to confirm, that individual’s perceptions. Noting the proliferation
of ridicule on the Web, this chapter examines a television commercial that ridicules Web users, a few examples of ridicule issued in comment-sections of social websites, and the phenomena of memes to reveal the problematics of interpreting often context-less Internet ridicule. Finally, Chapter 6 speculates on the effects of Internet ridicule on human consciousness.

Whatever it is and however it works, ridicule can both impose and disrupt order. The use of ridicule often signifies the presumption of an asymmetrical power relation—one has or presumes the right to ridicule others. When issued from power and from those presumed to side with power, ridicule is intended to impose or maintain order, to serve the maintenance of dominant ideology by effecting social control. Even uses of ridicule among peers or equals, for example, can function to impose order—not necessarily intended to harm or hurt, ridicule among peers is often a means of creating group cohesion, of drawing people together in a common activity of testing wits, which is imposing a sort of order on and within the group: those who pass the test of wits are in while those who fail are out. This, again, is one function of the agon called “playing the dozens.” However, ridicule can also be put to the service of disrupting order when it is used to critique, challenge, and potentially undermine power, any of which may result in altering power relations as well as in effect individual and cultural transformations. With the advent of the Internet, however, ridicule is proliferating rapidly, as too often web-users, shielded by anonymity, resort to ridicule to quell discourse with which they disagree or to create affinity among users, as signaled by an accumulation of clicks of the “like”
function provided at some websites. A multi-purpose tool, ridicule can achieve many different ends—as well as fail to achieve its aim. Since ridicule’s intent and effects are difficult to manage and control given the variety of human personality types, what a given act of ridicule is to mean and what to do about it is finally a matter for its audience to determine.

I have taken up this study of ridicule for several reasons. One is that ridicule has always been a part of my life. In my childhood, I was often subject to ridicule as a corrective, typically, as Bergson and later Billig theorize it, to instruct me about social norms. In the throes of puberty, for example, when peach-fuzz began to accumulate above my upper-lip, my biological father, in an attempt to cajole me to apply a razor, was fond of calling me “Mexican.” At the time, I did not understand the racist implications of the statement or that it was ridicule, a would-be insult intended to affect my appearance. As a youth who learnt the arbitrariness of the rule of household-law due to the various step-fathers and –mothers who tried to control and regulate my behavior, for example, I found indirect ridicule a useful method of being able to critique power relations while eliding the possible consequences of challenging power such as losing liberty by being “grounded.” During junior high school, when I was all of 86 pounds and the most diminutive male in the entire school, I was regularly bullied. Self-ridicule was sometimes a useful device for defusing such situations—to tell a bully in the hearing and to the delight of a gathering crowd that he’d waste his strength pummeling me when he could just as well blow hard and I’d fall down managed to spare my skin and psyche many
bruises. Yet, I have also grown increasingly uneasy with ridicule, as I have also
learnt in my many attempts to apply it that ridicule can just as well fail to achieve its
intent, eroding relationships and hurting loved-ones. Perhaps Aristotle’s
observation is astute—it is a mechanism best used carefully and sparingly, in
certain contexts only, lest it backfire, causing irreparable harm.

Because of these and other experiences, I have developed a concern for social
justice, a concern that has fueled my interest in studying methods of controlling and
regulating behavior. In Discipline and Punish’s final line, Foucault offers that the
volume “serve[s] as a historical background to various studies of the power of
normalization” (308). This study of ridicule intends to contribute to that project
since one main function of ridicule is precisely its “power of normalization,” it
power to discipline, punish, “correct.” But, more significantly, ridicule also contains
the power to challenge and undermine prevailing hierarchies, to create conditions
amenable to social justice. A trope of diverse uses, it also has the ability to induce
much-needed laughter during circumstances fraught with tension and anxiety. And
for that I appreciate ridicule.
Chapter 2: A Theory of Ridicule

The difficulty of defining and accounting for ridicule and its effects are not necessarily new to or a problem for the present only. Despite the great taxonomizer Aristotle’s various writings on ridicule, it has remained a slippery concept, just as has that category to which ridicule is most oft assigned, humor. In antiquity ridicule was common, took many forms: it was described in scratchings on papyrus and parchment—particularly as a type of humor suitable among peers and, less directly, as a mechanism that has potential to affect behavior—and it was deployed in graffiti etched or painted on walls as well as in numerous plays and other entertainments. In the entry “Humor” at the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Aaron Smuts notes, “Almost every major figure in the history of philosophy has proposed a theory [of humor], but after 2500 years of discussion there has been little consensus about what constitutes humor”; thus, Smuts continues, “the topic of humor [remains] currently understudied in philosophy” even though humor is a “philosophical topic that bares direct relevance to our daily lives, our social interactions, and our nature as humans.” What Smuts observes of humor in general applies to a specific type of humor, ridicule, especially concerning any “consensus,” past or present, about what ridicule is and does. However undetermined theories of humor and especially of ridicule remain, Aristotle’s treatment of ridicule has resonated throughout western history.

As the next chapter will demonstrate in its tracing of western conceptions of ridicule from antiquity through the neoclassical and medieval periods to the
eighteenth century, ridicule is a mechanism for achieving various ends, some of which greatly troubled early theorists of and commentators on ridicule. While Aristotle and later Lord Shaftesbury (and many other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century men who debated ridicule's social utility) recommended its use in certain contexts—namely, as a species of wit among "well bred" gentleman of "good taste," as Aristotle puts it in *Nicomachean Ethics* (108-09)—these men were also concerned about its use by the masses. When used improperly by the wrong sorts of people, Aristotle stresses in *Rhetoric*, ridicule's deleterious effects include its ability to arouse emotion to a degree that can warp judgment (3-4). Similarly, in his 1783 book *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Hugh Blair worries that when ridicule is "managed by unskilful [sic], or improper hands, there is hazard of its doing mischief, instead of good, to society" (542). Due to its farraginous nature, ridicule can be employed to improve or to degrade individuals and culture.

Following the great ridicule debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ridicule as a subject was not much discussed, while ridicule as rhetoric, as a rhetorical mechanism, continued to flourish. Not until the late twentieth century was ridicule examined in various disciplines in higher education—in psychology, education, and other fields, and somewhat in the then-newly developing field called humor studies. The only full-length study of ridicule to appear following the great ridicule debate is Michael Billig's 2005 book *Laughter and Ridicule: Toward a Social Critique of Humour*. While proffering a theory of ridicule—mainly, that its "role" in "social life" is "disciplinary"—Billig does not attempt to examine ridicule in culture;
instead, he invites readers to do so (5). Though not the ostensible foci, ridicule is on the margins of many studies. One such representative book is Ron Jenkins’ 1994 study *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy*. A graduate of Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Clown College and former clown turned academic, Jenkins explores one extreme of ridicule—ridicule as clowning, or the type of ridicule that clowns engage in, which often has subversive intentions. Jenkins’ study will introduce Chapter 5.

This chapter will describe how ridicule functions to endeavor to achieve various outcomes. Although ridicule is situational and operates differently according to who uses it and how, as well as upon whom, all acts of ridicule have in common, as described in the Introduction, both one characteristic and one effect: all ridicule refers to human behavior, and ridicule most often functions as a mechanism for attempting to control and regulate behavior, what Billig refers to as ridicule’s “disciplinary role” (15). To clarify how ridicule affects human behavior, this chapter will initially review its treatment across the disciplines to draw out pertinent conclusions, and then endeavor to advance a theory of ridicule, delineating and describing two different types of ridicule and the implications of their uses in specific domains.

Drawing from discourse theory, I will call these two types “monological ridicule” and “dialogical ridicule.” While each type attempts to affect human behavior, the two have different goals and effects. Monological ridicule commands or “corrects.” In doing so, it means to maintain the power and privilege of those who
employ it by advocating hierarchical inequities. To achieve this end, it is often used to denigrate others, sometimes resorting to invective or taking the form of a failed or bad “joke.” Monological ridicule does not expect or want a response other than compliancy. Monological ridicule is at base an observation that functions as an implicit, and sometimes explicit, unidirectional command or demand for its subject to comply with some social norm. Ridicule of this sort is often used to endeavor to create group cohesion or conformity.

In contrast, dialogical ridicule invites or asks for a response. Whether used to challenge or confirm a dominant ideological formation or social norm, dialogical ridicule’s aim is to affect some sort of transformation, be it individual, social, cultural, or political. Whereas monological ridicule often appears as invective and functions mostly as corrective, dialogical ridicule often appears as clowning: it traffics in word-play, puns, and other verbal gymnastics. The main way that dialogical ridicule differs from monological is that dialogical ridicule can result in transformative moments, about which monological ridicule is not concerned.

Whether it functions monologically or dialogically, ridicule is at base an argument that expresses a subjective interpretation about a subject’s relation to a social norm or ideological formation, about whether a subject is perceived to have complied with some norm. A ridicule act hails and hails from ideology. Whether as a verbal or bodily gesture or even as a gaze, ridicule wants a subject to change some aspect of its self, language-use, behavior, appearance, or the like. When issued from power, it means to maintain that power, either demanding compliancy with or
obedience to that power. As such, ridicule is often critical of difference, of anything that may be perceived to have compromised or upset the master-plan of efficiency. In contrast, when issued against power, despite the potential consequences of doing so, it means to challenge that power, to alter it in some way, perhaps even resulting in some sort of transformation.

Ridicule on the Internet, the subject of Chapter 6, does not operate according to a unique logic—it's either monological or dialogical. But ridicule has found its way to the Internet. Indeed, some websites specialize in posting content replete with ridicule, inviting commentators to ridicule both the content and each other. Moreover, many Internet users traffic in ridicule, and as such ridicule dominates comment-sections of social websites and blogs especially. Because it is often issued anonymously or masked behind an avatar, those who ridicule on the Internet are not often held accountable, and thus Internet ridicule is often more exaggerated and cruel than ridicule issued between or among humans in a shared physical space. Moreover, unlike in other domains, ridicule on the Internet can be permanent and thus can have a far greater reach and lasting effect than ridicule issued verbally. Whichever the form, function, and format of an act of ridicule—whether monological or dialogical—ridicule is a mechanism for affecting change.

Ridicule among the Disciplines

Between the years 1997 and 2012, approximately 25 articles were published on the topic of ridicule, with many others articles touching on ridicule indirectly through examination of related subjects like heckling, invective, bullying, and
clowning, or under the general category of humor. More recently, following the advent and increasing reach of the Internet, articles examining cyber bullying have proliferated, a discussion of which appears in Chapter 6. The scant discussions of ridicule among the disciplines reveal that while no one discipline or field owns ridicule, ridicule has bearing across many fields of inquiry. Relatedly, while all of these studies touch upon various aspects of ridicule, what they lack as a whole is a consistent, systematic treatment of ridicule, likely because none presently exists. Ubiquitous as it is, ridicule has been used far more often than it has been subject to examination or studied. Ridicule as a subject of study most commonly appears in contexts concerning asymmetrical power relations—in educational settings, for example—and in contexts fraught with tension and anxiety—under repressive political regimes, for example, and as an instrument of or a response to war. Further, aside from the one book on ridicule, only one of the recent academic publications attempts to offer something like a brief theory of what ridicule is and how it works—David Cowan’s 2005 publication, “Episode 712: South Park, Ridicule and the Construction of Religious Rivalry,” which this chapter will discuss at some length following its review of other recent publications.

Most of the studies discussed below are not concerned with ridicule as a mechanism per se; rather, they mostly only attend to its effects. Since these studies are so few and so scattered among the disciplines, it does not make sense to attend to each field’s treatment of ridicule sequentially or linearly. Instead, the following discussion will be thematically organized based on three factors, among which there
is some overlap: 1) studies that examine ridicule’s power to effect conformity with social norms; 2) studies that explore ridicule’s ability to create group unity and disunity; and 3) studies that consider the use of ridicule to challenge power—that is, the use of ridicule by minority or non-privileged groups to contest dominant powers. These categories bode well for the way I will theorize ridicule later in this chapter: ridicule as monological and as dialogical. Ridicule as corrective intended to ensure conformity with social norms is monological, whereas ridicule as a means of asking for, inviting, or creating discourse and negotiation is dialogical.

An abiding feature of the following studies that posit ridicule as monological is that the studies’ examples of ridicule often function as invective, as a mechanism for affecting people negatively; as corrective; and primarily as means of asserting or maintaining power. That is, the types or forms of ridicule most often studied in academia are not those shared among Shaftesbury’s select members of “the club,” those that privileged, fraternal fellows use to tease each other, as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. In academia, mostly only negative forms of ridicule are studied, evident in the fields of Psychology, Communications, Education, Criminology, Media Studies, Race and Gender Studies, and in examinations of politics and war.

Of the various studies on ridicule, those in Psychology and Communications are rather limited, concerned primarily with effects of ridicule. For example, in an aptly titled article published in 2000, “Jeer Pressure: The Behavioral Effects of Observing Ridicule in Others,” Leslie M. Janes and James M. Olson study only one
possible effect of ridicule—its ability to create conformity. Observing the effects on graduate students witnessing videotaped instances of behavior being ridiculed, the study tested the assumption that “seeing another person being ridiculed would have an ‘inhibiting’ effect because it would increase the salience of interpersonal rejection and motivate actions to avoid such a possibility (e.g., conformity to norms)” (475). Predictably, the study found that observing others being ridiculed “can have inhibiting effects” on the observer’s future behavior (478): “Our data clearly show that even the observation of others being ridiculed can create conformity and fear of failure” (484). An implication of this study is that ridicule’s aim is indeterminate, its reach vast—it can affect more than just those it is intended for.

Similarly, in a 1978 essay in *Communication Quarterly*, “The Effects of Heckling on Speaker Credibility and Attitude Change,” Michael J. Beatty and Michael W. Kruger study how audience attitude changes based on identification with a speaker or a heckler when the latter taunts the former. Not surprisingly, the authors found that when an audience identifies with the heckler, then “heckling lowered both speaker credibility and attitude toward the position advocated by the speaker,” whereas when an audience identifies with the speaker, then “heckling increased speaker credibility and attitude toward the speaker’s position” (50). As will be discussed below, audience identification with a ridiculer can result in both uniting and dividing audience members.
Who most likely uses ridicule to affect whom and how merits examination. In his 1976 article “The Rhetoric of Power Maintenance: Elites at the Precipice,” Andrew A. King examines “strategies” that “groups in positions of dominance” use to respond to “a serious challenge” to their power (128). Of the seven “rhetorical strategies” or “coping mechanisms” that powerful groups employ when challenged, the first King identifies is ridicule, which when issued “has several functions”: “undermine the self-confidence of the challenger”; “strengthen” the cohesion of the group issuing the ridicule; “cause third parties outside either group to see the emergent group as an aggregation of social clowns” who are “not worthy of serious” consideration; and “evoke intemperate, rash, profane replies that can be dismissed as hysterical” (129). King’s main example is ridicule of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention. Among other aspects, women and men participating in the Convention were ridiculed for presumably not conforming to social norms concerning femininity and masculinity—the women are “old maids” or “mannish women, like hens that crow,” while “the majority [of the men who attend the Convention] are hen-pecked husbands, and all of them ought to wear petticoats” (New York Herald Editorial 99). As King sums up his discussion of ridicule as a tool for squelching challenges to power, “The very essence of ridicule is inequality” (128). That is, ridicule—in particular the type I call monological—tends to be issued from power as a means to maintain power, to advocate and foment inequity.

One way of attempting to maintain power is to use ridicule as a corrective. In this case, language-use, behavior, appearance, or various other things that seem not
conform to social norms are ridiculed, the intent being to sway the ridiculed to conform to some social norm, to “correct” allegedly errant ways. For example, a 1981 publication in *Journal of Educational Psychology*, “Ridicule as an Educational Corrective,” attempts to answer the research question, “Is ridicule an effective motivator and/or a potent educational corrective?” (723). Jennings Bryant et al. recognize ridicule’s potential pejorative effects: its potential “to harm its victims psychologically,” “to undermine teacher-student rapport,” and “to destroy an atmosphere conducive to learning” (723). Examining the results of three different “motivators”—“ridicule, insult, gentle reminder” (722)—used by a professor on students prior to taking a test, the study’s conclusion “indicate[s] that ridicule is an effective educational corrective. Of the three motivational treatments employed, only ridicule produced a significant increase in information acquisition relative to the controls” (726). However, some aspects of the study need to be clarified to determine the efficacy of ridicule as an educational tool. For example, the study does not at all reveal anything about student familiarity with the professor ridiculing them or reveal the professor’s gender. If the students are familiar with the professor, and if the professor often uses some sort of humor or ridicule in the classroom, then the one instance tested would probably be less impactful than if the students had no familiarity with the professor or if the professor had not used humor or ridicule prior to the instance studied. Context is all. A last, parting question raises a serious concern about the use of ridicule as a “corrective” or
motivational agent in educational settings: “Ridicule can be an effective corrective, but can the emotional and relational costs of ridicule justify its usage?” (727).

Much has changed in educational climates since the publication of Bryant et al.’s study in 1981. In response to school bullying, in recent decades a slew of non-profit organizations and several shelves of books have appeared. The ambivalence of Bryant et al.’s study’s conclusion aside, Bryant et al. had examined a use of ridicule among college students, legal adults. In more recent studies of the effects of ridicule in K-12 settings, on children and teens, educators have taken a vastly different tact. Some have recently answered Bryant et al.’s parting question more decisively. In a 2008 book for K-12 educators, *25 Biggest Mistakes Teachers Make and How to Avoid Them*, Carolyn Orange offers an answer: “Truly professional educators would never ridicule” and “Effective teachers are aware of the effects of public ridicule and shaming on a student’s self-esteem” (37, 38). Judy S. Freeman’s 2002 how-to book *Easing the Teasing: Helping Your Child Cope with Name-Calling, Ridicule, and Verbal Bullying* provides parents exercises, role-playing scenarios, and other methods to help children learn to cope with ridicule. The title of Peter Yarrow et al.’s 2000 book for teachers of junior high school, published by the non-profit organization Operation Respect, also offers a clear position on the use of ridicule in education: *Don’t Laugh at Me: Creating a Ridicule-free Classroom*. Although several decades ago ridicule may have been considered a potentially effective means for teachers to motivate college students, more recently educators have made effort to
reduce the amount of ridicule, and bullying, in educational settings, whether issued by educators or by students.

In a 2001 study of ridicule in an educational context, “Worse than Sticks and Stones: Lessons from Research on Ridicule,” Larry K. Brendtro examines school-yard bullying. According to Brendtro, “the vast majority of school bullying is not overt violence; rather, it is covert psychological warfare. It comes in the form of social ridicule, psychological intimidation, and group rejection” (47). The weapons of this “psychological warfare” are commonplace: “Ridicule doesn't even require words; dirty looks and gestures will accomplish the same ends. All these bullying behaviors cross the line from playful teasing to disrespect, thereby demeaning a person” (47). Brendtro emphatically stresses, “Ridicule is a powerful social ritual designed to demean certain individuals and set them apart” (47). In this context, ridicule is used as a corrective to maintain group conformity and to ostracize others. As Brendtro recognizes, the effects of bullying vary. On the one hand, concerning the targets of ridicule, “in the last decade we have learned that the long-term effects of ridicule can be [...] damaging to victims" and “often as devastating to them as periodic physical abuse by peers” (48). On the other hand, “[b]ullying has an entirely different effect on the provocateur. Many bullies feel powerful and actually build an inflated sense of self-esteem by putting others down” (48). Albeit in different ways, Brendtro makes clear, ridicule affects not just the ridiculed but also the ridiculer.

Ridicule also often functions as a corrective in popular media such as on television programs. But whereas above, in educational settings, in which ridicule
is a means of directly attempting to alter behavior, the following study of television
attends to ridicule of body size of performers, without consideration of its effects on
audience. A 2003 study of 1018 major characters on US primetime television shows
finds that characteristics and behaviors deemed as socially unfavorable were more
likely to be attributed to obese characters (Greenberg et al. 1343). Obese characters
rather than thin characters are more likely portrayed as: less intelligent,
unemployed, African American or “members of minority groups,” unmarried, less
attractive, involved in fewer romantic and sexual interactions, having fewer positive
interactions, being less helpful, eating far more often than thinner characters, older,
and “more likely to be guests on shows and to be portrayed in comedies as opposed
to dramas” (1343-47). As this study intimates, television’s obese characters
represent that which other characters—and by extension, I would add, viewers—
are to avoid becoming or resembling: an always already easy target for ridicule.
Pejorative representations of obesity will affect different audience members
differently: some will abhor or find humor in obesity and obese people; some will
make attempts to avoid becoming obese, in which case ridicule of representations of
obesity has functioned as a “corrective”; some, those who may be considered obese,
may adopt negative attitudes about the self, perhaps experience shame; some may
remain indifferent.

Examinations of ridicule in Race Studies also attend to the power of media
representations, on television and in print. A short 1997 article in Journal of Blacks
in Higher Education titled “Brudder Jones: The New Acceptability of Ridiculing Black
People” reflects on negative, stereotypical portrayals of Blacks on television during the early- and mid-twentieth century to raise concern over a then-recent effort to remake the “Amos and Andy” television franchise, a program that regularly ridiculed Blacks (91-93). A 2012 online blog reviews a *Chronicle of Higher Education* posting that ridicules Black scholars. According to the blogger, the *Chronicle’s* publishing of Naomi Schaefer Riley’s piece titled “The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations” “deliberately insult[s] […] everyone within the field of black studies.” Riley’s critique, which according to the blogger amounts to “[p]ublic shaming and bullying,” is of the most powerless groups of people in all academe: doctoral students who lack the political over of tenure, institutional support, or extensive professional networks. She attacked junior scholars who have done nothing but tried to fulfill the requirements of their degree program and who had the audacity to be recognized for doing so in academia’s largest publication.

According to the blogger, by publishing Riley’s rant, the *Chronicle* “is legitimizing open season on black scholars for doing black studies.” In this case, ridicule is not issued as a corrective per se but as a means to maintain the power and privilege of one group over another. To belittle, to ridicule subjects in such a way is to endeavor to dismiss them and their work as irrelevant, as not worth serious consideration in academia.
The field of Criminology has also entertained ridicule as a corrective. An article in the British *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* discusses ridicule as one of three means of managing sex offenders. Although the article concludes that both penal methods and the death penalty as deterrent are more effective than social methods, author S. D. Kirby recognizes ridicule’s potential as “a potent instrument of social control”: the offender conforms not from fear of punishment but “in order not to be ‘laughed’ at” (490). Two possible effects could occur, according to Kirby: a “socially ostracized” offender who is “criticized sufficiently” might refrain from offending again, “though it is doubtful that this would be the actual outcome” (491); or, the offender may become “marginalized,” an “outcast within society” (491), in which case the sting from the ridicule of socially deviant behavior may be lessened: “The individual may offend feeling safe in the knowledge that socially imposed punitive measures have limited effectiveness” (493). Although Kirby is finally ambivalent about the social utility of ridicule as a corrective in context of the specific population of the study, Kirby’s study shares one significant, albeit unstated, factor with those studies reviewed above: in all these studies, ridicule is a tool for the maintenance of power, used by those with power or privilege on those who lack equal power or privilege—educators on learners, dominant races on subjected races, the legal system on delinquents, etc. For that matter, ridicule can serve not just to maintain but also to increase power, as is suggested by the following studies.
Ridicule is often evoked or deployed to maintain—as well as to attempt to secure—power in war contexts. From the singing of “Yankee Doodle Dandy” to the WWII government-issued propaganda pamphlets ridiculing Germans and Japanese, from the ridicule of President Nixon and combatants in the Vietnam War to US troops’ treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib Prison, ridicule has always been an element of the US’s wars. Moreover, as these examples suggest, ridicule in the context of war cuts many ways—opposing soldiers ridicule each other; governments use propaganda to ridicule enemies; citizens and soldiers ridicule each other; citizens ridicule the leaders of war efforts; etc. Consistent with King’s study of uses of ridicule by dominant powers to maintain power, dominant powers in wartime likewise ridicule those they deem inferior or less technologically capable.

A recent article advocates the use of ridicule by a dominant power as a means of maintaining as well as augmenting power. Specifically, it recommends that the US adopts ridicule in the present, on-going war on terrorism—according to the article’s website host, The Institute of World Politics—as a part of “American diplomatic policy and strategic communication.” In a 2006 white-paper entitled “Ridicule: An Instrument in the War on Terrorism,” J. Michael Waller contends that the US government endeavor “undermining the political and psychological strengths of adversaries and enemies by employing ridicule as a standard operating tool of national strategy.” Asserting that ridicule “can cut the enemy down to size,” Waller concludes that “policymakers must incorporate ridicule into their strategic thinking.” Waller does not contend that the US itself should ridicule terrorists,
however; he believes that the US should seek out uses of it in its “native environments” and then “do little more than give them publicity and play on its official and semi-official global radio, TV and Internet media, and help them become ‘discovered.’”’ Ridicule here is a form of propaganda.

Waller’s article has had some influence, spawning a number of supporters. In a 2008 Counterterrorism Blog article called “Ridicule Needed,” Jeffrey Brienholt contends that when US diplomatic policy and embargoes fail to achieve their ends, and when “Pentagon-type remedies become the only remaining option”—which “means body bags”—then instead of engaging in “Pentagon-type remedies” resorting to a “little old-fashioned ridicule might help.”11 A 2009 review of Waller’s article—entitled “Larry, Curly and Osama: Ridiculing Terrorists as a Weapon of War”—on the website Political Warfare supports Waller’s contention to make use of ridicule in the war on terrorism.12 The Hudson Institute’s March 2010 policy-paper “Organizing the U.S. Government to Counter Hostile Ideologies” also takes up Waller’s suggestion—the US should “provide covert support through, for example, private media corporations that would facilitate the broadcasting of” ridicule of despots created by people native to the countries with whom the US is at war.

The function of ridicule in the context of terrorism is complex: regardless of ridicule’s origin, it is issued from power with the intent to maintain that power while clearly delineating an “us”—those who ridicule and/or agree with the ridicule—and a “them”—those who are ridiculed. Group cohesion is an effect on several levels. More so, such ridicule is monological in intent. While it does intend to
elicit a response, the aim is not to create discourse, not to negotiate, however, but to provoke and to attain information. Ridicule here is not just propaganda but bait—a way to call out and expose alleged terrorists, to anger them, and to alienate would-be followers from them, to create a cohesive group against alleged local despots.

While the above articles advocate the use of ridicule by a dominant power in a war context, some have examined uses of ridicule by those most affected by the violence of war as a means of maintaining group-cohesion or solidarity against a more powerful adversary. Examining Palestinian humor during the Gulf War of 1990-91, for example, Sharif Kanaana observes a parallel increase in Palestinian ridicule of adversaries as the tension and anxiety resulting from the conflict elevated. In this case, ridicule is not intended to maintain or challenge power, as the power ridiculed was never exposed to the jokes. Its intent is to maintain group cohesion against an enemy as well as dehumanize an enemy, reveal the enemy to be of a different type than those allied against that enemy. Likewise, in a 1977 article entitled “Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain,” Oriol Pi-Sunyer observes that people experiencing repression under a dictatorial state such as that of Spain during the mid-twentieth century resorted to ridicule as a means of relieving tension more increasingly as the situation became more repressive and desperate (180-83). As these studies show, ridicule tends to proliferate during crisis. Indeed, this may be one of ridicule’s abiding features, its tendency to increase during crisis. As the above examinations of ridicule in contexts of war and other crises suggest, ridicule can function as a sort of coping mechanism, as a means for
subjects to vent frustrations and anxieties, often indirectly (through songs and jokes, for example), thus avoiding the potential consequences of confronting power directly.

As the above review of recent studies of ridicule intimates, ridicule intends to affect people; whether in the form of corrective, invective, bullying, or as a “joke,” such ridicule aims to create conformity with social norms. However, the intended effect is not always achieved, as sometimes the targets of a given act of ridicule reject it. Moreover, sometimes those whom are already rejected or dejected by a dominant power use ridicule against that power as an attempt to create change. Whether or not change occurs within the dominant group, change has occurred among those challenging the dominant group with ridicule—they cohere as a group around a common effort.

Similar to Kanaana’s and Pi-Sunyer’s examinations of the uses of ridicule by oppressed or suppressed groups, L. M. Bogad, in his 2005 book *Electoral Guerilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements*, studies ways that marginalized or disenfranchised groups use ridicule as a means of responding to dominant groups. According to Bogad, “Electoral guerilla theatre is often an expression of the frustration felt by individual citizens and social movements who feel excluded from the real decision-making process in current democracies” (3). That is, those who believe they are not part of a norm but are located in the margins of a given society and who feel ridiculed as a result sometimes resort to and use that already employed against them—ridicule—to gain social and political capital. In effect,
marginalized people organize, perform, and ridicule that which they perceive as marginalizing them. Occurring mostly only in recent liberal democracies, according to Bogad, “This is serious play” (7). It is more than mere play, however; ridicule issued by marginalized or disenfranchised groups can result not only in group cohesion against a dominant power but also in group augmentation, as those who become exposed to and concur with the ridicule may align themselves with those ridiculing the dominant.¹⁵

Group cohesion against—or as an effect or result—of ridicule can occur on a large scale, as Kanaana, Pi-Sunyer, and Bogad demonstrate, and also on a much smaller scale, as a group forming within a society. Four studies in particular bear out this claim—two on ethnic humor and two concerning religious representations. In their co-authored 1985 essay “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson examine what they call Polish, Irish, Jewish, and Black humor. Put another way, the two study jokes about and sometimes by members of these ethnic and racial groups. Acknowledging that “ethnic humor” about or directed at members of these groups “demonstrates aggressive intentions,” Boskin and Dorinson also “suggest that it possesses a salutary side as well”: “The disparaged group absorbs the barbs and, in fact, defuses them by passing them along as of their own manufacture” (82)—as US colonists demonstrated when they adopted as their anthem a ditty intended to ridicule them, “Yankee Doodle.” Ridicule may hurt its targets, Boskin and Dorinson understand, as its intent is primarily as a corrective, as a means of enforcing conformity: “The oppressors employ ridicule to
maintain conformity to the status quo by adhering to iron-bound stereotypes” (97).
But they also believe that such humor when appropriated by those it is intended to
denigrate or pain “functions as a mechanism for survival” (91): by “bring[ing]
pleasure even in the presence of pain,” on the one hand, “[s]uch jokes function, in
fact, as miniatures of rebelliousness” (93); on the other hand,

Mocking the features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of
the most effective ethnic infusions into national humor, particularly
by Afro-Americans and Jews. Minority laughter affords insights into
the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving
Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status. (97)
Implicit here, which Boskin and Dorinson do not address as it is outside the scope of
their essay, is that often people so mocked and ridiculed will cohere in solidarity
against those who ridicule them, an observation borne out, albeit in different
contexts, by the studies of Kanaana, Pi-Sunyer, and Bogad.

In a chapter of his 2006 book *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar
America*—“‘Well-aimed ridicule’: Satirizing American Race Relations”—Stephen E.
Kercher examines comedy and comedians in the US in the late 1950s through the
1960s, demonstrating that the satiric style of humor most prevalent then both
united people and allowed a subversive critique of privilege in ways previously
denied. As Kercher defines it, satire and ridicule are humor with a social purpose—
“protest, as Ken Tynan put it, ‘couched in wit’” (qtd. in Kercher 1): “At its best,
liberal satire boldly and intelligently challenged cold war orthodoxy and
demonstrated that dissent, when channeled through satiric humor, was far from dead in the postwar period” (8). This dissent was poignant, organized, and clear about its intentions: “Whether by targeting the racist ramblings of a Southern segregationist or the ill-concealed prejudices of white liberals, satiric improvisational troupes such as the Committee [as well as comedians such as Dick Gregory] reminded audiences routinely of the tragic absurdity of America’s racial predicament” (280).16

Then as now, well-wrought humor can sometimes result in recognition or realizations where a bitter criticism may fail to penetrate, a notion drawn from Aristotle and Erasmus that will be examined in the next chapter of this study. As well, as Boskin and Dorinson impute above, humor can be used to relieve tension and pain. If so-called ethnic humor issued from the privileged against subalterns can serve to rally a crowd to meeting humor with humor, as Boskin and Dorinson imply, then other such moments of crisis, of challenges to equality, can also function to inspire response: “satire directed at American race relations was in great demand during the peak of the modern civil rights movement” (268), and “Historians, sociologists, and folklorists who have studied African American vernacular humor have documented an increased circulation of jokes ridiculing segregation and racial prejudice following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954” (284).17 From Dick Gregory to Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, and others who have employed satire and ridicule to critique asymmetrical power relations, comedians then drew together large, mixed audiences who reveled in the
subversive humor. Many appeared on nationally-syndicated television shows, reaching an even wider-audience than a stage in a comedy club could allow. Against monological ridicule, satiric comedy and ridicule drew together an audience, created the conditions for dialogical ridicule to thrive, and contributed to effecting social and cultural transformations.

A study of a particular preaching style likewise makes clear how ridicule as corrective can often fail to achieve its effect with its intended audience, in some cases backfiring, creating group cohesion against the preacher who would ridicule a congregation into conformity. C. S. Jacobs’ 1982 dissertation “The Rhetoric of Witnessing and Heckling: A Case Study in Ethnorhetoric” examines Brother Jed Smock, a traveling evangelist who frequents college campuses nationwide, including the University of Arizona, to endeavor to convert students to Christianity. Smock’s method is that of the Jeremiad: he critiques students for backsliding, for not living as he believes they should according to how he interprets biblical tenets. His critique is replete with ridicule and invective—he ridicules women for the way they dress, men for drinking alcohol and lusting women, etc. Students flock around Smock, many of whom heckle him. Indeed, the Brother Jed appearances at the UA campus I have witnessed always become a major, loud, unscripted spectacle, with sometimes as many as fifty or more students hovering around Brother Jed. As Jacobs observes, “The preachers and hecklers engage in a tacit contest for control of the audience and of the rhetorical event generally” (95). Smock is adamant, insists he speaks truth; many students disagree with his truth-claims, however, heckling him for not being
willing to consider their views. Jacobs describes Smock’s style of argument as thus: “While the preachers will recognize and even solicit serious questions and challenges, they are not interested in debating. They will instruct, explain, and clarify. They will even correct and reprimand. But these acts imply a quite different engagement than that found in debate. The preachers will not cede their authority to the audience” (emphases added; 103). Put another way, Smock’s method is purely monological—believing he utters truth, Smock commands and corrects with force. Students who perceive Smock as “irrational” and “illogical” (140, 141), as “‘authoritarian’” and intolerant of their “values and beliefs” (119), believe that “heckling [is] a fitting and appropriate response to the situation” (136):

If the event is ridiculous and pointless, if the heckling is mean and rude, it is the preacher’s own fault. […] All the audience can do is reflect back to him the mockery he is making of religion and the absurdity of the stands he is taking. Heckling is the only avenue available for exposing the preacher for what he is. (141)

In this context, ridicule begets ridicule. Interpreting the preacher’s ridicule as excessive, beyond reason, the audience chooses to meet ridicule with ridicule, reflecting an assumption that in such a context reason itself would fail to be heard.

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, Aristotle presumes that some people are in themselves inherently ridiculous. Because Smock ridicules monologically and excessively, invites only consensus while disparaging difference, and will not engage on students’ terms or negotiate, Smock appears to students to
embody ridiculousness. As Beatty and Kruger’s study demonstrates, students in the audience who disagree with Smock but agree with the heckling of him will identify more with the hecklers than with Smock, resulting in Smock losing credibility with them. Smock’s use of monological ridicule backfires, that is, creates the conditions for and results in a sort of dialogical ridicule. This is not to suggest that in this case transformation happens—it certainly is unlikely to for Smock, though it may occur for some student disputants. But it is important to point out that students unify, coalesce, and form a cohesive group, however temporarily, against a common target. Thus, the only appropriate response, based on the actions of most students who attend Smock’s talks, is to meet ridicule with ridicule, to heckle the already ridiculous. As an interviewed student put it, “‘People heckle him because he’s so totally illogical. He defies logic. I think it’s like saying, ‘Come on, attack me’” (137). In the process, students are aligning themselves against the preacher. This is not to suggest that a situation where monological ridicule meets monological ridicule will automatically result in a dialogical moment. But, rather, that in such situations dialogical exchange can occur.

As the discussion above reveals, most academic articles on ridicule are primarily concerned only with its effects. Moreover, the trend is to treat ridicule simply as a mechanism of power, a power to effect people, without speculating how or why, theorizing what ridicule is and how it achieves it sundry effects. Further, as the next chapter will detail, those involved in the great ridicule debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognized that ridicule has both positive and
negative uses—its positive effects occur when it is playfully shared among like-
individuals, a prime example being what Shaftesbury calls among members of “the
club,” whereas it becomes most negative, has the ability to do the most damage,
according to the privileged men writing of it then, when handled by the unlearned
masses. Though the clear privileged class and patriarchal biases infecting earlier
pontifications on ridicule seem to have dissipated in recent examinations, most
contemporary studies of ridicule, as the above demonstrates, attend to ridicule
mostly as a negative, as a means of affecting people negatively, whether as a
corrective, as invective, or as bullying. Few directly take up its positive effects—
namely, its ability to create group cohesion and, on occasion, contribute to
individual as well as social transformations. Of all the recent academic studies on
ridicule, the only article to offer something like a theory of ridicule is David E
Cowan’s 2005 online publication “Episode 712: South Park, Ridicule and
Constructions of Religious Rivalry.” Cowan also stresses ridicule’s ability both to
unite and to divide.

Examining an episode of South Park in which a family of Later-Day Saints
relocates to the town of South Park and is ridiculed by its denizens, Cowan explores
how ridicule achieves its effects. In Episode 712, a specific family of Latter-Day
Saints and Mormonism in general are ridiculed—for believing the presumably
untenable. Cowan suggests that “ridicule is always self-disclosive, revealing at least
as much about the [ridiculer] as it does about the [ridiculed]”—that is, a given act of
ridicule reveals something about a ridiculer’s beliefs according to what a ridiculer
finds ridiculous. Ridicule of religion, thus, not only reveals a ridiculer’s take on a
religion but also functions to create cohesion among those who are members of that
religion as well as potentially among those who for various reasons oppose or do
not subscribe to that particular sect. As Cowan concludes, ridicule and other
contests of religious beliefs are “the bedrock of religious faith and practice,” are
challenges against which group cohesion is formed and maintained. Ridicule of
religion can cut many ways: it can unite those who agree with the ridicule; it can
unite those who are ridiculed for a certain belief; it can dissuade some from holding
a particular belief; and it can result in some occupying another space altogether,
remaining disinterested or aloof from the fray.

As Cowan points out, ridicule is so common nowadays that it often goes
unrecognized: ridicule “is such a prevalent commentarial form that we often miss its
significance as a mechanism of labeling” and for “reinforcement of cultural
hierarchies.” Just as Brendtro recognizes about a specific type of ridicule, bullying,
so too does Cowan concerning ridicule in general—its effects vary, affecting
ridiculers, the ridiculed, and the audience of an act of ridicule differently:

making particular groups or individuals appear ridiculous serves two
mutually reinforcing purposes: (1) it marginalizes the target group
and reduces its status both in the eyes of those doing the ridiculing
and (presumably) their intended audience, and (2) it amplifies the
place of the group or individual doing the ridiculing and increases its
status. That is, ridicule renders the target inferior, while
simultaneously invoking the superiority of the one doing the ridiculing. (Cowan)

I would temper Cowan’s final claim here, however: ridiculing itself does not necessarily render “the target inferior” any more than it makes the ridiculer superior. These are matters of intent, not of actuality, which are always dependent upon what various persons believe and value.

Cowan suggests that ridicule as a mechanism requires six components to do its work, the first few of which are obvious. A “ridicule event” can only be “meaningful” if: 1) a person or group ridicules; 2) a person or group is “targeted” with ridicule; 3) an audience is exposed to the ridiculing—whether as ridiculed or as witnesses to ridicule; 4) “some kind of preexisting relationship between the aggressor and the target” exists; 5) “some manner of shared understanding within the aggressor community”—that is, “audience”—“about why this particular ridicule event is to be regarded as humorous”; and 6) it is understood that ridicule is always a “temporary phenomenon,” one that “requires ongoing reinforcement to maintain its social and cultural effectiveness.” By “some manner of shared understanding,” Cowan means context. A person must have knowledge of what is being ridiculed and of how the ridicule is to mean if it is to achieve its intended effect. As Cowan puts it regarding the ridicule of Latter-Day Saints in Episode 712 of South Park,

ridicule is not a function of derision alone, but of the social relationships that make derision meaningful. Would a person with no background knowledge of Latter-Day Saints’ history and beliefs have
found the episode “absolutely hilarious”? Or would she have focused more on the hostile and petty reactions of the narrow-minded South Park regulars to newcomers in their midst? Would she have pointed out the similarly fanciful—and often contested—origins of culturally dominant religious traditions, and the charges of manipulation to which they are open? (Cowan)

In Cowan’s rendering of ridicule, the “social relationships” among those involved in a “ridicule event” are significant. Without some sort of pre-existing understanding of the context for an act of ridicule, of the various nuances a given act of ridicule can evoke, then a person or audience will not be able to follow the gist of a “ridicule event”—it will fail to achieve its purpose, perhaps backfiring, making the ridiculer seem ridiculous. These “social relationships” essentially amount to a culture’s social norms or codes, its prevailing, dominant ideologies, as I will further detail below. Hence, again, Cowan’s suggestion that “ridicule is always self-disclosive, revealing” as much about the ridiculer as it does about the ridiculed and the audience for a “ridicule event.” What one ridicules reveals something about a ridiculer’s beliefs, values, the ideologies that the ridiculer subscribes to. What one allows one’s self to be ridiculed by or about reveals something about the target’s beliefs, values, the ideologies that the ridiculed subscribes to. And whether an audience laughs or groans, cries or yells in anger reveals something as well about what members of that audience believe, value, etc.
Moreover, Cowan examines ridicule’s effect of “stabilization,” by which he means its ability to create group cohesion: “When a group of people who share affinities that make a specific act of ridicule meaningful point and laugh together at what they regard as the unfortunate circumstances of another,” Cowan observes, “this shared understanding stabilizes identity within the aggressor group,” just as occurred among students who were ridiculed by Brother Smock.\textsuperscript{18} That is, the ideology hailed by a “ridicule event” serves to stabilize the identities of those who find an act of ridicule appropriate: they agree with it, understand and subscribe to the argument contained in the ridicule, which is ultimately an act of “hierarchization,” of expressing that some people or some things are—according to some ideological tenet—correct, proper, superior, while some are incorrect, improper, inferior. Whereas Janes and Olson’s study “Jeer Pressure” demonstrates how an act of ridicule can cause some to repel that which is ridiculed, Cowan reveals that an act of ridicule can also serve as a rallying point to attract and unite people. As Cowan puts it, ridicule is both “a mechanism of social labeling” and “a method of social commentary and control.” But, I will stress, it can only do either if those involved in the “ridicule event” have some awareness of the ideology being hailed by and from an act of ridicule. For example, what are called “blonde jokes” would be nonsensical if sexism, if gendered ideologies claiming one gender is superior to another, did not exist. Those who laugh at jokes of this type are, in effect, united in the maintenance of power against those who are ridiculed, whereas those who reject the “joke” are, likewise, united against that power and such (ab)uses of power.
Billig’s treatment of ridicule in his 2005 book *Laughter and Ridicule: Toward a Social Critique of Humour* is the most extensive examination of ridicule presently available. Billig offers much of use to this study, despite its limitations. Billig’s focus is primarily on negative aspects of ridicule. As he puts it, ridicule is “the great neglected negative in the psychological theories of ideological positivism” (5). The main import of ridicule, according to Billig, is its function as a disciplinarian, as a corrective: “ridicule plays a central, but often overlooked, disciplinary role in social life” (5). As a result, he rejects, or discounts, positivist constructions of ridicule. Drawing from Herbert M. Lefcourt’s 2001 book *Humour: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*, Billig is not concerned, as Lefcourt is, with “positive” humor that “encourages group solidarity” (Lefcourt 72). Rather, Billig’s interest is in “negative or aggressive humour” that “separates, divides and excludes” (qtd. in Billig 22). According to Billig, an emphasis on “positive” humor results in the construction that “ridicule and mockery, even if they provoke laughter, cannot be genuinely funny” (22). Billig intends to recuperate ridicule’s negative effects, which the positivists, he insists, have not fully appreciated, as he expresses here: to the positivists, “Ridicule cannot bring positive benefits because it is not proper humour, however much enjoyment ridicule brings to those who practise [sic] it” (23). One effect of this stress on “positive” humor over “negative” humor is that the latter has not been adequately studied: “Although hostility and aggression have been major topics of interest in psychology, aggressive or hostile humour has not been investigated extensively” (64). Billig contributes to that investigation.
Billig’s book is not concerned with specific uses of ridicule in contemporary society. He does not analyze uses of ridicule. As he points out, “there is no complete theory of ridicule that can be pulled off the shelf, dusted down and then applied to the relevant phenomena” (175). Rather, he works out a theory of ridicule specifically as a type of negative humor that is at base a disciplinary mechanism: “Humour has become a routine means of accomplishing discipline” to maintain hierarchical organizations (46). To do so, he draws extensively from an under-appreciated theory of humor—Henri Bergson’s 1911 book Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. To Bergson and Billig, ridicule, and by extension laughter, is ultimately a social gesture, the function of which is to “correct men’s manners” (Bergson 16). Ridicule achieves this aim, both Bergson and Billig emphasize, by creating conditions in which will arise embarrassment, humiliation, and/or shame. These are necessary components of social life, Billig insists, because “the social practice of ridicule is necessary for the maintenance of social life” (200): “ridicule provides a key force in maintaining social order” (199). For Billig, ridicule serves to maintain social order by calling attention to behaviors that do not meet some social, ideological norms to evoke shame and embarrassment in the object ridiculed; shame and embarrassment must be learned, and it is precisely the function of ridicule, Billig is sure, to teach these two emotions (218). Fear of shame and embarrassment, in turn, results in people behaving appropriately: “Becoming a socialized member of society means more than learning how to behave in public. It involves learning how to laugh at those who behave inappropriately, for polite
adults must be able to discipline the socially deviant with momentary heartless mockery" (230). Put another way, “ridicule fulfills a key social role in maintaining morality, taste and good manners” (78). Or, as Sydney Smith had stressed at the beginning of the nineteenth century: “in polished society, the dread of being ridiculous models every word and gesture into propriety” (qtd. in Billig 139). In this configuration of ideas, the evoking of shame and embarrassment in the service of the maintenance of social order is the prime goal of ridicule. For Billig, then, ridicule is primarily a corrective—which, according to my scheme, ridicule of the sort Billig is concerned with functions mainly only monologically.

According to Billig, Bergson’s book *Laughter* “represents the first real social theory of laughter” (111). While there are several competing theories of humor—namely, superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory (theories which I will examine at length in Chapter 4)—Billig (and Bergson) are not interested in these: as Billig explains, “Superiority, incongruity, and relief theories are essentially individualist rather than social theories, for they sought to discover what stimuli or feelings induce individuals to laugh” (195). Neither Billig nor Bergson is concerned with how or why laughter arises. The concern is with the social functions of laughter and, specifically, the laughter that ridicule evokes. For laughter is rhetorical (Billig 199) and, as I will argue in the next chapter, contains an argument that serves a social function, with which Billig agrees: “Laughter has a rhetorical character, for it is typically used to communicate meaning to others, rather than being a reflex reaction following a particular inner state” (189). Bergson stresses that ridicule’s
laughter is a disciplinary mechanism. But ridicule itself cannot achieve any effect whatsoever, in Bergson’s formation, without ensuing laughter: laughter is a “method of discipline or ‘breaking in,’” as laughter is “first and foremost a means of correction” (Bergson 69, 95). Here, ridicule is merely a vehicle to evoke laughter, for to Bergson it is laughter (especially as a result of ridicule) that has more social utility between the two: “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed” (70); and “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (96). To avoid being laughed at, to avoid feeling shame, humiliation, and embarrassment as a result of being laughed at, people self-‘correct’ their behaviors: “laughter, by checking the outer manifestations of certain failings, thus causes the person laughed at to correct these failings and thereby improve himself inwardly” (97). The laughter Bergson entertains punishes, disciplines, corrects:

Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging.’
In this construction, ridicule is secondary, a mere vehicle for moving laughter, while laughter becomes the prime mechanism for evoking shame to coerce conformity.

Even so, laughter itself is not and cannot be an active agent of change here. What may result in change, according to Billig, is fear of the feelings of shame or embarrassment experienced from being laughed at. But note change here is completely conservative—it is a changing of ways that are laughed at for not conforming to a social norm or code: “the prospect of ridicule and embarrassment protects the codes of daily behaviour, ensuring much routine conformity with social order” (Billig 202). Summarizing Bergson, Billig contends that “laughter has its primary function in discouraging infractions of [...] codes and customs” and “functions conservatively to discourage the sort of social innovation that inevitably breaks rules” (132). But since social codes, norms, and rules must be learnt, ridicule and laughter can teach them: “ridicule is both a means of disciplinary teaching and the lesson of that teaching” (177). Parents use “the laughter of ridicule to exert control and to impose the codes of social living” on children (199). Ridiculing and consequently laughing at some behavior is to be educational, a lesson, implying a way to be or act to avoid being laughed at as well as, conversely, a way to be or act to gain praise by conforming to the expectations of a social code or norm. Again, “Laughter has a rhetorical character, for it is typically used to communicate meaning to others” (Billig 189).

Billig’s theory of ridicule, informed by Bergson’s social theory of laughter, is of that type of ridicule that I call monological ridicule, ridicule that is issued from
power or privilege to chastise, correct, and call for conformity. Or, “it is the business of laughter,” in Bergson’s words, “to repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to covert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with” (88). Here, laughter is to discipline, to correct. Laughter can also be reformatory, in Bergson’s take, but only insofar as it results in a subject reforming behavior to comply with some social norm. Useful as Billig’s theory of ridicule is, it does not allow space for what I call dialogical ridicule, ridicule that begets a response, creates conditions for discourse, perhaps even negotiation, and ultimately contributes to some sort of individual or social transformation. Monological ridicule generally intends to maintain conformity with extant social codes and norms. Dialogical ridicule often results in critiques of and challenges to those codes and norms.

From this review of recent studies of ridicule, a few conclusions can be drawn. First, it is evident that ridicule has sundry effects, from rhetorical to psychological and emotional, and is often employed as—or at least among academics has been most studied as—a corrective. Additionally, as these studies reveal, ridicule will have different effects depending upon its relation to those whom use or are exposed to it—whether ridiculer, ridiculed, or one or another member of an audience. For that matter, ridicule can have inhibiting effects even on those not directly hailed by but exposed to an act of ridicule—whether captured audience or random passer-by—often resulting in such persons being unwilling to engage in that which is ridiculed. In relation to youth especially, ridicule as bullying can have
lasting, potentially damaging psychological effects. Not just the bullied but also bullies are affected by the use of ridicule: ridicule issued as an expression of power or in the maintenance of power can result in inflating the ridiculer’s sense of self-worth. As these studies imply, ridicule most commonly appears in contexts fraught with tension and anxiety, tends to increase during crisis, and is always marked by, becomes an expression of, inequity. In contexts infused by expressions of crisis, ridicule can serve as a coping device, as a means of expressing indirectly with the intent to avoid potential negative consequences. Finally, in relation to the formation of groups, ridicule can both unite and divide, as well as function to create additional, disassociated or disinterested, autonomous groups, groups who, though not directly hailed by a given act of ridicule, do not identify with either the group who aligns itself with an act of ridicule or the group aligned against an act of ridicule.

As stressed throughout this study, ridicule is a slippery trope. Indeed, ridicule may be the slipperiest of tropes since its rhetorical situation is difficult to control. An act of ridicule may not achieve its intent or may be misinterpreted—it may not be understood, may be misunderstood, or may not even be recognized as ridicule but as spite, invective, insult, or something else. However indeterminate a given issuance of ridicule and its effects may be, what it does is clear: it exerts an interpretation that is an argument for change.

**Toward a Theory of Ridicule**

As intimated above, ridicule does its cultural work by appealing to some ideology to call attention to a subject's relationship to that ideology. Slippery as it
may be, how ridicule works and what it aims to do can be outlined. To elaborate a
theory of ridicule, this section will call upon a number of scholars and cultural
critics, including, among others, Louis Althusser, Michele Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu,
and Mikhail Bakhtin. As a mechanism intended to effect change, ridicule exerts an
interpretation and, in doing so, reveals how a ridiculer interprets a subject’s
relationship to a norm. The interpretation expressed as ridicule is an argument.
Coercive or subtle, as invective or as humor, it’s an argument for change. Moreover,
as a tool to effect change, ridicule is available to all people who would make use of it.
It exempts nothing—no person, idea, or object is immune from it. Though it is
equally free for all to use, not all may use it equally. Though a dominant power or
force may ridicule a subordinate, subordinate ridicule of power may have
consequences. But that is the nature of ridicule: it wants consequences, results—
sometimes demanding them, sometimes inviting them through play, a tease,
clowning, or the like.

Whether an act of ridicule becomes or functions as monological or dialogical,
terms I will expound upon later in this discussion, any act of ridicule must first
evoke ideology. Indeed, it may be said that without ideology ridicule could not exist,
would not be sensical, since for an act of ridicule to be fathomable, to achieve any
effect, there must be some shared knowledge about a social norm and, relatedly,
about ways a subject relates to a social norm. By “ideology,” I mean that as defined
As a subtitle in the essay succinctly puts it, “Ideology Interpellates Individuals as
Subjects” (244), which is expanded thusly: “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (244), and “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (245). That is, subjects exist as a function or emanation of ideology, are defined by and in ideology. In a significant passage, Althusser elaborates on the processes that create subjects from individuals:

ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing, ‘Hey, you there!’ (245).

When an individual so hailed “recognize[s] that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him [or her]” (245-46), that individual becomes transformed into a subject, a subject constituted by the recognition of being hailed, the hail itself casting the shadow of ideology over and thus marking the individual-as-subject.

Ideology’s hailing is key for ridicule to work. In a sense, a hailing that ridicules is excessive, is more than just the hail of ideology. It’s Althusser’s “Hey, you there!,” plus excess. In some contexts and depending on how the “Hey, you there!” is intonated or heard, the mere phrase may serve to ridicule or be experienced as ridicule—e.g., calling out a subject whose finger is knuckle-deep in his nostril. The
plumbing of a nostril in itself is a natural act, the simplest, most effective way to keep that necessary passage open. While to pick it privately is not likely to result in shame, embarrassment, or social ostracism, to pick it publically may since it has become a social taboo, a compromise of propriety, to do so. The hail needn’t be excessive, need not point out the placement of the finger. The mere hail informs the subject that the finger in the nostril has been noted, gazed upon, which is likely to cause the subject embarrassment for transgressing this social norm—provided, that is, the subject is cognizant of the social norm (children, imbeciles, and foreigners often are not, in which case ridicule, as Billig observes, can be an instrument for teaching that norm). For that matter, the subject’s digit need not even penetrate the nostril—the mere perception that it may have can result in embarrassment and social ostracism. But more often, the excess of the hail is signaled by appended words. Consider the following examples of hailing to excess: “Hey, you there—you’re picking your nose”; “Hey, you there—you throw like a girl”; “Hey, you there—nice shoes, for a horse!”; “Hey, you there, you are ______” (for the blank of the latter example to ridicule it may be filled in with any non-normative ideological term). When a subject is so hailed, that subject becomes shrouded in ideology, becomes subjected to whatever it is that a given ideology prescribes as “right” or “wrong,” as “correct” or “incorrect.”

The hail itself, simple as it may be, is complex, evoking multiple layers of ideological meaning depending on context. In Althusser’s words, “ideology is centred,” meaning that ideology “subjects the subjects to the Subject” that is ideology
As subjects of the ideological Subject, subjects are to “behave accordingly,” act as that ideology insists. So hailed, the subject “participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which [she or] he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (243). These “certain regular practices” defined by a given ideology are those which ridicule hails and to which the hailed subject is to conform.

Without some sort of hailing—verbal utterance, physical gesture, or the like—ridicule would not exist. That is, ridicule is expressed through and by hailing. It hails its subject as delinquent, as having deviated from some norm. The aim of such a hailing is generally to effect conformity. In this sense, ridicule is a discipline, in multiple senses of the word. As shown in the previous section, one function of ridicule, as some contend of laughter, is to discipline—in the most generic sense of the term—to correct, to punish. But ridicule also disciplines in another way, as a mechanism that shapes thought and behavior toward particular ends. In this sense, “discipline” works as Michele Foucault defines it in his 1975 volume *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. According to Foucault, disciplines are tactics to effect efficient “control and use of men” (141), “techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities” (218), and “methods of training that enable individuals to become integrated into” the “general demands” of an ordered social body (222). Disciplines—means of affecting compliancy—function as “the corrective technologies of the individual” (235). A “power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied” (220), the disciplines constitute a “calculated technology of
subjection” (221). Put succinctly, “the disciplines provide, at the base, a guarantee of
the submission of forces and bodies” (222). Ridicule is a tool the disciplines use to
effect compliancy.21

Disciplines mark bodies, rank them. Disciplines achieve effects upon the body
through attention to distribution, activity, geneses, and the accumulation of force
(Foucault 141-69). To do so, distribution attends primarily to three areas—space,
place, and rank—each of which disciplines call forth and organize to control and
regulate bodies. The space and place a body is to occupy, its assigned place, signifies
its rank: “Discipline is the art of rank, a technique for the transformation of
arrangements” (146).22 Rank is paramount here. All ideologies operate as ranking
mechanisms, as tactics that rank bodies to determine their “worth” or “value,” to
ascertain whether they have conformed as some presumed rank, authorized by
ideology, dictates that they should have, or whether they have transgressed a rank
as presumed by a given ideology. Ridicule ranks by calling attention to a body that,
according to an ideological formation, is perceived not to be in its “proper” space,
place, and rank.23

Ridicule ranks bodies not just for the sake of ranking them but to achieve
compliancy. As such, ridicule is critical of individual bodies, of difference. In the
service of power, ridicule calls out difference to squelch it. What ridicule wants is a
mass-body, one bent on achieving its master-plan of efficiency.24 Put another way,
the body is maximized when distributed among and organized with other like
bodies. Hence, disciplines endeavor to “construct a machine whose effect will be
maximized by the concerted articulation of the elementary parts of which it is composed”—that is, “[t]he body is constituted as a part of a multi-segmentary machine” (164). Single bodies are to congeal in a homogenous mass. Such a mechanized mass-body is arranged and manufactured through the disciplines’ control of space, place, time, and activity, all of which are determined through rank. The space and place an individual body occupies within the mass-body reveals its rank, whether as one to command or to be commanded, to correct or to be corrected. Ridicule is thus one of various tools the disciplines use to achieve the goal of compliance with the master-plan of efficiency.

A main effect of the ubiquity of the disciplines is that the disciplines norm individuals and communities to disciplines’ norms. Not a part of law but a sort of “counter-law” (222), Foucault suggests, “it is the regular extension, the infinitely minute web of panoptic techniques” that “generalizes the power to punish” (224), that allows others than repressive state apparati such as police—neighbors, for example, and neighborhood watch groups—to presume the right to punish. To Foucault, this norming process is significant: “perhaps the most important effect of the carceral system and of its extension well beyond legal imprisonment [into “the entire social body” (298)] is that it succeeds in making the power to punish natural and legitimate, in lowering at least the threshold of tolerance to penalty” (301). Thus the act of punishing—and, as both Bergson and Billig imply, the fear of punishment—creates what Foucault calls “[t]he power of the Norm” (184). In a circular process, the Norm becomes the yard-stick with which some measure others
to discern compliance with the Norm. The Norm through use thus comes to normalize itself. And just in case some individuals are unable to grasp a given Norm, ridicule as a tool of the disciplines calls attention to ways a subject may have transgressed a Norm to ensure if not enforce its compliancy.

The carceral system's influence on the social system was affected through historical transformations in punishment, in the treatment of the body, and in the legal system itself. Following these developments, the fear of potential punishment, not corporeal punishment itself, became a new means of affecting social control and regulation. The aim of this power to punish is not to punish but to control and regulate subjects so that they need not be punished. The legal system developed to support this aim: the judgment of judges is no more “activated by a desire to punish” but is “intended to correct, reclaim, ‘cure’” (10)—that is, reform behavior. In this new reformation economy, “One no longer touched the body, or at least as little as possible, and then only to reach something other than the body itself” (11): the psychology of subjects. Foucault’s phrase “the political technology of the body” does not signify knowledge of the science of the body’s functions but refers to ways that a body, a subject, may be controlled; to strategies and mechanisms; to “dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings” for effecting domination of bodies (26). Hence, the technology “produces” that which it can attach to, the soul (or “psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness,” or whatever else it may be called): the soul is “the element in which are articulated the effects of” power (29). As a tool of the disciplines, ridicule likewise does not mark a body but rather endeavors to
communicate to that which inhabits a body. Ridicule communicates to the conscience.

One of the more recently developed disciplinary techniques—and one of the most profound in terms of its reach into and hold on the social body—is that of the gaze. The social utility of the gaze, a means of surveillance, as it permeated and permeates a social body is to effect mass control of bodies, in the present and in the future. The gaze’s “major effect,” in Foucault’s words, is “to induce [...] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). This power of displacing surveillance from the surveyor to the surveyed ensures conformity: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (202-03). The gaze does not touch the body per se: it touches upon the conscience conscious of being gazed upon.

As a disciplinary technique, the panoptic gaze has spread from the prison to the social body, its force pervading all public places and spaces.27 “[P]olyvalent in its applications,” the panoptic schema does not just function to “reform prisoners” but to insist on reformation of noncompliant behaviors on all people comprising a social body (205): “We are [...] in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism” (217). Under the
ubiquity of the self-surveying gaze, it has become a norm that the social body, without external supervision, norms itself:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he [or she] may find himself [or herself], subjects to it his [or her] body, his [or her] gestures, his [or her] behaviour, his [or her]aptitudes, his [or her] achievements.

The carceral network [...] has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power. (304)

The social body, that is, has become normed to policing and judging itself, through the gaze and by gazing upon itself. As such, the social body becomes complicit with the aims of the legal system to maintain order by policing itself, in theory protecting itself from itself: “The right to punish has been shifted from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defence [sic] of society” (90). The aim of this “right” is to “prevent repetition” of deviance (93). Punishment, then, is “an art of effects” that “take[s] into account not the past offense, but the future disorder” (93): “The penalty must have its most intense effects on those who have not committed the crime” (95). The “new art of punishing,” then, is meant to deter future offenders of the prevailing legal and social codes, “to control delinquency by a calculated economy of punishments” (103). A synecdoche, the gaze has the power to see through the present to control the potential future— the effect of observing a present transgression is to ward off
future transgressions. The gaze that ridicules, furthermore, may ward off future transgressions, as Janes and Olson’s 2000 study “Jeer Pressure,” described above, suggests: ridicule “can have inhibiting effects” on the observer’s future behavior (478).

As this discussion of *Discipline and Punish* suggests, ridicule is a tool of what Foucault calls the disciplines. Moreover, ridicule is imbricated in ideology and thus cannot do its work without implicating or hailing ideology. That is, ridicule is a hailing, a hailing that simultaneously evokes an ideology while calling attention to some alleged transgression of the ideology conjured. Just as according to Althusser ideology interpellates subjects and according to Foucault the disciplines make subjects, similarly with ridicule—while ridicule does not necessarily interpellate or make subjects, it does create in subjects an awareness of ideology, of being implicated in ideology, and potentially of having transgressed an ideological norm. Casting an ideological net over a subject, ridicule makes subjects conscious of ideology and (potentially) of (future) transgressions of ideology.

Moreover, ridicule is a form of what Foucault calls “generalized punishment” and “punishment without torture,” at least in relation to the body of a subject ridiculed. What ridicule punishes is the subject’s psychology—its soul, its consciousness. It does do by drawing attention to the subject’s body in space and place and to its rank—whether the subject is conceived as conforming to some ideological rendering of its body. Ridicule ranks, foments inequity, advocates for hierarchical inequalities, and as such is most often critical of difference. Both the
gaze and ridicule function as a “political technology of the body,” as mechanisms or tools for controlling the subjects inhabiting bodies. Ridicule draws attention to a subject through examination, particularly through the examining gaze. Indeed, a poignant gaze itself in some situations can adequately ridicule—e.g., that of a mother on a child with her hand in a forbidden cookie jar. More generally, an examining gaze is followed with and amplified by verbal utterances and other physical gestures to call out the subject, implicate it in ideology to rank and ridicule it. The ridiculed subject’s conscience becomes conscious of the examining gaze—it may either acquiesce, in which case it alters behavior to conform to the social norm evoked, or opt to reject it (or, in the examples of some children, imbeciles, and foreigners, an act of ridicule may serve to educate a subject about a social norm). What ridicule aims to evoke in the knowing subject is fear—fear of being called out as abnormal, in which case arise feelings of shame and embarrassment, as Bergson and Billig stress, a fear that may be sufficient to sway the subject to avoid future ideological transgressions. Even those witnessing others being ridiculed, as Janes and Olson’s study demonstrates, may be inhibited from engaging in that which is ridiculed.

Finally, following Foucault’s tracing of the penal system filtering into the social system, the social body itself has become normed and conditioned not just to punishment but more so to punishing itself as a means of protecting and defending itself from and for itself. The social body surveys itself as a means of creating conformity, a homogenous, docile social body, to achieve the master-plan of
efficiency. Individuals gaze upon both the self and others to demand conformity with social norms. With no verbal accompaniment whatsoever, without even an additional physical gesture, the gaze itself may threaten ridicule. In this context, used in this way, ridicule calls out difference, demands sameness. The gaze itself can ridicule.

The above sketch has outlined what ridicule does and how it acts upon subjects to achieve its main effect of conformity to or compliance with social norms. But as I have emphasized throughout this study of ridicule, ridicule does not just or always result in conformity, even though most of the academic studies reviewed above only notice that aspect of ridicule. Ridicule can also result in group unity and disunity. Ridicule can also function to create discourse, even individual and cultural transformations. Ridicule wants change.

As a means of achieving change, ridicule is thus rhetorical. Of rhetoric's tripartite functions, Aristotle delineates in *Rhetoric*, ridicule is a species of the third sort—epideictic rhetoric—“ceremonial oratory of display,” proffering an assessment of “present” actions to discern which merit praise or blame: “The ceremonial oratory of display either praises or censures somebody” (13). In general, ridicule censures, and it censures by making a direct or indirect statement that calls attention to a perceived transgression of an ideology. To censure is to bring an action or behavior into relief, to emphasize to critique. The censuring argument or statement that is an act of ridicule means to effect change.
As a rhetorical trope, ridicule requires at a minimum an utterance and a concomitant analysis to result in an effect. A statement of ridicule can be covert, indirect, or even obscure. Sometimes an utterance may be painfully evident—“Hey, you there, you’re picking your nose”—whereas other times the statement may be less evident, formed with incongruity or word-play, inviting—or forcing—the recipient to discern its meaning—“Hey, you there—are you mining for gold?” Uttered at a person with a finger in a nostril, that statement would have a specific meaning in context of the discursive field of the science of bodily functions, whereas aimed at another person—say, one rearranging pantaloons and undergarments—that statement would raise another constellation of meanings. In both cases, however, the possible significations can be filtered, reduced to the lowest common element, which is the implication that some behavior is inappropriate according to some ideological formation hailed.

To unpack an ideology and its implications is to attend to the habitus implicated by an ideological formation. As Pierre Bourdieu elaborates in *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, habitus in the abstract are “generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices”—and as such, they are learnt—as well as “classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes” (8). Further, habitus “make distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar, and so forth” (8). In simple terms, habitus refers to practices, opinions, expressions, moral and ethical judgments, behaviors, manners,
attitudes, linguistic habits and practices, tastes, styles, etc. (8-9)—the stuff of ideology. And as such they are arbitrary and relative—“the same behavior or even the same good can appear distinguished to one person, pretentious to someone else, and cheap or showy to yet another” (8). Nonetheless, as symbolic forms of cultural capital, Bourdieu implies, habitus have power when practiced according to the rules and laws, tastes and styles, preferences and privileges of the dominant or ruling classes. As Richard Harker observes in his examination of Bourdieu’s writings on school systems, the basic function of education is to conserve and reproduce the culture of the dominant in youth, to assimilate them to adopt the habitus of the elite: “the habitus of the dominant group [is taught or reproduced] as the natural and only proper sort of habitus” (87). Ridicule is thus an educational tool, one that may instruct a subject proper ways to behave according to some social norm or habitus. It is to specific habitus that both ridicule and the ideology it evokes always refers.

Ridicule hails and appeals to ideology. As such, ridicule is a function, perhaps even a style or form, of discourse, as I will now demonstrate. In a most basic sense, discourse is active language, language in use—or, as Mikhail Bakhtin defines it, “language in its concrete living totality” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 181). Put another way, discourse is language that produces meaning. Meaning here is not the same as signification. Rather, “meaning” means, as Foucault describes in his 1969 study The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, all the potential “relations that make it possible” to understand a given statement’s import (11). Discourse then is not just a way of speaking—it is the constellation of meanings that
an utterance or communicative event evokes. More so, “discourse” should be
differentiated from “Discourse,” as defined by James P. Gee in his 1995 study
*Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. Proffering a theory for and
method of analyzing discourse, Gee defines “little d” “discourse” as “language-in-
use” (7). Following discourse is “big D” “Discourses,” which include discourse as
language-in-use in a “patchwork” of “ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing,
valuing, together with other people and with various sorts of characteristic objects,
symbols, tools, and technologies” (7). That is, while discourse refers to active
language, Discourse refers to various other forms of meaning-making that subjects
evoke and perform as means of situating identity (12), of “making visible and
recognizable who we are” (18), which, to Gee, is not a “we” in fact but rather a “we”
as a performance: a “we” who are “‘carriers’” of “the Discourses we represent and
enact” (18). By uttering or ‘carrying’ a particular discourse or discourses as well as
by “acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the
‘appropriate way’ with the ‘appropriate’ props at the ‘appropriate’ times in the
‘appropriate’ places” (17), subjects perform “‘recognition work’”—“People engage in
such work when they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who
they are and what they are doing” (20). As this chapter has noted and later parts of
this study will stress, an act of ridicule reveals more about a ridiculer—it performs
the “‘recognition work’” of making evident the ridiculer’s values, beliefs, and so
forth—than it does about that which the ridiculer ridicules. A statement or act of
ridicule as monological or as dialogical, moreover, reveals something of a ridiculer’s
presumed relation to power—whether and what a ridiculer presumes the right to ridicule.

Monological discourse, as Bakhtin describes it in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, is ossified language, language that is a “direct authorial discourse,” language composed of “unidirectional words,” and language functioning as a “a discourse-address” (188, 199, 236): it is “[d]irect, unmediated discourse directed exclusively toward its referential object, as an expression of the speaker’s ultimate semantic authority” (199). For example, in the Introduction to their 1995 collection of essays entitled *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Manneheim identify the quintessential monological speech act as the monologue, stressing that “The speaker of a monologue expects no answer” (1-2). Ridicule that is monological, then, likewise “expects no answer” since it functions as a command: the issuer presumes the cultural authority, the privilege, the righteousness to command through ridicule a subject to change. This ridiculer does not want a response in the form of discourse, a conversation, negotiation, or the like: the response wanted is that for the ridiculer to conform to the directive issued, to obey. Bakhtin defines monological discourse thusly in “The Problem of Speech Genres”:

Language is regarded from the speaker’s standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively. The utterance is adequate to its object (i.e., the content of the uttered thought) and to the person who is
pronouncing the utterance. Language needs only a speaker—one speaker—and an object for his speech. (67)

Monological ridicule functions as a directive, often as a corrective, and may resort to invective to get its way. As a discursive practice, monological ridicule demands obedience. In contrast, dialogical discourse invites and wants response. It is language begging for language. Bakhtin characterizes dialogical discourse as “[d]iscourse with an orientation toward someone else’s discourse (double-voiced discourse)” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 199). Such discourse can take many forms, from parody to polemic. Of “double-voiced discourse,” Bakhtin writes, “Someone else’s words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced” (195).28 As Bakhtin’s example of the scholarly article as double-voiced discourse reveals (188), dialogical discourse is not always just double—“double-voiced”—but can be triple, quadruple, etc.: it is multi-voiced, polyphonic, evoking multiple layers of meaning.29 Tedlock and Manneheim unpack two of Bakhtin’s terms, “anecretic” and “syncretic,” demonstrating that whereas “anecretic dialogues” are “formally but not functionally dialogical”—that is, monological—“syncretic dialogues” are “functionally dialogical regardless of their form” as they “sustain multiple voices” (2). By hailing and thus evoking ideology, ridicule is always in reference to something outside of itself—ideology, a social norm: discourse—but when ridicule functions dialogically it then becomes syncretic, prefiguring possibility rather than conformity.
Though likely not welcomed by one who would issue monological discourse, dialogical discourse can trump monological discourse. As Bakhtin explains, "The weakening or destruction of a monological context occurs only when there is a coming together of two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object" since the two discourses “cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically, regardless of whether they confirm, mutually supplement, or (conversely) contradict one another, or find themselves in some other dialogic relationship (that of question and answer, for example)” (188, 189). Such discourses travel together, forming a “semantic bond” (189) along the way. They do not travel together like two parallel horses competing for control of the same chariot, however; dialogical discourse can subsume or appropriate and thereby lead monological discourse, pushing and pulling the latter in directions it would not go if not forced. While monological discourse demands obedience, dialogical discourse invites negotiation.

Dialogical discourse’s trumping of monological discourse has been examined at length by Renate Lachmann in the essay “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture.” For Lachmann, Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World is an exercise in literary criticism as a means of countering authoritarianism. Carnival in this configuration thus becomes the romanticized site at which authority is temporarily suspended to be at least ritually overturned, offering in its stead a new world that “undermines the prevailing institutions of power through its symbols and rites of
“laughter” (124). Carnival culture thereby is juxtaposed with “official culture” to reveal a conflict between two forces, the centrifugal and centripetal. It is precisely the latter that tends towards the univocalization and closure of a system, towards the monological, towards monopolizing the hegemonic space of the single truth. The centripetal force permeates the entire system of language and forces it towards unification and standardization; it purges literary language of all traces of dialect and substandard linguistic elements and allows only one idiom to exist. The centripetal force is countered by a centrifugal one aimed at promoting ambivalence and allowing openness and transgression. (Lachmann 116)

As this passage implies, monological discourse is “centripetal,” insisting on “unification and standardization,” conformity with a dominant paradigm. As a ‘counter’ force, dialogical discourse if not advocates then stimulates “ambivalence” as well as “openness and transgression.” Ambivalence, a characteristic of all ridicule that functions dialogically, is key here since ambivalence’s task is to function as a “mediator” between carnival and “official” cultures: against official culture’s monological demands for uniformity, the ambivalence of carnival’s laughter is “integrative” and “inclusive” (Lachmann 129). “In the carnival,” Lachmann contends, “dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter” that invite “change” (130). Carnival laughter is thus “generative” (131): “the dialogical,
which describes a dynamic confluence of meaning, is positive and reconciliatory” as it results in a “disharmonic chord: the hybrid and the syncretic cause the single, consolidated meaning to disperse” (Lachmann 144). As Bakhtin stresses in *Rabelias and His World*, what “prevails” at carnival is “renewal”: the function of carnival acts of “debasement, uncrowning, and destruction” and relatedly the proliferation of “[a]busive expressions” serve to transform or regenerate objects of derision (372). Unlike monological discourse, then, dialogical discourse prefigures processes of transformation (a term to be defined in Chapter 5).

A meeting of monological and dialogical discourses has been termed a dialogic moment. Drawing from Martin Buber’s early writings, Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson suggest that a “dialogic moment” occurs when dialogues come together, sometimes clashing, and can “result” in “often surprising and even epiphanous or sporadic insight” (*Moments of Meeting* 174). In their 1988 essay “Theorizing about Dialogic Moments: The Buber-Rogers Position and Postmodern Themes”—from which sprang their 2002 book *Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*—Cissna and Anderson characterize a dialogic moment as

the experience of inventive surprise shared by the dialogic partners as each turns toward the other and both mutually perceive the impact of each other’s turning. It is a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself. (186)
Applicable here is Aristotle’s definition of catharsis—to be discussed at length in the next chapter of this study—as a realization or epiphany that can result in transformation. An act of ridicule hails a subject, asks the ridiculed-subject to turn toward the utterer of ridicule, to suss out the ideological implications of the ridicule, and finally willfully to make some sort of decision. While the subject may either comply with or reject the hailing, the subject may also choose to respond, even ridicule the ridicule or ridiculer. In such a moment, the potential for some sort of change occurs, and not just the change desired or demanded by a directive that is monological ridicule. In such meetings or moments, transformation can happen—a surprising, epiphanic, or sporadic insight can occur. One dialogic moment can beget another. Dialogic discourse can result.

Ridicule’s means of precipitating transformation, of inviting participants to turn toward each other in a moment of focused awareness, is through the creation of cognitive dissonance. In his 1952 study of racism and the dehumanizing practices of colonization, *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon observes:

> Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore, and even deny anything that doesn’t fit in with the core belief. (42)
Here, Fanon is specifically implicating colonists who are unwilling to recognize the humanity of those they exploit. An issuance of dialogical ridicule that invites or asks a subject to reconsider some “core belief” is one means of creating “cognitive dissonance,” which can lead to or result in transformation. Such change can be effected through what psychologists Barbara Benedict Bunker and Jacqueline J. DeLisle outline as a tripartite process of “unfreezing, change, and refreezing” (137). Dialogic ridicule aims towards “unfreezing” core beliefs. According to Bunker and DeLisle, unfreezing “is a state of disequilibrium in a normally balanced state”: “human beings are motivated to change their cognitions and attitudes when they find themselves in a state of imbalance or dissonance in order to restore balance and an internal state of harmony” (137). Following unfreezing is change: people develop, learn, and try out “new” “attitudes,” “values,” and “behaviors” in an endeavor to restore equilibrium (137-38). Refreezing then occurs as people accept or internalize the alterations that result in the intended effect: “the new response becomes integrated into the person’s belief or value system, which locks the change into place” (138).

Monological ridicule does not want change of the sort that Bunker and DeLisle trace: it insists on, to appropriate and reconstitute Fanon’s term, cognitive compliance—affirmation of social norms. That is, it commands its subject(s) to conform, to remain frozen (in contrast to “unfreezing”) in accordance with the argument issued as ridicule. Dialogical ridicule, in contrast, invites its subject(s) to defreeze, to reconsider some notion or belief, be willing to change or, more to the
point, transform. Dialogical ridicule attempts to engender fluidity, openness, a willingness to try out some alternative ontological orientation. As such, dialogical ridicule is usually aimed at and a critique of established orders, taxonomies, orthodoxies, ideologies, and the like. Because it is often issued at power, dialogical ridicule is usually covert or indirect in order to avoid potential consequences that may result from challenging power. Although dialogical ridicule is generally subversive, its ultimate aim, like that of the idealized Bakhtinian carnival, is regeneration.

Ridicule is adaptable. It can be used either to affirm or to contest an ideological formation. While monological ridicule would seem to be the property of the powerful to use on those lacking power to maintain power, as King above examines, subordinates may also use monological ridicule to demand power to change, though not likely without consequence. Ridicule can be used to demand the powerful to comply, to demand conformity with non-dominant ideological formations—e.g., vegans ridicule omnivores, environmentalists ridicule the oil industry, feminists ridicule sexists. But power need not listen, let alone acknowledge or change in relation to, such ridicule. Indeed, in some contexts, to ridicule power can result in violence or incarceration. As a means of inviting change or transformation, dialogical ridicule is more likely to beget negotiation. As such, as Chapter 5 will demonstrate, dialogical ridicule has the potential to result in social, cultural, and political transformation.
In *Discipline and Punish*'s final line, Foucault notes that the book “serve[s] as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization” (308). A study of ridicule can become one of those “various studies” since one main function of ridicule is precisely its “power of normalization,” its power to discipline, punish, “correct.” At least, this is the goal of monological ridicule. In contrast, dialogical ridicule seeks to alter power, destabilize it, change it in some way or another. Used in some ways, dialogical ridicule may be said to be a power of abnormalization.

From this attempt to establish a theory of ridicule, a few conclusions can be drawn. As a verbal, bodily, or other gesture, ridicule evokes and appeals to—hails and hails from—ideology to call attention to and proffers an interpretation about a subject’s relationship to that ideology, the intention being to assert that its subject change some aspect of its relation to or performance of ideology—often, but not always, to comply with it. In doing so, ridicule ranks subjects—as normal or abnormal or the like. As a tool of the disciplines, ridicule effects homogeneity in service of the master-plan of efficiency and, as such, often attends to and is critical of difference. In this way, ridicule has become a power the social body has adopted to police itself, for which it employs the gaze (the latter of which touches not the body but the conscience). When functioning monologically, ridicule often demands compliancy with or obedience to some configuration of ideas, often those that benefit or are in the service of power. When functioning dialogically, ridicule often asks for or invites response and negotiation and sometimes begets transformation.
In the next chapter, I will further describe monological ridicule, noting its uses in various domains. Specifically, Chapter 4 will examine monological ridicule in the form of the joke, which requires a discussion of humor studies, of some types of humor, and of the inability of both humor studies and various humors to account for ridicule as a potentially positive mechanism. In humor studies, ridicule is often considered satire gone too far. Nonetheless, ridicule seems to be the present prevailing style of popular culture, particularly that of popular television and on the Internet (memes, for example, often ridicule). To this end, I will examine ridicule-as-joke in three sites, all of which are a part of popular culture, albeit in different time periods: 1) A segment of “The John Stewart Show” in which Stewart ridicules some politicians; 2) Aristophanes’ comedic-play *Women at the Thesmophoria*, which is replete with ridicule—ridicule which, despite occurring several centuries ago, is surprisingly contemporary given the subjects it ridicules; and 3) A series of contemporary television advertisements for an insurance corporation. These advertisements conclude with the slogan, “So easy, even a caveman can do it.” While to many this commercial campaign is funny, provides a good joke, for some it is anything but humorous. Therein lays the rub of “the joke”: what to one person may be a “good” joke is to another a “bad” or “failed” joke. To some, this advertising campaign is offensive and, as such, results in outrage, in response, protest—and, perhaps, even in dialogical moments. Monological ridicule does not always achieve the obedience it wants.
In Chapter 5, I will elaborate on dialogical ridicule, providing several examples of ways that issuances of ridicule have become dialogical, resulting in individual and, eventually, in cultural transformations. Dialogical ridicule often takes the form of linguistic tropes or language games such as puns, metaphors, irony, intentional-indirection, and double-voicings—what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the “poetry of signification” (51). Tricksters, Signifyin[g] Monkeys, and clowns are common types that deploy dialogical ridicule to challenge and undermine prevailing hierarchies. The aim of such ridicule is the creation of what Franz Fanon calls “cognitive dissonance” (42), which is a method of unsettling a subject’s core beliefs to alter them. That is, dialogical ridicule aims to create conditions that can allow for transformation. Beyond those of linguistic trickery mentioned above, two other methods it uses to try to effect transformation are the double-take of clowning and self-ridicule, both of which invite subjects to reconsider or revise core beliefs. Dialogical ridicule, then, is often subversive. A trenchant example in US history is that of the Cake Walk. Invented by slaves to ridicule the dancing style prevalent then among slave masters, the “joke” was misunderstood by those it was to ridicule. Instead, not realizing its intention to ridicule them, many whites found great humor in the phenomenon, in time joining in and appropriating the dance for themselves. The Cake Walk was the US’s first dance craze. Similarly, the vaudeville stage, to be discussed in Chapter 5, also allowed for dialogical ridicule, as these song-and-dance “comedy” shows, precursors to the modern “variety shows,” allowed Black and white entertainers to occupy a stage together to strive for a common, mutual
purpose—to entertain—as well as allowed some challenges to and subversions of then-dominant ideological formations—in front of mixed-race audiences for the first time in US history—eventually transforming entertainment culture into a far more inclusive entity than it was prior to the blackface minstrelsy show.

Chapter 6 will examine ridicule on the Internet, which can be either monological or dialogical. Ridicule is pervasive on the Internet, especially on social websites, where it often informs content and is exchanged among users in comment-sections. The Web has taken on some aspects of a Bakhtinian carnival since in cyber-space nearly anything can be subject to acts of “debasement, uncrowning, and destruction” and “[a]busive expressions,” without the potential consequences that might occur should such expressions be issued in public spaces. On the Web, that is, Foucault’s panoptic gaze is blinded by anonymity, and thus the usual codes of non-cyber spaces do not obtain. But while some features of Bakhtin’s notion of carnival are in full play on the web, the ultimate aim of the carnivalesque—regeneration or renewal—is not achieved as most users ridicule popular “celebrity” figures and each other rather than use the open-space that is the Web to challenge and potentially alter prevailing hierarchies. Yet, to ridicule a celebrity is a means of reducing that person’s power, though not necessarily that of the celebrity industrial complex that in the maintenance of its power will cycle in a substitute figure to replace any so dispossessed. One especially prevalent form of online monological ridicule is that known as cyberbullying. Like its counterpart in school settings, school bullying, cyberbullying is most often regarded as a species of
problematic behavior that can have deleterious effects on its targets and, simultaneously, can result in an inflated sense of self-worth for she or he who would ridicule others online. Ridicule often appears in a popular Internet phenomena known as memes. Though memes as cultural artifacts pre-date the Internet, Internet memes especially traffic in ridicule. How a given meme is to mean, however, is always a matter of hermeneutics, especially memes that ridicule. Because of the canned nature of most memes, which tend to recycle corporate images, memes tend to affirm dominant conceptions, thereby substituting for thought and action. Chapter 6 will conclude by entertaining a common anxiety concerning the Internet—its presumed potential to result in a utopic or dystopic future. Examining a television commercial that ridicules its protagonists’ use of the Internet, this chapter will consider that anxiety in relation to Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism that “the medium is the message,” speculating on the effect of the proliferation of Internet ridicule on human consciousness.
Chapter 3: A History of Ridicule

Ridicule has long been a matter of debate. Because of its ability to exact change—whether individually, socially, culturally, or politically—many have expressed concern that only the right sorts of people should have the liberty to ridicule. Taken up by the wrong sorts, so goes this line of reasoning, then individuals and culture may be degraded. But who should possess this right to ridicule, and who not? As the historical record reveals, privileged, powerful men have argued circularly that only privileged, powerful men should be permitted to ridicule. Put another way, because ridicule can function to maintain or destabilize prevailing hierarchies, those who benefit from extant dominant hierarchies have endeavored to contain ridicule lest it be used against them to contest their privilege and weaken their power. Among the ancient Greeks, Aristotle primarily argued that ridicule, a mode of persuasion, should not be handled by the masses. Later, Latin concerns for decorum also came to bear on ridicule, which sought to regulate its uses even among the privileged. In the medieval period, when neoclassical proprieties were undermined by shifting epistemologies and gender politics, ridicule was used both to maintain and confront prevailing hierarchies. Following developments in print culture and an expanding reading public, by the eighteenth century ridicule was once again a matter of great debate, as Lord Shaftesbury and others worried that ridicule among the masses would upset polite culture. That is, it is precisely because ridicule is a mechanism for affecting change that its propriety has been debated for centuries.
Even though Aristotle’s treatment of ridicule has resonated throughout western history, the slipperiness and instability of ridicule is concomitant with and results from the various slippages within the Aristotelian system. Aristotle’s art of rhetoric, Jasper Neel observes, is “a subsidiary within the art of politics, which Aristotle names the ‘master art’” (14). Although rhetoric may be a tool for achieving various ends, any ends it achieves are within the bounds of an Aristotelian hierarchical system in which citizens are superior to non-citizens, masters possess slaves, men dominate women, soul is to rule body, and intellect is to rule emotions. These hierarchical arrangements are, for Aristotle, the natural order, as he intuits or “reasons” in a significant, lengthy passage in Book I of *Politics*:

> the soul rules the body with a despotical rule, whereas the intellect rules the appetites with a constitutional and royal rule. And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. (24)
Here Aristotle intuits and opines that a hierarchy is natural, that some few are by nature superior and the many others inferior. Aristotle continues the passage thusly, employing circular reasoning to justify his hierarchical hermeneutic, noting that some people—those he calls “the lower sort”—“are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master” (24).

While exactly how enslavement is advantageous to or “better for” those enslaved is highly contentious, this does not appear to be a concern to Aristotle. As Neel puts it, “To Aristotle, slavery and the concomitant vestiges of a hierarchical system simply are” (18). What is of concern to Aristotle, however, is “logical” consistency of binary relations, from humans through animals, the effect of which is to “naturalize” and thus maintain and justify a hierarchical relation of beings: “It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right” (Politics 24). That is, to Aristotle, hierarchical inequalities are a given, the natural order or the order of nature.

How does ridicule relate to or fit in this system? The simple answer: uneasily. Ridicule cannot be yoked to and remain the property of any one side of the binary relations spelled out in Politics, despite Aristotle’s attempts, in Rhetoric primarily, to reserve it for those he deems superior. Like air, ridicule is free, available to any and all humans to use provided they’ve the capacity (and are willing to accept possible retaliation as a result of ridiculing). More significant, ridicule, issued by intellect, affects emotion. And the emotion elicited, in turn, can affect intellect—ridicule has the potential, Aristotle notes in Rhetoric, to warp judgment. More than just warp
judgment, ridicule can move intellect, can result in intellect reflecting on an emotionally-charged rhetorical situation generated by an instantiation of ridicule, possibly reassessing ridiculer and ridiculed. Ridicule, that is, can upset Aristotle’s privileging of intellect over emotion. In which case, ridicule is to be feared: hence Aristotle’s attempts to reign in ridicule, reserve it for superiors only. Although Aristotle articulates some reservations about the public use and value of ridicule, he is clear about whom should and should not be permitted to use ridicule and for which purposes. The distinctions he draws, that is, are borne out of the system intuited in *Politics*. Ridicule as a means of persuasion, Aristotle stresses, should be reserved for superiors, men of his ilk, those who’ve the wherewithal—“well bred persons” with “good taste”—to use it appropriately. In the mouths of others ridicule can be dangerous.

The commonplace of the eighteenth-century debate concerning ridicule echoes Aristotle’s concern with alleged superior and inferior beings: only privileged men, the sort “of the club,” should be permitted to ridicule. And what are these men some twenty centuries apart to ridicule? If they ridicule to entertain, then they may use ridicule amongst themselves; if they ridicule to instruct, however, then they are to ridicule that which is deemed already ridiculous, “inferiors” in need of instruction if not reprimanding. Ridicule thus becomes a tool for the maintenance of difference—whether that be class or caste, race or gender difference. Ridicule thus presumes and is predicated upon hierarchical differences. Because ridicule can be deployed to destabilize extant hierarchies, the historical theorizing and discussions
of ridicule recommend that ridicule’s proper primary function is to maintain hierarchy—that is, be used by power to maintain power.

**Ridicule in Antiquity: Ancient Greece**

The most significant treatment of ridicule is Aristotle’s in three books—*Rhetoric*, *Poetics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. To be discussed in the next section, also important are Cicero’s various discussions on ridicule in *De Oratore* and Quintilian’s section in Book VI of *Institutes of Eloquence*, both of which, with some slight variation, closely follow Aristotle. In his writings on ridicule, Aristotle proffers a definition; categorizes ridicule as an element of ethos and as a persuasive act; outlines a means of assessing whether a given act of ridicule is lacking, appropriate, or excessive; opines that some forms should be banned; and suggests that ridicule is a means of affecting and regulating behavior. These categories are organized by and around a presumption embedded in Aristotle’s definition of ridicule. Aristotle intuits that some objects, human and otherwise, are inherently ridiculous and thus justifiably subject to ridicule. This presumption, which circulates throughout western history, arriving intact in the present, establishes a binary (and subsequent binaries) that informs his treatment of ridicule, a binary predicated on presumed notions of human difference.

To appreciate fully Aristotle’s conceptions of ridicule, the biases informing his thinking—such as those expressed in *Politics*—must be kept in mind. In the following section I will initially draw attention to a significant passage in *Poetics*, then turn to *Nicomachean Ethics*, next discuss *Rhetoric*, and lastly return to *Poetics*. 
To Aristotle, ridicule exists because the ridiculous calls for it. This notion—that some people or things are in themselves inherently ridiculous—has become tautological as it has been echoed throughout history and has survived to the present, as evidenced in the 1987 *OED*'s initial two of four definitions. In a brief discussion in *Poetics*, as translated by Leon Golden, Aristotle notes that comedy is an imitation of baser men. These are characterized not by every kind of vice but specifically by ‘the ridiculous,’ which is a subdivision of the category of ‘deformity.’ What we mean by ‘the ridiculous’ is some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects. The example that comes to mind is the comic mask, which is ugly and distorted but causes no pain. (9)

Here “‘the ridiculous’” is defined as inherent in a subject, as an appearance of “error or ugliness,” more or less relative evaluations dependent in meaning upon some sort of cultural norm or standard as well as on the perspective—informed by the factors Preston had outlined—of the subject declaring the object ridiculous. That is, according to Aristotle’s formulation, there exists the ridiculous—“naturally” deformed, flawed, or ugly subjects—and the non-ridiculous—whatever conforms to or fits the norm. To call or presume someone “ridiculous,” to ridicule someone, then, presumes knowledge and awareness of propriety and social norms. It also presumes the right to judge what is and is not ridiculous, what is and is not errored or ugly according to some social norm.
While this theorizing of ridicule and the ridiculous occurs in Aristotle’s treatment of comedy in *Poetics*, note that the biases that permeate *Politics* also appear in this text, albeit more covertly. Though Aristotle’s promised full treatment of comedy is lost (Heath 51n22), Golden’s structural analysis of *Poetics* suggests that Aristotle’s theory of comedy can be surmised from the extant examination of tragedy because “Aristotle had placed the genres of tragedy and comedy in polar opposition to each other in terms of the object represented by each of them” (286). What the two share is that both rely on imitation—tragedy, of superior beings; comedy, of inferior beings—and both appeal to “the lowest grade of audience”: tragedy relies on “vulgar performances” and “vulgarity” to be able “to communicate effectively to the low-grade members of the audience, who could not follow what is happening or respond to it without this kind of exaggerated acting,” whereas “weak audiences encourage the degenerate tendency of tragedy to turn away from the proper tragic pleasure to one more characteristic of comedy” (Heath lx-lxi). As quoted above, Aristotle contends that comedy “is an imitation of baser men,” of inferior beings—that is, of people who neither share nor appreciate Aristotle’s affinity for virtue and for virtuous living—and is thus suitable for what Heath calls “the lowest grade of audience”—or, base and inferior men and women. The binary here between a “low” and an implied opposite “high” audience is akin to what Neel argues Aristotle establishes, in *Rhetoric*, between dialectic and rhetoric. Not a “counterpart” but “subordinate” to dialectic, that is, pure reasoning suitable for communicating clearly with a *high* audience, rhetoric is reduced to a means of
suaision necessary for communicating to and swaying a low audience who “is incapable of the detail and rigor of dialectic” (Neel 46, 63). For an audience who cannot follow dialectic, resort to rhetoric. For the “vulgar” audience incapable of appreciating “the proper tragic pleasure,” give it comedy. For those unaffected by either, ridicule. When reasoning fails, ridicule as a means of persuasion and thus as a function of rhetoric can be resorted to as a way of communicating and persuading. Or, ridicule for the presumed always already ridiculous.

Some persons and things may be, as Aristotle is sure, inherently ridiculous; however, to label a person or thing as ridiculous nonetheless requires a person to judge the entity and to presume the right to label the entity so. Moreover, much more than just that presumed ridiculous is treated to ridicule. Ridicule knows no bounds. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle thus offers a system for assessing whether a given act of ridicule is lacking, appropriate, or excessive. In this book Aristotle examines the nature of happiness, the highest human good that virtuous people achieve, giving much attention to the phenomena called pleasure, which thus includes some discussion of ridicule since people are wont to ridicule. To Aristotle, humor is a necessary part of the human experience since, as he observes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “relaxation and amusement seem to be necessary in our life” (109), though neither are the aim or “end of human conduct” but rather means toward the achievement and fulfillment of happiness (267). However necessary some pleasures are, Aristotle differentiates among degrees of pleasure, observing that “some pleasures are necessary and some not [...] while excessive or insufficient
enjoyment of them is not necessary at all” (183). Aristotle cautions, “most people like fun and ridicule more than they should” and thus warns against excessive use of ridicule or ridicule that is excessive (108). He is also concerned about who should be allowed to ridicule.

In examining happiness and pleasure, Aristotle assays the virtues that lead to and the vices that draw away from them, treating each to a tripartite appraisal—the doctrine of the mean—to assess when a virtue is underused, used appropriately, or used in excess. For, Aristotle insists, it is a “fact” that “moral qualities” are “destroyed by deficiency and excess” (34). Hence, Aristotle would have us aim for the mean (40-49). Aristotle explains, “Those who go too far in being funny are regarded as buffoons and vulgar persons who exert themselves to be funny at all costs and who are more set upon raising a laugh than upon the decency of expression and consideration for their victim’s feelings. [...] But those who exercise their humour with good taste are called witty” (108). Here the subjective, relative “good taste,” a function of a social norm, becomes the yardstick by which to measure the appropriateness of a given act of ridicule. Aristotle then asks, “Should we [...] distinguish the man who uses ridicule rightly by his ability to use language that is not suitable for a well bred person, or by the fact that he does not annoy the person about whom he is speaking, but actually gives him pleasure?” (108-09). The appropriateness of an act of ridicule is to be ascertained by whether it is in “good taste,” whether it is expressed in language that is “suitable for a well bred person,” and whether it “annoy[s],” which it should not do, or “gives pleasure,” which is to be,
according to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the aim of ridicule. Implicit in this formulation is a caste or class bias, as well as a male bias, informing the assessment of the appropriateness of a given act of ridicule. As Cheryl Glenn observes, “the dominant ideology of most of the ancient world offered women no place in public discourse” and excluded “women from politics and power” (19), and as Neel asserts, “Slavery, sexism, and racism made perfect sense to Aristotle” (25). Thus, women, children, slaves, and non-citizens—Aristotle’s “baser” beings—could be subjected to ridicule without concern for propriety. Lacking full subjectivity according to the operative dominant ideology, such non-persons are liable to be ridiculed since ridicule would be considered an acceptable means of dealing with and referencing those already written out of the social norm.31 But among male citizens of “good taste” who are “well bred,” according to Aristotle’s formulation, then ridicule that annoys is excessive ridicule or ridicule to the excess.

But ridicule can do far worse than merely annoy: it can offend, cause pain, and result in defamation. Aristotle is concerned with excessive ridicule as the following syllogism expresses: “because ridicule is a sort of defamation, and some forms of defamation are forbidden by law, [then] presumably some kinds of ridicule should be forbidden, too” (109). According to an online source, *The 'Lectric Law Library*, defamation presently includes slander and libel and is “An act of communication that causes someone to be shamed, ridiculed, held in contempt, lowered in the estimation of the community, or to lose employment status or earnings or otherwise suffer a damaged reputation.” Defamation, then, is both a type
and a result of excessive ridicule, which Aristotle contends out to be “forbidden” or illegal. The sort of ridicule that Aristotle does not object to is that which is appropriate to the context—that used among equals, “well bred persons,” or that used to ridicule the presumed already ridiculous. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle draws out this notion further:

> The cultured and well bred person, then, will exhibit this disposition, acting as a law to himself. This is the sort of man who observes the mean, whether he is called witty or tactful. The buffoon cannot resist a joke, sparing neither himself nor anybody else provided that he can raise a laugh, and saying things that a man of taste would never dream of saying, and some that he would not listen to, either. (109)

Implicit here is that only buffoons—people lacking Aristotle’s sense of culture, tact, and taste—would use ridicule to defame others, whereas the good person would act “as a law to himself,” self-censuring and suppressing any ridicule that borders on defamation, instead using it only to entertain, to give pleasure—to the object of as well as to the audience for ridicule. Here Aristotle endorses a limited use of ridicule.

As it entertains or defames, ridicule persuades. In *Rhetoric* Aristotle examines ridicule primarily as a means of persuasion, particularly in a legal context. Moreover, while in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle endorses some limited uses of ridicule, in *Rhetoric* he tends only to treat its negative side. This may be because the many involved in a legal proceeding—judge, prosecutor, defendant, jury—are not equal socially and politically. Since ridicule involves “laugh[ing], mock[ing], or
"jeer[ing]" as a means of both "show[ing] contempt" to "inflict injuries" and "stir[ing]" people "to anger" (*Rhetoric* 62-63), Aristotle categorizes ridicule as an element of ethos. But since the function of ridicule is to evoke an emotional response, generally from an audience against the target of the ridicule, then ridicule does not remain neatly ensconced as an element of ethos, as Aristotle would have it, since it also can serve to appeal to pathos.

However it is categorized, ridicule is a means of persuasion since it acts upon the emotions of either or both the object of the ridicule (ethos) and those who witness or hear the ridiculing act (pathos). Persuasion in a legal context, according to Aristotle, functions in one of three ways: "(1) by working on the emotions of the judges themselves, (2) by giving them the right impression of the speakers’ character, or (3) by proving the truth of the statements made" (119). As an act of persuasion intended both to attach itself to ethos and to appeal to pathos, ridicule primarily operates as the first of the three functions listed above, though it certainly can be employed to create impressions on character as well as to challenge statements. The aim of appealing to emotions is to change the subject(s) from one state to another, to sway the subject(s) to alter emotion, opinion, or position regarding that which is ridiculed. Since "[t]he Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments" (60), ridicule can thus be a means of clouding reasoning. In a context of law, ridicule is thus dangerous to truth, for on the one hand "[i]t is not right to pervert the judge by moving him [or her] to anger or envy or pity—one might as well warp a carpenter’s rule before using it” (3)—while
on the other hand judges, juries, and assemblies of people often allow “themselves to be so much influenced by feelings of friendship or hatred or self-interest that they lose any clear vision of the truth and have their judgment obscured” (4). Thus, as a persuasive act, Aristotle suggests in *Rhetoric* that ridicule can be used to appeal to and arouse emotion sufficiently to cloud clear thinking. If in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle endorses some limited uses of ridicule among “well bred” peers, in *Rhetoric* he is concerned of the deleterious effects of ridicule, especially of its ability to obscure and warp judgment.

If ridicule can affect judgment, it can also affect behavior. Although ridicule’s effect on the subject of an audience for ridicule is the eliciting of emotion, the type of emotion varies based on the degree of ridicule and on the factors Preston has outlined, those concerning the subjectivities of the persons involved in an act of ridicule. In relation to the three types of speech Aristotle enumerates in *Rhetoric*, ridicule is also able to slip among categories as well, for it can be used in both forensic speaking—which “either attacks or defends”—and ceremonial oratory—which “either praises or censures” (13). Ridicule can be used to attack and thus provoke fear or anger, and it can be used to censure. Aristotle notes in *Rhetoric*, “The persons with whom we get angry are those who laugh, mock, or jeer at us” and also “those who speak ill of us, and show contempt for us” (63). Yet milder forms of ridicule, as noted above, can simply raise laughter, be pleasant or humorous for all involved. As a device that can elicit ire or humor, a range of emotions, ridicule is thus a means of affecting behavior. For if, as Aristotle claims, “[t]o praise a man is in
one respect akin to urging a course of action” (*Rhetoric* 35), then the converse is also valid concerning the potential semantically structural opposites of the act of praising—mocking or censuring, both of which can be effected through ridicule. To mock is to call attention to a certain type of behavior, a means of censuring. Thus, to mock or ridicule a person can also be “akin to urging a course of action”—that is, to act otherwise from that which is mocked. If to censure means to call attention to (and ultimately alter) behavior considered inappropriate, then ridicule can also serve that function. If the ridicule is of behavior considered bad or immoral, the aim would be to shame the ridiculed into compliance with virtuous behavior. If the ridicule is of behavior that is not considered bad or immoral but peculiar or idiosyncratic, then the aim of mocking that behavior to raise a laugh would also be to effect compliance with cultural norms or standards of behavior.

That ridicule can affect behavior is implicit in Aristotle’s treatment of comedy in *Poetics*. In his structural analysis of *Poetics*, Golden speculates that if Aristotelian tragedy means to evoke pity and fear, then Aristotelian comedy would intend to evoke an appropriate emotion structurally opposite to those. Since, as Golden points out, in *Rhetoric* Aristotle asserts that “opposed to ‘pity’ is what we call *nemesan*” (qtd. in Golden 287), a word which Golden translates as *indignation*, then comedy aims to raise an emotion that can “range from the savage indignation of Aristophanes to the muted admonishments of Chekhov for whatever is ridiculous and inappropriate in human behavior” (288). As Golden conceives of it, the aim of comedy according to Aristotle is to arouse an audience emotionally by appealing to
indignation. Indignation is appealed to by ridiculing representations of the ridiculous in human behavior and appearance. The result for the audience witnessing and experiencing such would be comedic catharsis, a kind of persuasion, as I will now demonstrate.

According to Aristotle, both tragedy and comedy work on the emotions to affect catharsis (288). Comedic catharsis, Martha Nussbaum contends, is a “clarification,” one that does not depend exclusively on the intellect but can be generated by emotion as well (390). Whereas in *Rhetoric* Aristotle insists ridicule is a form of persuasion that can trouble emotions sufficiently to cloud clear thinking, in *Poetics* ridicule becomes a means of experiencing catharsis, a clarification. That ridicule can result in both is not contradictory but a testament to the range and power of—and the difficulty of defining and classifying—ridicule. If ridicule in comedy is to arouse indignation in an audience, and if that indignation concerning human behavior is to result in catharsis or clarification, then what is to become clear to an audience is that some behaviors are to be avoided if one is to escape ridicule. That is, what is clarified is what *not* to be or *not* to do in order *not* to be laughed at or ridiculed. In this way, Aristotle’s comedic catharsis, enabled through acts of ridicule, becomes a means of persuading or enlightening an audience about what is and is not proper social behavior. Or, comedy’s catharsis is a means of affecting, controlling, and regulating behavior, a vehicle for “urging a course of action.”

**Neoclassical Ridicule: Ancient Rome**
If in ancient Greece satire and ridicule constituted a dominant form of entertainment as evidenced by the plays composed by Aristophanes, Euripides, Lucian, Menippus, and others and, according to Aristotle, was sometimes useful in arguing cases in court, in ancient Rome satire and ridicule were often far more harsh and vicious than that of the Greeks and was not employed merely to entertain or to fulfill legal needs. Romans not only produced plays and poems and other writings replete with ridicule but also issued political cartoons that ridiculed, etched ridiculing graffiti onto walls, and in public spectacles involving dismemberment, decapitation, and other forms of torturing the body turned ridicule into something like a public art form intended to maintain the power of the emperor of the moment. The placard purportedly nailed above the crucified body of Jesus Christ, identifying him as “King of the Jews,” for example, was intended to ridicule both him and his followers. Ridicule handled by Roman writers often intends to damage directly the persons it names and critiques. Whereas an ancient Greek such as Aristophanes may have lambasted Socrates in his play *The Clouds*, an act of ridicule that will be discussed later in this study, Aristophanes’ “Socrates” was merely a caricature. Socrates himself attended a performance of *The Clouds*; in his *Apology* Plato does not object to Aristophanes’ ridiculing of Socrates per se but to the potential “negative effect of the portrayal upon the popular perception of Socrates” (Dutta xxv). In contrast, when the Roman poet Catullus, in Poem 57, calls Caesar’s chief engineer Mamurra a “catamite” and asserts that the two together are “beautifully matched the perverse buggers,” he’s not mocking a caricature of either but directly ridiculing
both for behavior he perhaps finds reprehensible. In ancient Rome, as well as in other historical periods, ridicule often takes the form of invective, a concept to be examined in Chapter 4.

This section will examine ridicule in Rome in two ways: what two prominent philosophers wrote of it and how one Roman poet used it. First, it will review discussions of ridicule by Cicero and Quintilian. Cicero’s commentary in De Oratore largely derives from Aristotle, only he is less broad in approach, focusing on just two contexts for ridicule—legal and convivial. Although in Book VI of Institutes of Eloquence Quintilian also mostly follows Aristotle, he is far less sure than both Aristotle and Cicero of ridicule’s value. Second, this chapter will examine some select poems by the Roman poet Catullus, who provides a counterpoint as the ridicule of his poems would be considered excessive and thus inappropriate according to Cicero’s and Quintilian’s postulations on ridicule.

Although his treatment of ridicule in De Oratore is largely derivative, borrowing heavily from Aristotle, Cicero’s discussion differs is that he places it in the context of what he perceives as the duty of the orator, which in De Oratore is expressed primarily through the character Crassus. For Crassus, eloquence, the power of the ideal orator, is the device that not only accounts for the beginnings of but also maintains civilization, which becomes “the most important” role of eloquence in the history of humankind (1.34: 65): “what other force could have gathered the scattered members of the human race into one place, or could have led them away from a savage existence in the wilderness to this truly human, communal
way of life, or, once communities had been founded, could have established laws, judicial procedures, legal arrangements?” (I.33: 65). Or, as Crassus “‘summarize[s],’” “‘I assert that the leadership and wisdom of the perfect orator provide the chief basis, not only for his own dignity, but also for the safety of countless individuals and of the State at large’” (I.34: 65). If an orator is to resort to ridicule, that is, he had better be sure it is consistent with the duty of an orator—to maintain the civilized state and “‘the safety of countless individuals and of the State at large.’” Cicero’s ideal orator is to be a unifier, not a divider. Hence, any public use of ridicule must fulfill, not waver from, this goal.

In De Oratore, Cicero often borrows from Aristotle’s various writings on ridicule. For example, Cicero paraphrases Aristotle’s notion that the ridiculous is inherent in an entity. When asked to account for the “‘source’” of laughter, the character Julius Caesar remarks, “‘the field or province of, so to speak, of the laughable [...] is restricted to that which may be described as unseemly or ugly’” (II.236: 373). And later Caesar adds, “‘In ugliness too and in physical blemishes there is good enough matter for jesting’” (II.239: 375) and “‘what excites laughter is [...] ridiculing other people’s characters’” (II.289: 419). Of the seventeen types of the laughable or commonplaces for finding joking matter that Caesar lists, the last is “‘jests at other’s expense’” (II.286: 417). Throughout De Oratore this notion is often referenced as instances are described in which acts of ridicule are seemingly justified on the grounds that the object of the ridicule has acted in such a way that it is deserved. What Cicero’s characters mostly ridicule is lack of ability—especially in
oratory, their profession. Indeed, throughout De Oratore the main characters poke fun at or mildly ridicule each other. An orator with a “graceful” style who has not “comprehended” the “subject-matter,” Crassus claims, will “become the sport of universal derision” (I.50: 39). Because knowledge of rhetoric is useless without the concomitant philosophy or wisdom, Antonius asserts, then rhetoric handbooks are good for nothing more than to “scoff at” (I.87: 61). Similarly, those who do not understand the law but believe they can win a case by sheer oratory, Crassus remarks, are ones who “[d]erision surely befits” (I.174: 121). Inability begets ridicule. That is, those who falter from observing or meeting norms are bound to be subject to ridicule.

Cicero’s characters are well-aware that behavior deemed inconsistent with social norms may be subject to ridicule. Early on in De Oratore, in a moment of self-consciousness, Anotinus observes that they as orators must avoid “indulging in heroics over trifles”—“trifles” here signifying emotions—lest they be “deemed fit objects of ridicule” (II.205: 349). That is, behavior considered excessive, exceeding social norms, may be deemed “ridiculous” and thus subject to ridicule, whether that behavior is of overt emotional displays or of histrionics regarding emotional displays. But where Aristotle may conceive of that as a natural process—the ridiculous begets ridicule—Cicero calls for restraint, though of a different sort than that Aristotle advocates. On the one hand, one “must not let his [or her] jesting become buffoonery” or that person is liable to be ridiculed for having ridiculed excessively, thereby compromising social norms (II.238: 375). On the other hand, an
orator is to speak “with good reason [...] to gain some benefit”—upholding the duty
of the ideal orator in context of the rhetorical situation or occasion—which cannot
allow for a slide into buffoonery:

Regard then to occasions, control and restraint of our actual raillery, and
economy in bon-mots, will distinguish an orator from a buffoon, as also will the fact
that we people speak with good reason, not just to be thought funny, but to gain
some benefit, while those others are jesting from morning to night, and without any
reason at all. (II.247: 381)

If the duty of the orator is to maintain the order of the state, then the
orator must not only speak eloquently but also act eloquently, as a
paragon of the propriety of which he preaches. For Cicero, there must
be a unity of character.

To be sure, Cicero’s ideal orator is as much infected by a caste and male bias as is
Aristotle’s persona. Cicero’s ideal orator must not only “‘acquire knowledge of a
great number of things’” but must also exude “‘a certain spirit and humor, the
culture that befits a gentleman,’” the former of which is “‘essential to possess’” if one
is to achieve the status of ideal orator (I.17: 13-15). But again Cicero cautions that
restraint must be observed in the application of ridicule, that the best way to
ridicule is to observe a variation of Aristotle’s “right mean” way:

the things most easily ridiculed are those which call for neither strong
disgust nor the deepest sympathy. This is why all laughing-matters
are found among those blemishes noticeable in the conduct of people
who are neither objects of general esteem nor yet full of misery, and
nor apparently merely fit to be hurried off to execution for their
crimes; and these blemishes, if deftly handled, raise laughter. (II.238:
375)

The “mean” for Cicero is the “mean” of social norms, a space between the extremes
of people meriting “‘general esteem’” and those “‘full of misery’” or criminal; most
important, however, is to ridicule in such a way that is “‘deftly handled’”—which
James M. May and Jakob Wisse translate as “‘in a neat sort of way’” (II.238: 187). To
handle ridicule “‘deftly’” or to ridicule “‘in a neat’”—or, adroit—“sort of way’” is thus:
“‘the chief’” way of raising laughter is by uttering “‘sayings which remark upon and
point out something unseemly in no unseemly manner’” (II.236: 373). Cicero’s
orator may resort to ridicule but in doing so must observe and remain within social
norms so as not to appear or become as “‘unseemly’” as that which presumably
deserves ridicule and thus by engaging in ridicule become ridiculous. The passage
quoted at length above concludes: “‘In ugliness too and in physical blemishes there
is good enough matter for jesting, but here as elsewhere the limits of license’” are to
be observed (II.238: 375). Aristotle and Cicero both believe ridicule should be
reigned in; however, whereas Aristotle’s main concern is that ridicule be reserved
for only the right sort of people—well-bred men of taste and tact like him—Cicero’s
chief concern is that if ridicule is to be used, its use should not “‘detract from the
dignity’” of the orator (II.229: 367), which May and Wisse translate as the
“‘authority’” of the orator (II.229: 184). Although Cicero’s orator may resort to
ridicule, especially in a legal context, as head of state the orator is not to act or ridicule in a way that is unbecoming to his or her authority lest that authority and thus the ability to lead or influence citizens be compromised.

Quintilian follows the basic outline Aristotle establishes and Cicero fleshes out. Like both, Quintilian recognizes that ridicule—in Book VI, Chapter III of *The Orator's Education*—is a means of persuasion, potentially of use in private, public, and legal settings (409, 416). Also like both, Quintilian expresses reservations concerning excessive displays of ridicule: “As there are, however, many sources of ridicule, I am once more to caution my reader, that all of them are not proper for an orator” (419), and “It seldom or never is proper for an orator to raise a laugh at his own expense for that is more proper for buffoons” (429). Some “sources” and types of ridicule should be avoided because, to Quintilian, “A man of sense and good breeding will say nothing that can hurt his own character or probity. A laugh is too dearly bought, when purchased at the expense of virtue” (416). Quintilian notes another unseemly use of ridicule: “There is another manner, which, though it admits of ridicule, is unworthy a gentleman; I mean that of saying anything that is low or passionate” (429). Quintilian finds ridicule so unbecoming to a “man of sense and good breeding” that he cautions against its use in general: “all ridicule has something in it that is buffoonish, that is, somewhat that is low, and oftentimes purposefully rendered mean” (409). A “man of sense and good breeding” should not stoop to ridicule, to conduct “unworthy a gentleman,” lest he become “low,” thereby
potentially taxing his “virtue” and “character or probity,” become, in a word, ridiculous.

If an inappropriate use of ridicule can reflect badly on the ridiculer, then it can also have some effect, Quintilian notes, on an audience. “As to the practice of [ridicule],” Quintilian explains, “it is mighty simple; for it arises either from others or from ourselves[...]. When from others it operates by reproach, by refutation, by dashing, by retorting, or by eluding. When from ourselves by discovering somewhat of the ridiculous, or what Cicero calls it, over and above absurd” (413). While Quintilian, like Aristotle and Cicero, recognizes that ridicule as a means of persuasion can affect behavior, he is far less sure of its efficacy. Quintilian’s primary concern is that ridicule is unstable, indeterminate. Not only is ridicule “the property of all the different [six] kinds of wit I have here treated of” (413) but it is “next to impossible to trace all the different sources of ridicule” (416). Moreover, “What adds to the difficulty is, that no rules can be laid down for the practice of this thing, and no masters can teach it” (410). Quintilian sums it up,

I call it unaccountable, for many have endeavored to account for it, but I think without success. Here it is that a laugh may arise, not only from an action or a saying, but even the very motion of the body may raise it; add to this, that there are many different modes for laughter. For we laugh, not only at actions and sayings that are witty and genteel, but such as are stupid, passionate, and cowardly. It is therefore of a
motly [sic] composition, for very often we laugh with a man, as well as at him. (409)

For Quintilian, it is the final sentiment that looms most—that in using ridicule one is not just laughed with but at, the ridiculer becoming ridiculous.

For Quintilian as for Cicero and Aristotle, ridicule is rhetorical, an act of persuasion. As Cicero’s Antonius enumerates, ridicule is one of many means of “‘stirring the feelings of mankind’” (II.205: 349). Ridicule employed to raise a laugh in a legal context can result in myriad effects, from “shatter[ing] or obstructing [...] an opponent’” to “‘showing the orator himself to be a man of finish, accomplishment[,] and taste’” (II.236: 373). The latter interest—of “‘showing the orator himself to be a man of finish, accomplishment[,] and taste’”—matters to all three because, according to the concomitant system, ethos—both the presumption and demonstration of—is requisite for the right to ridicule properly, without effecting buffoonery. Cicero’s concern that the orator eschew ridiculing extremities or to extremes is really a concern with the orator’s ethos. Likewise with both Aristotle’s and Quintilian’s caution about ridiculing to excess. If ridicule can be a means of “‘urging a course of action,’” then one must be careful what one urges though ridicule, wary of whether the act achieves the intended effect. A slide into excessive ridicule can result in the ridiculous.

Cicero’s and later Quintilian’s cautions about ridiculing excessively were apparently ignored by a number of their contemporaries. While some satirists such as Varro, Horace, Seneca, Lucilius, and others mocked and ridiculed behaviors they
found to be repulsive, generally using ridicule as a means of maintaining dominant
conceptions of propriety and decorum, others such as Martial, Juvenal, and Catullus
often directly ridiculed and attacked various prominent persons by name (Coffey
45-47, 132-46, 203). There was of course some risk in doing so, as can attest the
tongue of Cicero as well as the citizens of Alexandria who mocked Emperor
Caracalla (the latter as described in the Introduction). As have others throughout
history, Romans deployed ridicule both to confirm and to contest dominant
ideologies and social norms, a practice which will be examined further in later
chapters.

As a representation of the degree to which some Romans ridiculed, Catullus
is exemplary. While his topics range from lyrical love poems through descriptions of
pleasant scenery, his so-called bawdy or vulgar poems, which are replete with
ridicule, are probably why his few works have survived history. These poems
generally ridicule behavior that flaunts Roman notions of propriety and decorum;
paradoxically, some of the language and imagery of these poems would be
considered improper, in turn flaunting propriety and decorum. Catullus seems to be
aware of this conundrum, as in Poem 16 “A Rebuke: to Aurelius and Furius,” he
addresses and ridicules these two figures, telling them

I’ll fuck you and bugger you
Aurelies the pathic, and sodomite Furius,
who thought you knew me from my verses
since they’re erotic, not modest enough.
It suits the poet himself to be dutifully chaste,
his verses not necessarily so at all [...]

The impetus for the poem seems to be that the two have made overtures, probably sexual in nature, to Catullus that he objects to, conflating the poet himself with his poems' various personas and contents: “[...] have wit and good taste, / even if they’re [his verses are] erotic, not modest enough, / and as for that can incite to lust.” The poem indicates that just because Catullus may write of impolite subjects and may use language that some would consider vulgar does not mean that Catullus himself euphemistically “speak[s] to boys.” Or, just because Catullus writes erotic poems “that can incite to lust” does not necessarily mean that Catullus himself is an indecent, profligate caitiff. The poem’s final lines challenge this assumption boldly, declaring, “You, who read all these thousand kisses, / you think I’m less of a man? / I’ll fuck you, and I’ll bugger you.” In this poem, Catullus ridicules his subjects for their inability to discern the man from the various personas he constructs, and he then offers to meet them on their own terms, only he will dominate rather than be dominated—that is, Catallus’ poem bullies those who had bullied him.

Although human behavior is the topic his poems most ridicule, Catallus focuses most of his barbs on bodies and bodily functions. In a sense, Catallus’ poems function something like the panoptic gaze, a concept discussed in the previous chapter: to reach the addressed-subject’s consciousness, the poems gaze upon and ridicule the subject’s body. Poem 25, for example, ridicules an acquaintance, Thallus, for allegedly pilfering some of Catallus’ material goods. After calling Thallus a
“sodomite,” the poem then piles on the ridicule, metaphor after metaphor: Thallus is “softer than rabbit’s fur, / or goose grease, or the little tip of the ear, / or an old man’s slack penis mouldy with spider-webs.” As shall be seen below in the discussion of Christine de Pizan’s use of ridicule and as observed in Chapter 4, male genitalia have been and remain a common site for ridicule throughout western history (as have female genitalia), perhaps because it stands out as a patriarchal vulnerability that can be ridiculed with less impunity than ridiculing the whole male. But Catullus is not particular, as he ridicules other body parts as well. Poem 39, “Your teeth!: to Egnatius,” for example, ridicules Egnatius’ “snow-white teeth” and propensity for “smil[ing] all the time,” insinuating that he brushes them with his own urine: “so the fact that your teeth are so polished / just shows you’re the more full of piss.”

Lest this brief analysis of a few select poems of Catullus leave the impression that he only ridicules fellow males, consider Poem 43, “No Comparison: to Ameana,” which in subject is very similar to William Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, “My Mistresses’ Eyes are Nothing like the Sun,” only where the latter mockingly ridicules to revert the sentiment by the final couplet, at which point Shakespeare’s persona confesses an honestly “rare” love for the object of his desire, Catullus’ Poem 43 never retracts the ridicule but instead displaces it from the woman initially ridiculed, Ameana, to the social construct of beauty that would consider her more beautiful than Catullus’ preferred object of beauty, Lesbia. The ridicule of Poem 43, in its entirety below, begins in the opening line:
Greetings, girl with a nose not the shortest,
feet not so lovely, eyes not of the darkest,
fingers not slender, mouth never healed,
and a not excessively charming tongue,
bankrupt Formianus’s “little friend.”
And the Province pronounces you beautiful?
To be compared with my Lesbia?
O witless and ignorant age!

Though Catullus’ poems often ridicule behavior that does not comply with some social norm, Poem 43 ridicules to critique a social norm: the poem gazes upon Ameana’s body, ridiculing it, as a vehicle for critiquing the cultural construct that would consider her the paramount of beauty. Unlike those referenced above, Poem 43 would likely pass one of Cicero’s tests of the propriety of a species of ridicule: “‘In ugliness too and in physical blemishes there is good enough matter for jesting, but here as elsewhere the limits of license’” are to be observed (II.238: 375).

Whether Catullus read or knew of his contemporary Cicero’s pronouncements on ridicule is unknown; since they were acquainted, however, it is possible that Catullus knew of them. Either way, he did not heed the advice, as he often ridicules without what Cicero calls “restraint,” thereby qualifying in the Ciceronian system as a “buffoon.” As discussed above, Cicero’s characters in De Oratore observe that behavior deemed inconsistent with social norms may be subject to ridicule. Though Catullus’ ridiculing poems may meet one of Cicero’s
qualifications for using ridicule rightly—they may “gain some benefit” (*De Oratore* II.247: 381) for those he ridicules or indirectly instruct his readers how to avoid being ridiculed—because the poems ridicule excessively, thereby compromising social norms, Catullus himself becomes subject to ridicule. As this chapter explores and as later chapters will examine, despite the attempts of men like Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and later Lord Shaftesbury to reign in and regulate ridicule’s use, ridicule can be used by any one with the capacity for it and to achieve sundry effects, from affirming to contesting dominant conceptions of propriety.

**Ridicule in the Middle Ages**

While ridicule was discussed and dissected as well as employed in antiquity, following that period ridicule was not so much theorized as a function of rhetoric, according to the extant historical record, but rather deployed as rhetoric, in print and in public. In the middle ages, George A. Kennedy relates, the study of rhetoric was less taken up as “preparation for public address in law courts and assemblies” than it was applied to many practical uses; the principles of rhetoric shifted “to knowledge useful in interpreting the Bible, in preaching, and in ecclesiastical disputation” (271). Whereas Saint Augustine recommends rhetoric for analyzing biblical ambiguity, for example, the anonymously written *The Principles of Letter Writing* (ca. 1135) outlines uses of rhetoric in the writing of letters, Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova* (ca. 1200) applies the five classical canons of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, memory, delivery, and style—to the writing of poetry, and
Robert of Basevorn’s *The Form of Preaching* (ca. 1322) offers a rhetoric of and for preaching.

Ridicule during this time was active and, as rhetoric, actively applied as a means of persuasion. Three examples of this trend are Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), which both objects to and then employs ridicule to counter ridicule; Desiderius Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly* (1511), a satirical work rife with ridicule; and Peter Ramus’ attacks on Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, in which he ridicules the three in the process of trying to dismantle and ultimately replace their systems of rhetoric. Christine, Erasmus, and Ramus employ ridicule to challenge or disrupt the then-prevailing order, even though they each had a different conception of what constitutes the “order” that requires reformation. All three conceived of ridicule as persuasive, as a rhetorical mechanism useful to attempt reformation. As Rosalind Brown-Grant notes, Christine was “the first woman in the Middle Ages to confront head-on the tradition of literary misogyny or anti-feminism that pervaded her culture” (xx) through a “critical engagement with the dominant ideology of her own day” (xxxv). Erasmus’s satire ridicules through feigned praise—by praising folly and other vices, Erasmus means “to help” readers recognize the errors of their ways so as to alter them to adopt a lifestyle more consistent with the teachings of Christianity (143), as he put it in his 1514 letter to theologian Martin Dorp, who had objected to *The Praise of Folly*: “in the ‘Folly,’ under the appearance of a joke, [Erasmus’s] purpose is just the same as in ‘The Enchiridion,’” which is, Erasmus identifies earlier in the letter, Erasmus’s endeavor
to propound “the character of a Christian life” (143, 142). Ramus employed ridicule as a means to penetrate the various ethos of the ancient trio of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian in the attempt to reform the then-established canon of rhetoric. A main difference among uses of ridicule in antiquity versus those in the medieval period is that where Aristotle and Cicero saw it a necessary device for those in power to maintain order and authority, in the middle ages ridicule began to be employed to challenge and disrupt the then-prevailing order and authority: while for Christine that means to alter the extant order to allow for fairer assessment of and opportunities for women, for Erasmus it means to critique what he saw as the prevailing order—in which folly reigns—to sway people to observe and obey the order propounded by Christian doctrine, and for Ramus that means to challenge the authorities of antiquity to revise the prevailing order or system of the rhetorical canon.

In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan’s aim is to improve the lot of women by drawing upon many positive examples of capable past women for present women readers to emulate to improve themselves. But before Christine begins to erect her city of women, she first observes the general lack of power and treatment of women, objects to the numerous texts that ridicule women, and then employs ridicule to ridicule the ridiculers of women. Early in the book, Christine notes that “envious slanderers” have “attacked” women with “countless verbal and written assaults” and have unjustly abused women with much “mocking” and “joking” (11, 25, 27). Of Matheolus’ *Lamentations*, a “satirical attack on women and
marriage” (Brown-Grant xx), for example, Christine objects that the book is replete with “immoral language” appreciable only by “those who enjoy reading works of slander” (5) and like many other books of its type includes “lie[s]” and other “awful, damning things about women” (6). Christine’s method for dealing with ridicule? Refutation by reversal. Christine ridicules the “misguided and irrational” men who would slander women (22). For example, in regards to Matheolus, she asserts that he “freely admits that he is just an impotent old man who would still like to satisfy his desires,” yet being incapable of doing so he becomes one of “[t]hose men who have attacked women because of their own bodily impediments, such as impotence or a deformed limb, [who] are all bitter and twisted in the mind” (19). Here Aristotle’s definition of the ridiculous as inherent in an entity is called up and used by Christine to great effect. To ridicule Matheolus, Christine ignores text and aims straight for ethos, ridiculing his body and presumed bodily dysfunctions as a way to diminish his character. Christine may not be employing ridicule with the aim of affecting or altering Matheolus’ behavior or thinking; nonetheless, her use of ridicule is suasive, intending to alter how women perceive themselves as a result of the mistreatment and misogyny they’ve been exposed to by “bitter and twisted” men. Christine’s use of ridicule means to affect the behavior of both men and women—while men are to act more charitable toward women, women are not to act in ways that allow men to ridicule and attack them. Christine contributes to an inchoate tradition: the use of ridicule to counter ridicule.
Similarly, Erasmus also makes use of ridicule with the intent of affecting behavior. Very catholic in his application of satire, Erasmus critiques nearly everything imaginable, from typical human foibles to war, misguided philosophers, particular religious sects, and self-proclaimed Christians who do not live according to the tenets of Christianity, especially those who claim to be theologians. But rather than examine Erasmus’ various uses of ridicule, more significant to this study is to glean why Erasmus conceived of using satire and ridicule to achieve his purpose. As explained in his letter to Martin Dorp, Erasmus’s “single goal” in writing “all” of his books “has been to provide by [his] efforts something profitable to readers” (140). And in *The Praise of Folly* specifically he “intended to admonish, not to sting; to help, not to hurt; to promote morality, not to hinder it” (143). Then why use satire and ridicule to achieve such a purpose? First Erasmus references Horace’s notion that “‘There is nothing [...] to prevent you from telling the truth, as long as you do it with a smile’” (qtd. in Erasmus 143). He then takes this notion further, explaining that “the wisest men of ancient times [...] preferred to deliver the most wholesome rules of conduct in humorous and (to all appearances) childish fables because the truth [...] penetrates more readily into the minds of mortals when it comes recommended by the allurement of pleasure” (143). Though he recognizes that in employing satire and ridicule that he “went beyond the bounds of propriety,” Erasmus does so because he “had often observed that this humorous and witty manner of admonition worked very well for many persons” because it is “a way to take the minds of
spoiled men by surprise” (145, 144), an idea later entertained in the eighteenth-century.

Erasmus does not hedge in the least that his aim in using ridicule is to affect behavior, to admonish readers to alter and regulate behavior. What Erasmus contributes to the understanding of ridicule is his support of the theory that humor, including ridicule, may be received more easily by its targets than, for example, a chastising sermon because when seasoned by “the allurement of pleasure” “many persons,” but not all, are more likely to be affected since it takes them “by surprise.” In doing so, Erasmus is appealing to and perpetuating an established tradition of using humor as a means of dispensing virtue or challenging vice, a “widespread and frequently stated belief that laughter was the only way to shame those inured by vice to serious reproof” (Gilmore 5). This tradition is evident in antiquity in works by playwrights such as Aristophanes and satirists like Lucian and Juvenal, is echoed in the eighteenth century by Thomas Swift in his *Epistle to a Lady*—“my Method of Reforming / Is by Laughing, not by Storming” (II.229-30)—and continues to be to be made use of in the present. A notion of humor as edifying is prescient: as to be discussed later, the incongruity theory of humor developed in the eighteenth century contends that the “risible emanate[s] from a juxtaposition of incompatible contrasts” (Hutcheson 135). For Erasmus, dressing truths in the garb of satire and ridicule is an effective mechanism for taking people “by surprise” so that they may reconsider their ways, not behave or be like that which Erasmus ridicules. Whereas Christine uses ridicule to counter ridicule, Erasmus employs ridicule to ridicule that
which he deems ridiculous behavior. Both Christine and Erasmus in making use of ridicule mean to affect the behaviors of contemporaries.

Ramus’ use of ridicule was not meant to affect the behavior of contemporaries per se but rather to alter contemporary notions of rhetoric as inherited from antiquity. Ramus aims his ridicule at three of the more famous and esteemed figures of antiquity. Intending to reform educational curriculum, Ramus argues that Aristotle and his followers—namely, Cicero and Quintilian—had confused, among other concepts, the relations of logic and rhetoric, mistakenly subsuming invention to rhetoric when, to Ramus’ way of thinking, invention properly belongs to logic or judgment. Ramus is not content to argue by logos alone, however, to point to and amend flaws of logic; rather, Ramus resorts to appeals to ethos and to ad hominem arguments as a means of eliciting pathos, of stirring up his audiences against the triumvirate of esteemed philosophers. For example, Ramus suggests Cicero and Quintilian were frauds: “Let us ignore all these Aristotelians and return to Aristotle, the author of such a noble discipline [i.e., philosophy], and to Cicero, who tries to emulate Aristotle’s teaching and to imitate him” (Collectaneae 299). In Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintilian, Ramus calls Quintilian “stupid” (repeatedly) and his thinking “muddled,” and charges that Quintilian often “scrapes together the most stupid trifles” (14, 16, 8). It seems that this anti-scholastic scholastic of the sixteenth-century believes that it is inadequate merely to propose another system of rhetoric and logic without also mocking, and thus deprecating, the founders and prominent advocates of the established and accepted system. If
Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian are revered, the logic seems to be, then to alter their conceptions Ramus has also to alter their reputations, to try to make them disreputable to weaken their influence in order to alter their systems. While some contemporaries may have found that Ramus’s treatment of the three flaunted propriety, the intent of Ramus’s ridicule is to displace the three from posterity so that Ramus and his system could supplant them.

Erasmus’s admission to Dorp that his uses of satire and ridicule in *The Praise of Folly* “went beyond the bounds of propriety” (145) signals a major concern of the many who debated the merits and demerits of ridicule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing from the satiric mischaracterization of Socrates in Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, Erasmus ridicules Socrates as a man engrossed by the sort of “philosophical judgment” that is “useless” in “the ordinary affairs of life” (36):

> For while he was philosophizing about clouds and ideas, while he was measuring a flea’s foot, while he was struck with admiration by the gnat’s voice, he neglected to learn what pertains to everyday life. (37)

Erasmus’s contention—that Socrates’ neglect of “the ordinary affairs of life” in favor of useless “philosophical judgment” had some relation to Socrates later being “sentenced to drink hemlock” (37)—would have irked those later eighteenth-century disputants of ridicule had they noted it. In echoing Aristophanes’ treatment of Socrates, Erasmus foreshadows one of the major points of debate concerning the use of ridicule: if ridicule is as harmless as some of its advocates claim, then how is it that Aristophanes’ ridiculing of Socrates in *The Clouds* was able
to sully the esteemed philosopher’s reputation among peers, later resulting in the
disfavor shown toward Socrates when on trial, leading to his death by hemlock? To
many in later centuries, the eighteenth-century in particular, Socrates is a paragon
of virtue. If Socrates is not immune to ridicule, is anyone or anything safe from it? In
Truth and Innocence Vindicated (1699), for example, John Owen assessed the extant
circumstances leading to Socrates’ death—“they ceased not until they had destroyed
the best and wisest person”—to conclude that if Socrates is vulnerable to
destruction by ridicule then ridicule could just as well topple anyone or anything,
religion included (50). Raymond Anselment summarizes the situation thusly: “the
persecution of Socrates at the hands of the satirist [Aristophanes] offers a
commonplace example of ridicule’s destructive power” (176). In the eighteenth
century, Socrates becomes a kind of test-case for the limits of and trepidation
concerning ridicule.

The Great Ridicule Debate

Following the advent of the enlightenment, ridicule became a very
controversial subject matter. Widely regarded today as the great age of satire, the
eighteenth-century was rife with humorous satirical texts lambasting everything
from the social mores of polite culture, the aim of Alexander Pope’s mock epic The
Rape of the Lock (1714), to the baseness and cruelty of general humanity, the target
of Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726). Satire was not only a prominent mode
of expression in the newly developing print culture but also a subject as well.
Against public raillery and published satires, many essayists and moralists pleaded
for restraint, for civility and politeness to reign. With so much concern over satire, then, it is only logical that ridicule—an extreme form of satire, according to humor studies—would come under increased scrutiny during this period.

The wrangling over ridicule was largely occasioned by the publication of Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, with a Collection of Letters* (1711), which more than any other single text fomented the great eighteenth-century debate—“great” because at no other time in the history of western print have so many pages been dedicated to debating ridicule—regarding the limits and proper uses of ridicule in polite society. Yet, the debate was not really about ridicule. Although ridicule may have been the ostensible subject, ridicule merely served as a litmus-test for the debate’s real concern: liberty and its limits. Moreover, the debate was not just about the liberty of all persons but, in particular, liberty as becoming to a proper gentleman, as nearly all of the disputants drew explicit classed distinctions between who should be allowed to ridicule (gentlemen) and who should not (the vulgar masses) as well as the types of ridicule permissible for the former class versus of the latter. For that matter, all those debating ridicule in print were male, as was much of the reading public then, which implies that not just the those of the upper classes but in particular males of that class were appointing themselves the right sorts to be engaging in acts of ridicule—although sometimes among themselves, almost always against those who lacked their power and privilege. Another, less prominent concern voiced in the debates regarded the function of ridicule. Whereas earlier
writers on ridicule mostly only implied the corrective power of ridicule, those
deating ridicule in the eighteenth-century increasingly became more explicit
concerning ridicule as a means of affecting behavior. This is evident in the two
works that, while not directly engaged in the debate, commented on it later, offering
for the time the final word: George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) and
Hugh Blair’s *Lecture on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783).

It should also be noted that the debate, for all the thousands of pages it
occupied, began as a result of a misunderstanding regarding what Shaftesbury had
actually claimed concerning ridicule, leading Thomas B. Gilmore, Jr. to call “the
controversy” over ridicule “madness”—“a tenebrous struggle without discernible
purpose” (1). Shaftesbury did not claim, as was imputed, that *ridicule is a test of
truth* (Aldridge 132). Thomas Carlyle in his essay “Voltaire” (1838) had observed,
“We have oftener more than once endeavoured to attach some meaning to that
aphorism, vulgarly imputed to Shaftesbury, which however we can find nowhere in
his works, that ‘ridicule is a test of truth’” (II.22). To be sure, Shaftesbury discusses
ridicule at length in his *Characteristics*, only his concern is ridicule’s “social utility”
(Anselment 129). That is, Shaftesbury is not just urging that ridicule be used but
“merely that there be freedom to use it” (Aldridge 134). As Anselment points out,
two passages (of four) in Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* come close to approximating
the phrase in question, *ridicule is a test of truth*. Ridicule is not a means of testing
truth, Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* opines, but a means of testing people—
“cowards”—and the “gravity” or seriousness, or lack thereof, of those who would
spread falsehoods (10, 52). “Thus Shaftesbury is attempting to distinguish,” observes Alfred Owen Aldridge, among “pompousness, pedantry, preciosity and legitimate seriousness, offering raillery as the test of the attitude or disposition in the discourse of the opinions” (132). Ridicule becomes, hence, a means of testing people's convictions.

Given that so much of the debate lends itself to matters not of direct concern to this study, I will not rehearse the entirety of it here but rather emphasize select contributions to a developing theory of ridicule that resulted from the debate and that has bearing on present notions and uses of ridicule. For that matter, much of the debate is derivative and tautological, drawing heavily from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Indeed, every piece either directly cites, summarizes, or plagiarizes Aristotle’s definition in *Poetics* of comedy-as-ridicule—“the ridiculous’ is some error or ugliness” inherent in a person or object. Shaftesbury, for example, appropriates and amends Aristotle’s definition as, “For nothing is ridiculous except what is deformed: nor is anything proof against raillery, except what is handsome and just” (110), adding to it the contrary twist that if the “deformed” is inherently ridiculous than that which fits the presumed norm—“handsome and just”—is to be exempt from ridicule. Some 77 years later, Preston’s paraphrase of Aristotle opens up the category of the ridiculous to include more common differences, thereby allowing ridicule a greater range, than the extreme Aristotelian deformities: “Ridicule excites mirth by the RIDICULOUS; that is to say, by an exhibition of defects and blemishes of the lighter kind” (69). The moralists the following will highlight—
Shaftesbury (1711), Joseph Addison (1711), Anthony Collins (1729), Corbyn Morris (1744), Allan Ramsay (1753), John Brown (1751), and Preston (1788)—for all that they disagree on share commonly two notions regarding ridicule: that it should be reserved for gentlemen of taste and good breeding, and that it has the power to discipline and correct improper, as well as encourage proper, behavior and thus should be used to do so.

A commonplace among the many in the eighteenth century examining ridicule is that ridicule, used rightly by the right people, can be useful, but when it is taken up by the wrong sort of people, ridicule is dangerous. Who should be authorized to ridicule? Not surprisingly, according to this host of writers, men just like themselves. Shaftesbury is clear regarding who his audience is and for whom he is authorizing the use of ridicule: “I am writing to you in defense only of the liberty of the club, and of that sort of freedom which is taken among gentlemen and friends, who know one another perfectly well,” “gentlemen” who are of “sense and breeding” (emphasis added; 62, 8). These “gentlemen of fashion” (116) are, to Shaftesbury, above reproach:

A man of thorough good-breeding, whatever else he be, is incapable of doing a rude or brutal action. He never deliberates in this case, or considers the matter by prudential rules of self-interest and advantage. He acts from his nature, in a manner necessarily, and without reflection: and if he did not, it were impossible for him to answer his character, or be found that truly well-bred man, on every
occasion. It is the same with the honest man. He cannot deliberate in
the case of a plain villany [sic]. A plum is no temptation to him. (111)
Collins concurs that ridicule should be reserved for “Men of Quality and Fortune in
the World” (26): “Tho I have endeavour’d to defend the Use of *Ridicule* and *Irony*, yet
it is such *Irony* and *Ridicule* only as is fit for polite Persons to use” (77). Morris
seconds the motion, insisting that men of “*good Breeding*” alone would use ridicule
sensibly to ensure “the *Ease* of each other,” which “is the Point most peculiarly
consulted by *well-bred* Persons” (55).

While Addison and Preston are not as explicit in declaring who should and
should not use ridicule, throughout their formulations the implied “other” reveals a
similar self-interested bias as that articulated above. Addison appeals to Hobbes’
“superiority theory” of humor—we only laugh at that which we believe we are
superior to—to elide an obvious power divide: “Thus everyone diverts himself with
some person or other that is below him in point of understanding and triumphs in
the superiority of his genius whilst he has such objects of derision before his eyes”
(“Psychology” 23). Preston’s examples of the Aristotelian “ridiculous” make it
evident who is to use ridicule against whom: subjects to ridicule include those who
feign “a departure from the decorums of character and propriety of acting
conformable to rank and station” (85), such as “female pedants, and small
politicians” (86) and “some diminutive and feminine form [who] would, with the
military garb, put on the menacing brow and martial stride” (83). More so, Preston
continues, those who “show a want of refinement and understanding” as measured
by propriety deserve ridicule—e.g., “the travelled coxcomb and fop” and “the characters of Frenchmen”; and “the simple representation of humble life sometimes excites mirth” (86).

Although Ramsay and Brown do not authorize per se that only gentlemen should use ridicule, their observations concerning uses of ridicule reveal that is usually the case. Ramsay’s definition of ridicule operates on the assumption of a social-norm: Ridicule “consists in the bare representation of what is improper in manners or actions” (71), which according to the prevailing configuration of ideas would not refer to that category called gentlemen of good-breeding. Furthermore, Ramsay observes: “And there is nothing more common, than to observe people in health and affluence, laugh and sneer at bodily infirmities, weakness of intellects, thread-bare clothes, and other masks of distress and poverty of those, who accidentally come in their way” (68). For Ramsey, then, ridicule is aimed at that which does not conform to social-norms, even if, as he insists, the lack of ability to conform is due to “poverty.” Brown takes a different tact, instead noting forms or modes of ridicule and which classes of person are more likely to engage in which forms or modes: “Among these several Kinds of Ridicule, Justness of Thought and Expression, adorned with striking Figures, is the highest: Coarse Language, Buffoonry [sic], false and indecent Images, are the Characters of the lowest” (47). Though the objects of ridicule may be the same regardless of privilege—“it is only in the Modes, not the Objects of Ridicule, with regard to which the Courtier differs from the Clown” (67)—lest readers be unclear about who employs “the highest” kinds of
ridicule and who “the lowest,” Brown later elucidates: Since “the Imagination acquires a certain Delicacy, which the low Vulgar are generally Strangers to,” “Men of Sense” and “Men of Breeding,” as distinguished from the “much more considerable Body” of the “Vulgar,” have “a finer, but by no means a truer Kind of Wit” (66-67).

While Brown does somewhat level the field, suggesting that wit is a faculty possessed by all classes and that all likewise ridicule (dis)similar objects, Brown nonetheless establishes a clear hierarchy between “Men of Sense”/“Men of Breeding” and the “Vulgar.”

Underlying this commonplace asymmetrical hierarchy is a fear that ridicule, in the presumed wrong hands, will be used to spread fabrications, dupe the masses, and degrade culture. As Shaftesbury stresses, men of “good-breeding” know the proper function of ridicule—primarily, but not only, to entertain each other—whereas others do not: “In a gentleman we allow of pleasantry and raillery, as being managed always with good-breeding, and never gross or clownish” (55). While Collins likewise approves of ridicule for the elite, he is also sure about what sort of ridicule he does not approve of: “And if any kind or degree of Ridicule be absurd or ridiculous, that will appear so upon Trial, no less than the low and gross Ridicule prevalent among the unpolite [sic] Part of the World (22), and "As to the gross Irony and Ridicule, I disapprove of it" (77). Ramsay opines that the masses should not engage in “low and gross Ridicule” because with “minds weak and prejudiced” the masses can be more easily duped by false reasoning (34). Not only that but their uses of ridicule, Ramsay insists, are not proper uses of ridicule: “shallow-pated
people” who play practical jokes and purposely misuse and abuse language all to raise a “laugh, and tell you it was a joke,” degrade “that innocence, confidence, and security, which constitute the great pleasure and dignity of conversation, amongst those of liberal minds” (29). Since ridicule is a mode of eloquence and a means of persuasion (Ramsay 7, Brown 42), the “low and gross” ridicule of the “Vulgar” can have deleterious effects. As Brown emphatically stresses, “RIDICULE IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL ENGINES, BY WHICH ERROR CAN BE MAINTAINED AND ESTABLISHED” (73-74).37

This concern of the masses employing ridicule is predicated on the notion that ridicule is a means of affecting behavior. Those who do not conform to social-norms may pervert others to adopt non-conformity as well, according to these authors, while those with the presumed proper social manners may—and should—use ridicule rightly to coerce others to behave similarly. Ridicule is then, to resort to a cliché, a double-edged sword. Addison, for example, is concerned about who uses ridicule and how: “If the talent of ridicule were employed to laugh men out of vice and folly, it might be of some use to the world; but, instead of this, we find that it is generally made use of to laugh men out of virtue and good sense, by attacking everything that is solemn and serious, decent and praise-worthy, in human life” (“Laughter” 345). Significant here is Addison’s recognition that ridicule can affect behavior, can both “laugh men out of vice and folly” and “laugh men out of virtue and good sense.” As Brown puts it, “The proper Use of Ridicule therefore is, ‘to disgrace known Falsehood:’ And thus, negatively at least, ‘to enforce known Truth’"
(103). Campbell shares this concern that ridicule tends to highlight the negative rather than point to the positive: Ridicule “is fitter for refuting error than for supporting truth, for restraining from wrong conduct, than for inciting to the practice of what is right” (34). That ridicule as an act of persuasion can cloud reasoning, to hark back to Aristotle, leads Brown to caution that ridicule “hath a strong Tendency to prevent the Efforts of Reason, and to confound its Operations” (96). Ridicule, that is, can cut both ways, even simultaneously depending on whom uses it and how and whom the audience is: bolster and/or pervert reason.

But whereas Brown and a few others express some concern about ridicule being used to confound reasoning, most contend that ridicule is just the remedy to affect behavior when reasoning fails to do so. Campbell observes that when reasoning fails ridicule may be resorted to: Ridicule is “properly levelled [sic] at the [...] absurd in tenets,” at “that which we denominate silly or foolish,” at “palpable error or absurdity,” and in terms of doctrine “those dogmas [that] are beyond the reach of cool reasoning [...] are within the rightful confines of ridicule” (34). In his chapter entitled “Comedy,” Blair articulates these complexities at length:

To polish the manners of men, to promote attention to proper decorums of social behavior, and, above all, to render vice ridiculous, is doing a real service to the world. Many vices might be more successfully exploded, by employing ridicule against them, than by serious attacks and arguments. At the same time, it must be confessed, that ridicule is an instrument of such a nature, that when managed by
unskilful [sic], or improper hands, there is hazard of its doing mischief, instead of good, to society. For ridicule [...] is apt to mislead, and seduce, by the colours which it throws upon its object; and it is often more difficult to judge, whether these colours be natural and proper, than it is to distinguish between simple truth and error. [...] In the hands of a loose immoral Author, Comedy will mislead and corrupt; while, in those of a virtuous and well-intentioned one, it will be not only a gay and innocent, but a laudable and useful entertainment. (542)

Ridicule, that is, can be used to improve or to degrade both individuals and culture.

Shaftesbury contends there is historical precedent authorizing the use of ridicule to improve individuals and culture. “It was heretofore the wisdom of some wise nations,” Shaftesbury asserts, “to let people be fools as much as they pleased, and never to punish seriously what deserved only to be laughed at, and was, after all, best cured by that remedy” (10). Echoing the aim of Erasmus’ use of ridicule in *The Praise of Folly*, Shaftesbury states that the ancients’ means of achieving social “harmony,” a “happily balanced” state of affairs, was to allow “all the force of wit and raillery” to temper “superstition and enthusiasm” (14) for ridicule “was thought decent to mend men’s countenances, and render their intellectual complexions uniform” (69). Shaftesbury’s prime concern, again, is not that ridicule be used but that men be allowed the freedom or liberty to use it to create conditions favorable to hegemony. Shaftesbury is concerned, then, that attempts to harness the reign of
ridicule, even while he is anxious about which class of people employ it, ultimately would result in “a destroying of civility”: “All politeness is owing to liberty. We polish one another, and rub off corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision. To refrain this, is inevitably to bring a rust upon men’s understandings. It is a destroying of civility, good-breeding, and even charity itself, under the pretense of maintaining it” (53). Without the liberty to ridicule, Shaftesbury suggests, culture would be impoverished. But given the imperative to maintain propriety, Morris claims, “the Foible or Queerness of any Person will be most fully ridicul’d” (53).

All engaged in the debate over ridicule insist that, when reason fails, ridicule is the mechanism to be resorted to for teaching right and wrong. As Preston implies through his use of rhetorical questions, people do not want to feel the sting of ridicule and thus will go to strides to avoid it: “Why do not men chose to be laughed at? certainly because it indicates that they are objects of contempt”; “Why is ridicule so powerful an engine of debate, even while it disclaims an appeal to sober argument? Surely because the very essence of mirth is a latent contempt, and there is a sort of general intuitive perception that ridicule degrades and vilifies its object” (72). Morris agrees—ridicule “endeavours really to degrade the Person attack’d, and to render him contemptible” (37)—as does Campbell: “laughter is produced by ridicule [...] by exhibiting absurdity in human character, in principles or conduct: and contempt always implies a sense of superiority. No wonder then that one likes not to be ridiculed or laughed at” (43). Though this part of his discussion is
particular to uses of ridicule in writing, Collins most fully articulates ways ridicule may affect individuals, arguing the presumed benefits of allowing

*Men to criticize and ridicule one another for their Ironies and Drollery,* and to exercise their Wit and Parts against each other; that being the true Method to bring Things to a Standard, to fix the Decency and Propriety of Writing, to teach Men how to write to the Satisfaction of the ingenious and polite, and sensible Part of Mankind: for Decency and Propriety will stand the Test of Ridicule, and triumph over all the false Pretences to Wit; and Indecency and Impropriety will sink under the Trial of Ridicule, as being capable of being baffled by Reason, and justly ridicul’d. (21-22)

Whether through writing, discourse, or actions, ridicule can, these authors contend, correct bad habits while encouraging behavior considered proper according to propriety. Morris draws out ways that raillery, satire, and ridicule can serve to show what is improper behavior: “Hence the Aim of *Raillery*, is to please you, by some little *Embarrassment* of a *Person*; Of *Satire*, to scourge *Vice*, and to deliver it up to your just *Detestation*; And of *Ridicule*, to set an Object in a mean ludicrous Light, so as to expose it to your *Derision* and *Contempt*” (37).

For these eighteenth-century moralists, there are mainly two kinds of ridicule—that which is used among peers to “please, “as Morris puts it above, and entertain in polite conversation, and that which is used to deride those who are not part of what Shaftesbury calls “the club” and thus do not necessarily exhibit the
same manners and behaviors of those invited to “the club.” These two types, then, will have different effects on the objects of ridicule. Those in “the club” are likely to find delight in ridicule and, if skilled at ridiculing in the way Ramsay proposes in the following, would use ridicule to improve people’s ways: “a true philosopher, that is, a man of candour, sense and knowledge, has a better chance than ordinary of improving the understandings of those with whom he converses, at the very instant he makes them laugh” (82). As Campbell puts it, of the “graver forms” of ridicule, “the aim, whether avowed or latent, always is, or ought to be the improvement of morals,” whereas the “lighter” forms are to be concerned with “the refinement of manners” (36). Others would use ridicule, as Preston, Collins, and Morris imply above, to show contempt for that which does not conform to social-norms, with the intent to embarrass or shame into conformity.

Whether ridicule as a mechanism for affecting behavior is effective remains debatable. Part of the difficulty is the relative nature of ridicule. Preston observes that what any act of ridicule is to mean is always a subjective, relative matter, and discusses this problem at length—ridicule is not “something stable and certain” since “nothing in fact can be more variable and fluctuating in its nature”:

Things appear ridiculous or not according to the education, course of life, constitution and temper of the observer, which vary his [or her] notions of propriety, perfection and order[,] on the one hand, and of indecorum, defect and incongruity on the other. Virtue, religion, truth, honour, every thing [sic] serious and venerable, have and daily do
become subjects of ridicule among certain unhappy classes of men. The vulgar will laugh at many coarse jests and indelicate allusions, while persons of a more happy education and refined taste will be shocked at such mirth as inhuman and indecent. One may receive as facetious observations what would offend his neighbor as daring impieties. (88-89)

Ridicule is relative. But it persists, is used often, whether to raise a laugh to entertain or to raise a laugh to shame. There may be in a given act of ridicule a sense of superiority expressed, as Addison and as Preston, drawing on Hobbes’ theory of laughter, insist. And yet there is also always an implied argument in ridicule concerning the appropriateness of that which is ridiculed. Given ridicule’s relativity, whether the argument expressed in an act of ridicule will be understood, let alone acted upon, is a matter the ridiculed must discern. And it is what makes ridicule sometimes unmanageable, its effect potentially indeterminate. Ridicule can backfire as easily as an out-of-tune jalopy.

In “Of Ridicule,” Campbell recalls that ridicule is a means of persuasion, pushing the notion farther by implying that ridicule is a form of argument, that there is “argument in ridicule” (38). Just as Erasmus had suggested that laughter rather than censure can be a more effective means of altering behavior, Campbell takes up this notion, noting that it is just the slipperiness of ridicule that can result in it being more effective than censure for affecting behavior. Campbell claims that to
profess an intention to work upon the passions, would be in effect to
tell them [audience members] that he [the rhetor] meant to impose
upon their understandings, and to bias them by his art, and
consequently, would be to warn them to be on their guard against
him. Nothing is better founded than the famous aphorism of
rhetoricians, that the perfection of art consists in concealing art. [...]"[T]he assault of him who ridicules is from its very nature covert and
oblique. [...] It is on this account that the reasoning in ridicule, if at all
delicate, is always conveyed under a species of disguise. (37)

Of significance here is Campbell’s observation that there is “reasoning in ridicule,”
which he had also expressed earlier: “there always is an air of reasoning under that
[...] which stimulates laughter” (34). A means of persuasion, ridicule is thus an
argument, albeit an implicit or indirect form of argument: “the attack of ridicule,
whatever form it adopts, is always indirect” (Campbell 37). Ridicule is not didactic:
it does not tell its subject what to do. Ridicule is indirect: it suggests to its subject
what not to do. Wit that “is really pointed,” Campbell points out, “constitutes
ridicule” (44). And what ridicule is to point to is human behavior not in compliance
with social norms, thereby endeavoring to persuade through indirect argument that
the object of ridicule is to conform to social norms to avoid further contempt.

From the historical discussion of ridicule traced above, then, some
conclusions can be drawn. A mode of persuasion, ridicule appeals to social-norms as
a means of commenting on human behavior, with the intent to alter that behavior
upon which it comments. Ridicule can assume diverse forms—be they direct or indirect—and result in myriad effects—e.g., humor, anger, shame, pain. However, because the meaning of a given ridicule act is always relative, dependent on the ridiculed’s interpretation, the effects of ridicule are difficult to manage. Historically, ridicule has often been employed by those of power and privilege to promote and maintain the ideology that would ensure the maintenance of power and privilege. As such, many have expressed concern that only the right sorts of people be allowed the liberty to use ridicule, fearing that individuals and culture may be altered or degraded should ridicule be taken up by the wrong sorts. For that matter, ridicule has also been used to critique and challenge extant power relations, as the example of Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* reveals. Precisely because it is a mechanism for affecting change, ridicule’s utility and propriety have been debated for centuries.

Little has changed regarding conceptions of this master trope of rhetoric, ridicule. Though the theorizing of ridicule described above began several centuries ago, it has echoed through the ages, arriving intact in the present. Yet, for all that it occurs presently, ridicule and its cultural-work remain mostly unarticulated in the present. Whereas historically thousands of pages have been written concerning ridicule, presently only one full-length recent study of ridicule exists, as examined in the previous chapter: Billig’s 2005 publication *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. As Billig notes, however, his work is “a preliminary analysis that seeks to understand humour in terms of general, rather than
particular, features”; what his book does not provide is any “systemic analysis of the state of contemporary humour” (8). Rather, Billig offers, “That is a task for others” (8). And that is an invitation I accept. The next chapter will examine monological ridicule, ridicule issued with the intent to maintain power, and ways in which such ridicule may fail to achieve its purposes. In the subsequent chapter, I will explore dialogical ridicule, the goal of which is to invite negotiation, perhaps even mediation, usually with the intent to challenge if not undermine prevailing hierarchies. Lastly, the final chapter will analyze ridicule’s presence on the Internet: although ridicule in that domain may be used to critique and contest power, it is often used to perform the function of affirming and thus maintaining dominant formations. More significant, the final chapter will propose, is the effect of the proliferation of Internet ridicule on users.
Chapter 4: Monological Ridicule

Ridicule is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional tool. Whether it appears as a tease, as a command, or as an insult, among other forms, it means to effect change. One purpose it is often used for is enforcing conformity with dominant ideology. Yes, it can also be used to critique or contest a dominant ideological formation. Ridicule is not particular, can be appropriated to affirm or challenge any ideology or be used to try to shape the thought and behavior of any person. The ridiculer who uses ridicule in these ways—to enforce and maintain or to critique and contest a subject’s relationship to or representation of an ideological formation—presumes a sort of privileged cultural authority, an assumed knowledge of “right” and “wrong,” and the right to use ridicule to direct a subject to change—to alter behavior, language-use, or the like—to conform with some configuration of ideas hailed by an act of ridicule. This type of ridicule, which I call monological ridicule, appeals to ideology in an attempt to sway its target(s) to alter behavior or the like in relation to the ideology evoked. Ridicule is thus a mechanism of power that is predisposed to enforce some sort of change upon others, and when functioning monologically, the goal is to enforce conformity with the configuration of ideas evoked by the act of ridiculing. As this chapter will demonstrate, ridicule that functions monologically is a means of exerting power and of demanding obedience to that power.

Although Foucault's study of the panopticon and the panoptic schema filtering into the mass social-body would suggest that any member of a social-body has equal opportunity to ridicule monologically and the right to ridicule equally in
the maintenance of or to challenge social order, this is not so. Members of a social-body do not equally share in the same privileges since ideology in practice does not equally appraise all members. That is, as noted in the previous chapter, while all people have equal access to ridicule, all cannot ridicule equally: although power often can ridicule without impunity, to ridicule power has consequences.

As the previous chapter outlines, ridicule functions monologically when it is a command or unidirectional directive. In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin states that a monological speech-act occurs when “Language is regarded from the speaker’s standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication” (67). An act of ridicule functioning monologically, hence, is really only concerned with the ridiculer’s sense of self and of social order—it bothers to attend to others only because those others are not, at least to the ridiculer, conforming as they should. That is, it is not concerned with others as such, only with others as they ought to be according to the “speaker” issuing ridicule. In a monological ridicule context, the role of the ridiculed—to call it a “role”—is only as a passive recipient who is to heed the command issued by the ridiculer: “If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively” (Bakhtin 67). What the ridiculing speaker utters, that is, reveals more about the ridiculer and her or his sense of order and of propriety than it does about the ridiculed. Or, in Bakhtin’s words, “The utterance is adequate to its object (i.e., the content of the uttered thought) and to the person who is pronouncing the utterance” (67). The
utterance is more than just “adequate to” the person uttering: the utterance in ways defines that person, reveals much about her or his values and concerns.

As a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional tool for achieving various ends, ridicule is a sort of shape-shifter: it can take many forms, some in which it may not even be recognizable as ridicule. Monological ridicule, however, is usually recognizable as a command or directive demanding compliance. Sometimes the intended recipient or the audience for an act of ridicule may not recognize an act of ridicule as such or may misinterpret its purpose, which is often the case when an act of ridicule tries to assume the shape of humor. Like ridicule, humor is also difficult to manage, may result in unintended consequences, in people “not getting the joke” or being offended by it. Ridicule as humor can function in various ways. While on the one hand there is the sort of witty, jocular ridiculing-banter that Shaftesbury and his fellows at “the club” share while quaffing fine liquors, on the other hand there is ridicule intended as humor that results in the “bad” or “failed” joke. What one person may intend as a “joke,” that is, may be considered by another as offensive and/or as insult. Again, matters of identity often come into play here. So-called jokes about race/ethnicity or about gender—i.e., “blond jokes”—may be conceived as humorous or funny to some of those who do not fit the category ridiculed, whereas those who fit the category—whether from identifying with or from being identified as—or who object to such exertions of power, even in the form of “humor,” may not find the “joke” humorous at all, may instead find it insulting—a species of racism or of sexism, for example. Likewise, jokes about “trailer trash” or “rednecks” not only
critique matters of identity but also call upon an ideological formation to do so—in this case, socio-economic class, as “trailer trash” and “rednecks” are often stereotyped as lower class members of a society. Consider Halloween costumes as another example. While some may find a costume fun, funny, or even just cute, others find such representations racist and therefor offensive. An online blog entry entitled “Open Letter to the PocaHotties and Indian Warriors this Halloween,” for example, critiques the practice of appropriating Native American symbols and dress for Halloween costumes, especially those who perform as PocaHotties, as sexually revealing and available Native American women. In each of these situations, while “the joke” can be regarded as humorous to some, it can also become a failed “joke”—an insult—when the intended humor is not shared. The “bad” or “failed” joke, which presumes the superiority of the joker, fits a type of humor called “superiority humor,” to be discussed further below.

In this chapter, I will examine monological ridicule in two forms—as insult and as “failed” humor—and in three different domains: in a brief segment of the “The John Stewart Show”; in an ancient literary play, Aristophanes’ Women at the Thesmophoria (hereinafter, Women); and in a recent series of television commercials produced by an insurance corporation, recognizable by the tag-line, “So easy even a caveman can do it.” Although these texts differ in many appreciable ways, each is replete with ridicule and, indeed, has found acceptance with audiences largely due to the force of the ridicule employed. Moreover, these texts reveal that while much concerning human material conditions may have changed in the time
span between Aristophanes’ play and the two sites that initially appeared on television, ridicule as a means of exerting power has not altered, nor has what is typically ridiculed. The ridicule in *Women* is surprisingly contemporary—those in the play who have power use it to exert and maintain power. Also in common, each of these texts intends to be humorous, to raise a laugh with an audience, even while some members of the respective audiences of each may not find the ridicule humorous. Rather, they’ll find it insulting. Ridicule that fails as humor is usually perceived as insult. With each text the ridiculer presumes the right to ridicule, implying that the ridiculer is in some way “superior” to that ridiculed and is thus privileged to do so according to the social norm or ideology evoked through ridicule. An act of ridicule intended as humorous can fail to achieve its effect, offending rather than pleasing—depending, as it always does, on the person(s) ridiculing, ridiculed, and as audience exposed to the act though not necessarily directly hailed by it. As an exertion of power to maintain power, monological ridicule does not always achieve the obedience it wants.

**Ridicule and/as Insult**

In his 2010 book *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, Thomas Conley describes and situates insult in ways similar to the treatment of ridicule in this study's Introduction. To Conley, insult is “this most human of human behaviors” that is “a universal cultural practice” of which “the particularities [...] are almost infinite”—it “can be seen as at once ‘antisocial’ and constitutive of social relations”—and just like that species of humor called ridicule “remains one of the most overlooked (although
not unnoticed) and underexamined features of everyday social interaction” (viii, vii, 2). While ridicule can be used to insult, insult as defined by Conley only captures a minor facet of ridicule—its punitive, often abusive, force. Insult is, according to Conley, “an expression of a severely negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem; and often we consider insults to be examples of verbal abuse” (2-3). While this definition does account for one aspect of ridicule—its negative side—it also reveals that ridicule is far richer than insult since it can insult as well as perform other functions: ridicule can result in humor and can be employed to arouse an audience without angering it or affecting its “positive self-regard and esteem.” Ridicule that insults is monological in intention: it means to effect conformity, or at the very least insult some subject for allegedly not complying with some behavior. To insult in this way is to issue an argument: it is to inform the subject that something must change to avoid further insult.

Conley situates much of his study of insult in history, while entertaining its use in only one contemporary site. Examining instances of insult in Cicero, for example, Conley identifies a number of “stock topics, i.e., commonplaces” of “Roman invective” or insult (37) that he then traces in Shakespeare and to contemporary rap music. The eighteen commonplaces for insult are, according to Conley,

1. Embarrassing family origins
2. Unworthy of one’s family
3. Physical appearance
4. Eccentricity of dress
5. Gluttony and drunkenness
6. Hypocrisy for appearing virtuous
7. Greed and prodigality
8. Taking bribes
9. Pretentiousness
10. Unacceptable sexual conduct
11. Hostility to family
12. Cowardice in battle
13. Aspiring to tyranny
14. Bankruptcy or other financial embarrassment
15. Cruelty to fellow citizens or allies
16. Plunder of private or public property
17. Oratorical ineptitude
18. Stupidity (37-38)

As I have argued concerning the target of ridicule, similarly here: each of these eighteen commonplaces for insult reference human conditions, whether behavior, appearance, family origins, etc. More so, as Conley implies, all are behaviors that do not fit some or another social norm ("collective expectations" and "social presumptions" [40]), which ridicule likewise commonly attends to.

Conley does not address the fact that he draws all of these commonplaces from instances of insult involving males. This is not to suggest that women cannot be insulted or ridiculed as a result of exhibiting any of the behaviors listed above: as
Christine de Pizan observed many centuries ago, women have been ridiculed when perceived as not conforming to some standard of “physical appearance,” for “eccentricity of dress,” and for “unacceptable sexual conduct”—or, for conduct often considered appropriate for males only. Nor is it to suggest that women cannot issue ridicule or insult. Rather, it is to observe that ridicule-as-insult is a means of exerting power to maintain power. While all of Conley’s examples of insult—from antiquity to present—concern males in that they are all drawn from males interacting with males, each also involves males competing with males for power—to obtain or maintain power over one another.

Given differential power dynamics among the males Conley studies, not all may use ridicule or insult equally or similarly. In his examination of Shakespeare’s Falstaff plays, for example, Conley notes that “what may be most striking about the insults in these plays is the role of social status: those of superior status have no problem insulting their inferiors; but if inferiors insult their superiors, they do it behind their backs”—Falstaff being “the prime example” of the latter (61). An implication is that those without “social status” or power—subalterns like Falstaff, those like Falstaff who possess non-normative bodies, non-males, etc.—are subject to insult but cannot recourse to deploying it in return without fear of further attack. A means of responding to such insult, then, is with ridicule that is, as Campbell had characterized it, “covert and oblique” and “conveyed under a species of disguise” (37)—or, in the example of Falstaff according to Conley, “behind [someone’s] back.” With the intent of maintaining power, one with the “social status” or power of
Prince Hal can issue insult or ridicule without impunity. But a subaltern such as Falstaff cannot directly ridicule, insult, or challenge power without consequence. Thus, the adoption of what Campbell calls “covert and oblique” ridicule or insult as a means of expressing without necessarily offending.

In a recent segment of “The John Stewart Show,” clips of which can be found in various places on the Internet, Stewart addresses the US Congress’ October, 2013, 16-day “shutdown,” a term adopted and used by news’ organizations across the country to characterize the event. In this particular segment, not the only one in which Stewart had ridiculed this particular event, Stewart’s ridicule begins when he re-terms the affair “Shutstorm 2103: America Sits on its Balls.” Evoking the common-place slang-term “shit storm,” Stewart’s creation means to denigrate those who enacted the stall. Although the subtitle’s meaning is not so transparent—here, the hypostatization “America” both figures as an active agent that can sit and is personified as male given that it “Sits on its Balls”—the intent is to suggest, at the very least, some sort of inaction. After conceding that in the past he may have “thrown around some rather derisive terms” to characterize some members of Congress’ recent reluctance to fund government, citing a few examples—“dunderheads,” “morons,” “teenage mutant ninja fart-knobs,” and “babies who eat their own poop[...],” among others—Stewart then “apologizes” that he “may have been way too easy on them.” He then proceeds to offer other, ostensibly more offensive terms to ridicule the members of Congress who instigated the shutdown, calling them “Bald eagle fellators” and, the insult that has resulted in the clip
becoming viral on the Web, “self-righteous Orwellian zebra queefs.” Although in the segment Stewart provides some evidence and analysis of Republican blame-shifting tactics intended to exonerate themselves from responsibility while attributing the crisis to Democrats, he continues to apply the term “zebra queefs” to the House Republicans who instigated the shutdown. While it is unclear exactly how the phrase “self-righteous Orwellian zebra queefs” is to mean, its intent is clear: it is insult-as-invective intended to ridicule its target as “inferior.” A “queef,” according to the online Urban Dictionary, is “an expulsion of wind from the vulva during coitus; a vaginal fart.” As a whole, the phrase might be interpreted as “moralistic double-speaking mammalian vaginal farts.” But whatever it is to mean and whether it accurately characterizes its target is not the point. The point is that its intent, clearly gotten by the laughing audience attending the show, is to ridicule its target, thereby rendering the target “inferior” in comparison to Stewart and those who laugh with him.

To some degrees, Stewart’s ridicule is effective. The audience laughs, revealing its appreciation of the humor and its aim. Stewart’s use of potentially offensive language, more so, results in a sort of shock value that attracts an even larger audience. The segment is uploaded to the Web in numerous spaces, signaling its grip on some Internet users as well as contributing to its virulence or popularity, its ability to reach an even larger audience than that in attendance of the show or who watched it on television (a google search of the words “Stewart zebra queefs” reveals that the segment was uploaded to at least 40 Internet sites as of 25 October
Stewart ridicules, some may say even excessively, and his audience delights in the act. Further, the ridicule is clearly monological in function: its function is to call out some House Republicans for failing to maintain some social norm. Although it is unclear exactly which social norm the ridicule evokes, it may involve a norm regarding an interpretation of democracy as a form of government—failure to perform presumed functions as elected representatives beholden to the constituency that elected them. Or, to draw from Conley’s list of commonplaces for insult cited above, the particular members of Congress Stewart ridicules could be said to have engaged in behavior consistent with several of them: “Hypocrisy for appearing virtuous,” “Pretentiousness,” “Aspiring to tyranny,” “Cruelty to fellow citizens or allies,” “Plunder of private or public property,” “Oratorical ineptitude,” and/or “Stupidity” (Conley 37-38). As monological ridicule, moreover, “self-righteous Orwellian zebra queefs” is not inviting negotiation or mediation, nor would it likely result in that. For that matter, it may not even be intended to affect its target. Its effect, however, is evident: it riles its audience, creates a sort of cohesive affinity-group by appealing to like-minded people who revel in the ridiculing of some subjects.

What the audience is to do with or about the ridicule, however, Stewart does not identify. He does not call for the audience to protest or to take any sort of action. Rather, his use of ridicule offers some of the audience a temporary reprieve from any anger or anxiety they may have experienced as a result of the government “Shutstorm”—they may laugh their worries away. The audience’s laughter is also
significant here, evoking a type of humor—as to be described below—called superior
ity humor. Stewart’s ridicule implies that he, and those who laugh with him, are superior to those inferiors he ridicules. The irony here is that, though Stewart’s ridiculing phrase has labeled its target as “self-righteous,” the use of such ridicule essentially results in Stewart and his audience embodying a sort of self-righteousness, a smug moral superiority in relation to those he ridicules. Finally, to draw out a point I will return to later in this study, Stewart’s use of the word “queefs” fits a tradition of insult that males have typically resorted to when ridiculing males: referring to other males as female or as a female bodily part or function as a way to label them as “inferior,” as less than the allegedly superior category “male.”

Conley’s observations about insult, especially concerning the commonplace behaviors that are often subject to insult, apply not only to the segment analyzed above but also to the texts I will examine below—Aristophanes’ play Women and a series of television commercials for an insurance corporation. Both these texts intend to be humorous, to entertain audiences. Yet, like Stewart’s humor in the one segment described above, the humor of these texts is not shared by all, in which case it insults some rather than pleases or entertains. In both of these texts, the humor is directed from the privileged to those who lack privilege. In Aristophanes’ play, any character who is not a privileged, normative male is subjected to ridicule by the plays two protagonists, both of whom are male. In the series of television commercials examined below, white males ridicule “cavemen,” which, although
clearly fictional representations, have been conceived of as symbolizing or representing those lacking the privilege of the advertisement’s white males who ridicule. In both examples, the ridicule is intended as humor, as a means of pleasing and entertaining an audience, with a similar purpose of achieving favor or power for those who created the productions: Aristophanes hopes his play will find favor with his audience and with some deities, as its final two lines indicate—"May the goddesses bless us, and praise us well, / If they’re pleased with our work—and with our play" (123)—since such favor could result in his play winning the comic competition of the festival it appeared in; the GEICO television commercials also mean to be received favorably, to attract attention that may translate into audience members soliciting the corporation’s services. As pointed out above, Stewart’s use of ridicule in that one segment had achieved a similar effect—it found favor with its intended audience as well as reached an even larger audience once uploaded to the Internet, resulting in an accumulation of favor and power for Stewart’s show and sponsors. Again, for some, these texts will achieve their objectives, whereas for some others—mainly, those who identify with or have empathy for those ridiculed, or those who object to such assertions of power—the texts fail to achieve their effects, are not humorous but insulting. Put another way, ridicule functioning monologically is issued from power as a means of maintaining, consolidating, or increasing power. But as stated above, monological ridicule does not always achieve the obedience it wants, will sometimes fail to achieve its effect.

Ridicule and/as Humor
As this study’s Introduction points out, Humor Studies does not know what to make of ridicule. Of the three dominant theories of humor—superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory—ridicule can function within the bounds of any one the three, yet in operation it can also defy inclusion by any one of them. Of the various types of humor that can seem like or that may be able to define and account for ridicule, satire in particular is not comfortable with ridicule, and recent studies disavow, refuse to claim ridicule. Perhaps one reason none of the three dominant theories of humor cannot easily contain ridicule is because they are not really theories of or about humor: Humor Studies, that is, is a misnomer. They are really theories of laughter—of the physical origins of laughter, of what laughter is, and of why people laugh. Two of the theories—superiority and relief—thus focus on human psychology, while incongruity theory is primarily concerned with the form of jokes, with aesthetic matters. While these foci can account for some aspects of ridicule, they are not equipped to examine how ridicule works to achieve its sundry effects. That is, each theory in application can only capture a minor facet of ridicule, cannot trace ridicule’s effects beyond the theory’s scope. To be more fully understood and appreciated, ridicule requires its own field of study.

The superiority theory of humor, as first formulated by Thomas Hobbes, more fully allows for ridicule as a type of humor than the other prevailing, dominant theories of humor. According to Andrew Stott, superiority theory presumes that “laughter is always antagonistic and conflictual, establishing a hierarchy at the moment of pleasure” (Stott 133), which, as shown above, Stewart’s ridiculing of
House Republicans fits. In his 1640 publication *Human Nature*, Hobbes asserts that laughter is a “sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (54-55). Later, Hobbes identifies that which is likely to result in an observer experiencing “sudden glory”: people laugh “at the infirmities of others wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated”; “at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all”; and at jokes or wit that “always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity or another” (54). As conceived by Hobbes, superiority theory revels in the “infirmities” or deformities, in the “mischances” and misfortunes of others, which easily fits within Aristotle’s early definition of ridicule as some persons and things being inherently ridiculous. Indeed, a requisite of superiority theory is that some persons and things are without a doubt ridiculous, especially to those who would treat those persons and things to superiority humor. Like Althusser’s ideological hail, the laughter that fits Hobbes’ theory calls out something as a deformity, in the process of finding humor in a presumed deformity determining the phenomenon, mark, or whatever is laughed at as a deformity. Superiority humor taxonomizes and divides people. Ridicule that fits within superiority theory, thus, is monological: it presumes that its subject does not meet—falls short of or is inferior to—the criteria of the ideological configuration it evokes.

The superiority theory of humor presupposes hierarchical inequities in which some are superior, others inferior. The laughter of superiority theory,
however, is not really about a misfortune or deformity; rather, it is about the laugher, about the “sudden glory” or epiphany the laugher has about his or her own self not sharing in some alleged misfortune or deformity. Laughter resulting from an act that ridicules a subject as misfortunate, deformed, or somehow inferior to the ridiculer fits the superiority theory of humor. The example of the Stewart segment discussed above is consistent with this move: Stewart and his audience presume to be “superior” to the “inferiors” at whom they laugh. As Stott observes of superiority theory in his 2005 study of comedy, “there are types of humor that depend on a feeling of superiority for their operation. Racist and sexist jokes, for example, presume an ethnic, gendered, and intellectual advantage on the part of the teller and his audience” (134). As I will demonstrate below, ridicule as superiority humor in the form of a racist or sexist joke, whether intended or not as such, is always ideological, always based on presuppositions about who or what qualifies as superior and as inferior, and thus does not just divide but also can unite some people. It unites in common laughter those who agree with it, while dividing those who do not share in the laughter, in the process perhaps uniting those so divided in opposition to that laughter. Monological ridicule in the form of a joke, as humor, always centers on constructions of superiority and inferiority, and as such fits most comfortably within the theory of humor called superiority.

Acts of bullying that include ridicule operate as defined by Hobbes—in dominating the bullied, the bully feels a “sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency” in relation to “the infirmity” of the bullied, resulting
in what Larry K. Brendto, as quoted in the previous chapter, calls the bully’s “inflated sense of self-esteem” gained from “putting others down” (48). But while superiority theory may best account for some aspects of ridicule—namely, its pejorative aspects—it cannot fully explain or be used to make sense of teasing and other playful acts of ridicule such as those that occur among equals like those in Shaftesbury’s fanciful “club.”

Similar to superiority theory, relief theory also situates humor internally. According to these two theories, humor is part of a person’s psychology, something that occurs as an internal reaction to external phenomena. Relief theory was first theorized by Herbert Spencer in a short, seven-page article published in 1860, “The Physiology of Laughter.” Spencer’s ideas were later extended and championed by Sigmund Freud in several works, most notably his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. For Spencer and later for Freud, humor is nearly a bodily function: laughter is expelled nervous energy resulting from the recognition of unconscious thoughts brought to the fore by some external trigger, whether physical or linguistic. The laughter of relief theory is nervous, that which results when the psychology is forced to reckon with something repressed or suppressed. Laughter is thus an excess, as Spencer puts it: the body thus humored experiences a surplus of energy, an “excess [that] must discharge itself in some other direction”—“there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half convulsive actions we call laughter” (401). In relief theory, laughter is subjective, even to degrees solipsistic.
But the subjective laugh is incumbent upon external forces. The laughter of relief occurs when the laugher recognizes that the self is contradictory, inconsistent, or incongruous. Such laughter is the sound of recognition, of the laugher realizing, perhaps nervously, that he or she has not conformed to some social norm or convention despite protestations otherwise. In *Jokes*, Freud is concerned primarily with two types of jokes, the “innocent” and the “tendentious”: while “innocent” jokes are mostly plays on words, the “tendentious” have some relation to ridicule. Of a tendentious joke, Freud notes, “there are only two purposes that it may serve”: “It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence), or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (97). Tendentious jokes, as Michael Billig puts it, “typically” express “something that cannot be directly uttered because there are social restrictions against such expression,” which most commonly include “hostile” expressions and expressions of “sexual feelings” (154). Thus, the tendentious joke “will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud 147). Given various social restraints, then, hostile and obscene jokes allow fun to be had with that which etiquette and propriety would forbade comment on, such as taboo subjects. Laughter occurs, then, because the repressed or the taboo has been revealed or articulated through the joke, resulting in a sort of double-voiced laugh: seemingly a laugh at the object drawn attention to, which is really the self laughing at its own unacknowledged notions held in check by a superego prohibiting that which is deemed inappropriate to etiquette and to the maintenance of civil society. In a sense, then, the laughter of relief theory signals the
laughers recognizing that he or she embodies ridiculousness, according to Aristotle's definition—an avowed belief in a contradictory, hypocritical, or untenable position. While much that passes as ridicule can fit under the heading of relief theory—ridiculing of bodily functions and of taboo behaviors, especially—relief theory cannot account for ridicule’s full range.

Unlike superiority and relief theories of humor, incongruity theory is not concerned with the psychology of laughers but rather with the form of jokes, their linguistic and semantic or aesthetic qualities. While it can turn inward, inquire why one person may find a particular incongruity humorous while other does not, incongruity theory does not breach this terrain. The incongruity theory of humor, first proposed by Frances Hutcheson in his 1750 book *Reflections upon Laughter and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees*, contends that laughter arises from recognition of odd contrasts, juxtapositions, and incompatible couplings, among other elements that fit the term *incongruous*. Rejecting the then-dominant superiority theory of humor as too limited, not broad enough to account for all forms of humor, especially positive, playful forms that cannot fit superiority theory, Hutcheson offers an illustration concerning ‘great’ men attending to toiletries. Regardless of caste, class, or power, all people must eventually use a toilet to relieve themselves, which, in the case of ‘great’ men, may seem out of station, even while the natural act of defecating cannot be avoided. The humor in such a situation is not a matter of superiority—all people share in the act—nor of relief theory, even though “toilet” talk may be conceived of as inappropriate in some contexts. Rather, the humor arises from the
coupling of high and low, from the incongruity of the situation. As Hutcheson puts it, “the jest is increased by the dignity, gravity, or modesty of the person, which shows that it is this contrast, or opposition of ideas and dignity and meanness, which is the occasion of laughter” (21).

Recall Shaftesbury and his compatriots sharing bon mots at the “club.” If members of the group consider themselves equals, then the sort of humor characterized as superiority humor is inappropriate if used by one member against another as that sort of humor may result in dividing some members of the group. Though superiority humor may occur in such a setting, it would more likely be aimed at someone who is not a member of the group if group harmony or cohesion is to be maintained. In contrast, the humor of incongruity—puns, verbal world play, and non-sequiturs, for example—can result in a shared experience, of wit meeting and agreeing with wit, without creating division among members. The types of humor characterized as either superiority or relief could not be endorsed by Aristotle as that “suitable for a well bred person” of “good taste,” as those types of humor are likely to “annoy” rather than provide “pleasure,” the latter of which, according to Nicomachean Ethics (108-09), is the aim of humor in such a context.

As for types rather than theories of humor, satire would seem the most compatible to ridicule. But recent theorists of satire are uneasy with ridicule. In his 1994 treatise Satire: A Critical Introduction, Dustin Griffin conceives of satire traditionally as a “mode” or “procedure” for inquiring and provoking that attaches to “real world” “victims” to “attack vice or folly” with “exaggeration” that makes
“clear reference to some moral standards or purposes” (1-4). While this formulation shares much with how I have theorized ridicule in the previous chapter, there are also some clear differences—namely, ridicule can be, as discussed above, covert and oblique rather than “clear” in its referencing, and it need not exaggerate. For that matter, although he mentions ridicule a handful of times, Griffin does not define ridicule and, moreover, separates it from satire, conceives of it as a tool that satire may use to do its cultural work: “to attack vice or folly” satire “uses wit or ridicule” (1). Stott suggests ridicule and satire have a different relationship than that Griffin proposes. To Stott, ridicule is an excessive form of satire identifiable by its “degree of viciousness” (153). Whereas Griffin sublimates it to satire, makes ridicule a mere tool that satire may use on occasion, Stott conceives of ridicule as only a vicious—and thus extreme and excessive—rendering of satire. Though each can be said to offer an accurate assessment of the relation of ridicule to satire, they do not fully cohere: Griffin, who does not characterize ridicule as vicious, conceives as satire and ridicule as different domains, the latter of which satire may use as a tool on occasion; Stott does not see satire and ridicule as different domains but rather opines that ridicule is an extreme rendering of satire. Both underappreciate ridicule.

Though the two share much in common, three specific distinctions will make evident differences between satire and ridicule. First, as both Stott and Griffin show, satire always exaggerates some aspect of its target—hence, the satiric effect. In contrast, although it certainly can, ridicule need not exaggerate—it need only draw attention to some way in which its subject has comprised some configuration of
ideas. Second, whereas satire attends to types, often exaggerating some aspect of the type, ridicule in contrast references specifics, even when covert or oblique in meaning, in that it always refers to a specific entity. While satire can be used to poke fun at and critique anything from church ladies to presidents, for example, satire’s critique is not of any one specific church lady or President. Satire’s commentary is of the type in general, even though a particular church lady or President may take the satire personally. Whereas satire paints in broad strokes, to use a metaphor, ridicule paints with a fine brush. Ridicule may but does not just attend to types—it attaches to specific entities, in particular some specific aspect of the entity ridiculed. While presidents in general may be satirized, specific Presidents are ridiculed. Celebrity roast television programs, for example, do not satirize all celebrities—they distinctly ridicule the one celebrity held up to display. Aristophanes’ play *Wasps* may ridicule judges and jurists—types—but his play *Clouds* ridicules a specific person, Socrates. Some particular judges and jurists may take offense from *Wasps’* ridiculing of types, but not all will. Some particular sophistic philosophers may take offense from *Clouds’* ridiculing of Socrates, but they need not feel ridiculed by the play as its specific target is Socrates (even as Aristophanes’ Socrates is an exaggerated fictional construct, not an accurate representation of the historical Socrates). Third, satire can become ridicule when an audience member interprets it as such, takes the satire personally, feels shamed, embarrassed, or perhaps even saddened or angered by satire. Effect trumps intent. Both Griffin’s and Stott’s taxonomizing of ridicule in relation to satire, then, fail to account for ridicule as a
distinct function that, while it may share some common features with satire, can operate both separately from and differently than satire.

While one type of humor, satire, may be similar in form and function and may at times use or resort to ridicule, recent studies of satire go to lengths to maintain distance from ridicule, conceive of it as a sort of negative ad hoc appendage that for some occasions is useful, for others not. Ridicule slips in and out of the pages of the various studies above, refusing to be pinned down as often as it is pushed aside. As I have pointed out above, ridicule requires its own field of study to be more fully understood and appreciated. Although monological ridicule demands obedience and compliance, on some occasions it will fail to achieve that effect, especially when such ridicule is construed as excessive or offensive. This is especially so of monological ridicule that attempts to be humorous since sometimes the ridiculing “joke,” as the Stewart segment analyzed above suggests and as this chapter will now demonstrate, fails on some audience members.

**Ridicule and Satire in an Ancient Greek Comedy**

As the chapter tracing ridicule across history pointed out, the ridicule of Socrates in Aristophanes’ play *Clouds* became a major point of later debates on the uses and abuses of ridicule. If one of the most revered figures of history can be ridiculed to the extent that it may have contributed to his death sentence, the argument goes, then ridicule should be feared and, if resorted to, be very carefully constructed and issued, not be excessive. Aristophanes’ play *Women*, however, is far more exemplary than *Clouds* of ways ridicule was and is typically employed and of
its effects. *Clouds*, after all, ridicules only one person, Socrates, as a means of dismissing him as irrelevant, whereas *Women* ridicules several categories of subalterns in the maintenance of power. Although the terms around which the social body of ancient Athens was constructed vary some from those operating presently, the ridicule with which *Women* is replete if employed today would be nonetheless intelligible given its targets—non-privileged people. In *Women*, fun is had at the expense of women, of “effeminate” masculinity (Cleisthenes, for example, is labeled “a notorious effeminate” in the list of Characters preceding the play [75]), of ethnicity (a Scythian), of non-citizens, of various practices of sexuality, of cross-dressing, and of other categories that are still ridiculed presently. *Women*, then, is an especially apt play to suss out the various ways ridicule is often used, at whom it is often targeted, and its typical effects, then and now. Although conventions and the technology of theater may have changed over the centuries, ridicule—especially its function and its typical targets—has not. Ridicule was then and still remains a means of exerting power and of demanding obedience to that power.

Although its ostensible purpose may be to please and entertain an audience, *Women* functions to maintain the extant social order. Of the forty comedies Aristophanes is known to have produced, only eleven have survived (Dutta x), of which one is *Women*. According to Shomit Dutta, while many of Aristophanes plays “confront political issues head on,” *Women* is instead “conspicuously free of political concerns” (xxiii). Later, Dutta revises this claim to “*Women* is the least political of Aristophanes’ surviving plays” (71). Dutta reasons that *Women*’s lack of political
concerns may be because “[p]erhaps it was simply too dangerous to be strongly
critical at a time when democracy had been abandoned” (71). But I disagree with
Dutta: Women is very much a political play, even if it does not take on the
functionaries of political governance, as does Aristophanes’ Wasps, which satirizes
judges, juries, and jurists. By “political” I mean in relation to “politics” as James Gee
defines it: “anything and anyplace where human social interactions and
relationships have implications for how ‘social goods’ are or ought to be
distributed”; “social goods” refers to “anything that a group of people believes to be
a source of power, status, or worth” (2). Women is political: it is concerned with
power, with privilege, with who has it and who not, and with maintaining a specific
order or realm of privilege for then-normative males. Instead of critiquing or
satirizing a specific political figure, in Women Aristophanes primarily targets the
least privileged and powerful people residing in Athens at that time—women and
metics. The play is, as Dutta observes, “full of jokes at women’s expense” (72). For
that matter, the festival in which most of the play is set was attended by women
only—“The Thesmophoria was a festival for women in honour of the goddess
Demeter” at which “[m]en were strictly excluded” and of which “the details of the
rites were guarded carefully. Consequently, little is known about them,” about the
festivals (Dutta 73). To raise a laugh from his audience to win its favor,
Aristophanes’ play penetrates and violates women’s sacred space. But late in the
play the target of ridicule shifts from women of Athens to a metic. In the
maintenance of power, Aristophanes has had his fun at the expense of women but
then appeals to those same women he had attacked, making them willing allies in
the effort to maintain power by then targeting, at the play’s end, an ethnic other, a
Scythian metic. An ethnic other, the play implies, has even less power and privilege
than an Athenian woman married to an Athenian male. The political function of the
play, therefore, is to ensure that women and especially metics recognize that any
“power, status, or worth” that either has is less than that of Athenian male citizens.

Of course, social constructions such as gender and ethnicity operated
differently in ancient Athens than they do in contemporary US. For that matter, a
modern development like socio-economic class has no direct application to ancient
Athens. There are clear resonances between the two periods, however. In an
examination of the development of the bourgeois public sphere, Jurgen Habermas
points out that the terms “public” and “private” are “categories of Greek origin
transmitted to us bearing a Roman stamp”: “In the fully developed Greek city-state
the sphere of the polis, which was common (koine) to the free citizens, was strictly
separated from the sphere of the oikos; in the sphere of the oikos, each individual is
in his own realm (idia)” (3). A revealing word in this formation is “his”: as Habermas
explains, “[t]he political order” was based on “a patrimonial slave economy” (3). Just
as “[s]tatus in the polis was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of
an oikos,” Habermas continues, “conversely, poverty and a lack of slaves would in
themselves prevent admission to the polis” (3). Cheryl Glenn observes that “the
dominant ideology of most of the ancient world offered women no place in public
discourse” and excluded “women from politics and power” (19). In short, women,
children, slaves, and non-citizens lacked the privilege and power that Athens-born males held and reserved for themselves. As Jasper Neel contends of Aristotle—“Slavery, sexism, and racism made perfect sense to Aristotle” (25)—so too of free Greek males. These ideological formations the present has inherited. “Not the social formation at its base,” Habermas puts it, “but the ideological template itself has preserved continuity over the centuries” (4). While there are significant differences between the ancient and the modern world, the basic “ideological template,” to borrow from Habermas, remains largely intact.

Aristophanes has his fun at the expense of women and of other then-non-privileged people mainly through two protagonists, Euripides and his older relative Mnesilochus. Of the social categories the two ridicule, with Mnesilochus delivering most of it, first is sexuality and sexual practices, second is women, and third is a combination of ethnicity and caste/class, including dialect. The action of the play, for that matter, is instigated by a fiction—that women had power to decide the fate of a Greek male. The play centers on the women of Athens using the annual pilgrimage to the Thesmophoria to determine the fate of Euripides, who, they argue, has excessively and wrongly slandered and abused them in his plays. Fearing they will decide his fate is to be death, Euripides convinces Mnesilochus to cross-dress to infiltrate the festival to sway the women to change their position. Mnesilochus botches his performance, however, and is found out and imprisoned by a metic who verbally threatens him, which results in Euripides assuming several costumes in an attempt to save his relative. Throughout the play Euripides and especially
Mnesilochus voice much that today would easily qualify as sexist, classist, racist, and homophobic—in general, as discriminatory. Euripides and Mnesilochus are representative privileged males, able to move about the play’s various places and spaces freely without contest, even going so far as to dress in drag to be able to penetrate and violate the women-only event that was the Thesmophoria. For that matter, as men they are not challenged by other characters: they are only challenged when costumed as women.

Before the play ridicules women, it first targets sexuality and sexual practices. On the way to the festival, the two visit Agathon, who, in the process of composing a play, has attempted literally to embody a character he is creating. Costumed as a woman, Agathon is singing. When Agathon concludes the song, Mnesilochus assesses it thusly, “How feminine, how deliciously arousing!,” and asks, “‘Whence art thou, girlish man?’” and “Why this disruption of nature? [...] Why this union of sword and hand-mirror? It makes no sense. What are you—a man? Then where’s your cloak? And your shoes? And where’s your prick? If you’re a woman, where are your breasts?” (82). Though Agathon explains that he is dressed and singing as woman to be able to “participate in her experience,” Mnesilochus won’t accept that explanation, countering with, “Let me know if you’re writing a satyr-play, and I’ll come and help by ramming you from behind” (82). If Agathon mimics a woman in costume and in voice, Mnesilochus reasons, then Agathon must act as woman in other ways as well, accusing Agathon of submissiveness: “you, you filthy calamite, have a slack passage not from clever words but through submissive
acts” and let “yourself be buggered” (84). This round of joking, considered from the prevue of the prevailing, dominant theories of humor, is complex. While clearly some incongruity is involved—e.g., “Why this union of sword and hand-mirror? It makes no sense”—superiority theory supersedes incongruity in its ability to explain the social function of these jokes. Mnesilochus exerts his superiority by calling out Agathon as less male due to the latter’s incongruous, conflicting performance—“Why this disruption of nature? […] What are you—a man?” However, the “joke” here is not just directed at Agathon but indirectly at Mnesilochus himself. Before the conclusion of Scene 1, following Euripides’ insistence, Mnesilochus dresses as a female and is instructed to “put on a feminine voice” to fool the women at the festival into believing he is a woman so that he can then defend his relative Euripides (87). The remainder of the play, Scene 2 of Act One and all of Act Two, is set at the festival of Thesmophoria.

At the festival, the women raise many complaints about the various ways they are abused and mischaracterized in Athens (89), which Mnesilochus is present to hear. While some of these charges may be taken seriously, Aristophanes goes to great lengths to satirize the women, undermining their claims: as the Chorus puts it, “And to Zeus our most humble / Petition we tender, / That our prayers may be valid / In spite of our gender” (90). Of all the women at the festival, the character Mica makes the most trenchant of arguments concerning the misogyny of Euripides’ plays:
I can no longer bear to sit by and see us women dragged through the mire by this cabbage-woman’s son Euripides. The things he says about us! Is there are any crime he has not accused us of? Wherever there’s a stage and a theatre full of punters, there he is, coming out with his slanders, calling us double-dealers, strumpets, boozers, cheats, gossips, bad eggs and a curse upon mankind. (90-91)

Although the critique is ostensibly aimed at Euripides, Mica’s sole insult in the passage above is directed at a fellow woman, at one who like Mica lacks privilege, not at the privileged male with whom she is angry. In the process of critiquing Euripides, Mica ridicules Euripides’ mother, calling her a “cabbage-woman,” which is a caste- or class-based insult: whereas Mica would be entitled to some social capital through a marriage contract with an Athenian male, a “cabbage-woman” sells greens in the market, has less privilege and power than a married woman who need not work for an income. Monological ridicule, again, is always concerned with power, with hierarchical inequalities, which Women observes since throughout the play it is always those with higher power ridiculing those with little or no power, even if or when they share the same gender.

As the women at the festival discuss, Euripides’ ridicule and slander of them is only part of the problem. The larger concern is a matter of discourse. While to be abused by ridicule may anger them, worse is that Euripides’ words have circulated through the community, influencing husbands: “And naturally the men all come home after the play and give us suspicious looks, and start looking in all the
cupboards for concealed lovers” (91). The ridicule of Euripides’ plays, that is, has influenced the community, contributing to the oppression of women: “A woman can’t do any of the things she used to in the old days” (91). What does Mica propose be done about Euripides? “In conclusion, ladies, I feel that somehow or other we have got to devise a sticky end for him: perhaps by poison or some other way. At any rate, he must die” (91). Mica’s audience, including the Chorus, praise her speech. For males enjoying the play, however, Mica’s conclusion is part of the farce, humorous in itself, since women then had no such power to determine the fate of a male citizen of Athens.  

Euripides’ fate settled, Mnesilochus intervenes with the intent to alter the women’s perception of Euripides. Pretending to be one of them, Mnesilochus inquiries, “Why is it that we blame him for these things, getting so worked up, when all he’s done is mention two or three of our little tricks?” (93). He then enumerates several alleged examples of women transgressing social norms, the intent being to suggest that Euripides’ treatment of women is not as damning as it could be: “Now Euripides has never said anything about [...] how we let ourselves be rogered by slaves and mule-drivers when there’s no one better” (93). He concludes, “Why be so angry with Euripides? We suffer nothing worse than what we deserve” (93). Implied by Mnesilochus is that women are to be ranked, judged, and treated accordingly—implied, of course, is that it the role of men to rank and judge social inferiors—and that the women really deserve and have asked for worse treatment than that they have received from Euripides, since, Mnesilochus contends, he’s only related “two or
three of [their] little tricks.” Understandably, many of the women are outraged, though a few now seem unsure what to believe. Noting their ambivalence, Mica “springs to her feet,” the stage-directions emphatically inform (94), to protest Mnesilochus’ rebuttal of her earlier speech: “Women, women, are you thinking straight? [...] Are you going to let this outrageous woman stand here and insult us?” She follows that up by calling the cross-dressing imposter Mnesilochus a “bitch!” (95). Here, as with her earlier “cabbage-woman” insult, Mica resorts to ridicule, slander, and insult in an attempt to reduce her antagonist’s ethos and challenge his logos and, again as with her earlier “cabbage-woman” insult, Mica aims that insult at whom she presumes is a woman, not a privileged male.

Though the women take issue with Mnesilochus’ speech, they do not suspect that he is a farce, an imposter, which in effect ridicules the women’s inability to discern or judge who or what he is. Aristophanes then conveniently brings the “effeminate” Cleisthenes into the female-only festival, who the women accept among them even as or perhaps because he is, as Mica later says, “a man—of sorts” (98). Unlike Mnesilochus in relation to Agathon, the women accept Cleisthenes as is, do not make fun of or insult him, likely because like the women the “effeminate” Cleisthenes also lacks the privilege of a normative male. Revealing the plot, Cleisthenes tells them that Euripides has sent a cross-dressing spy among them, to which the Chorus-leader responds, “You really think a man could hide among us women?” (97). The purpose of that rhetorical question is to make the women seem ridiculous, unable to discern that a man has not only managed to “hide” among them
but has also nearly swayed some of them to change their opinion of Euripides. As the festival attendees search unsuccessfully for the suspect male among them, the Chorus sings that, when found, “His punishment [...] / Will be the worst in history” (100). Hearing this, Mnesilochus in an attempt to defend himself snatches what he believes to be Mica’s baby, threatening to kill it should they harm him. Mica panics, though not for the reason most assume. As Mnesilochus soon learns, “It isn’t a baby at all—it’s a full skin of wine, complete with Persian booties!” (102). Now aware that Mica is just as much a farce or imposture as he, albeit in different ways, Mnesilochus knifes the bladder, drinks its contents, and then tosses the priestess Critylla the empty bladder, who catches it and responds, “Oh, my poor Mica, you’ve lost your precious daughter. She is utterly drained” (103). Unable to discern a carcass from a wine bladder, the priestess, along with all women present, is rendered ridiculous.

Mnesilochus’ gender and identity exposed, he is held captive, awaiting the arrival of a magistrate. Thus opens Act Two, which ups the farcical elements of the play. Despite being under guard, Mnesilochus manages to send Euripides a message concerning his predicament, begging for relief. While awaiting Euripides, Mnesilochus continues to perform, in this first instance pretending to be Helen. Though already exposed as an imposter, he seems to believe that he is still yet able to dupe the women into releasing him, suggesting a very low evaluation of the intelligence of women. What follows is a series of plays-within-the-play, with Mnesilochus and Euripides pretending to be mytho-historical couples to dupe the women into releasing their captive, in each instance Mnesilochus taking on a female
role. First off, they act the parts of Helen and Menelaus. When that fails, they try out Andromeda and Perseus.

During these farcical plays-within-the-plays, the requested magistrate appears with a Scythian officer to serve as guard. While women and gender performances are still ridiculed some in the remainder of the play, albeit increasing less than in the middle of the play, additional social categories are now also included. The Scythian is not identified by name but by ethnicity: while the list of characters preceding the play calls him “A Scythian Constable” (74), in text his speaking turns are identified merely as “Scythian.” He is not just an ethnic “other”; he is nameless, lacking any identity beyond that of his ethnicity. Not a Greek, not an Athenian-born citizen, he is a metic, and as such he is of several layers removed from the sort of privilege shared by Mnesilochus and Euripides as well as likely of most the males in the audience. In function, then, he displaces the festival attendees as the butt of all jokes, revealing that his status is even lower than that of the wives of Athenian-born males, a notion implied later when the Chorus-leader calls the Scythian “barbarian” (121).

Though a rival to the women of the festival as a recipient of ridicule, the Scythian is ridiculed in more ways than the women are. In the final scene, Aristophanes dismisses the women from the play, leaving the Scythian alone to embody the ridiculous. Having failed in his performances as Menelaus and as Perseus to convince the women to release his relative, Euripides tries out another scheme—he enters as himself, proposing an ultimatum to the women concerning
his relative: “If I can get him out of here, you’ll never hear another bad word from me. But if you refuse to help, when your husbands get back from war I’ll tell them everything that’s been going on at home” (121). The Chorus-leader acquiesces, pointing out to Euripides that he himself must rescue his relative from “the barbarian” Scythian officer charged with guarding Mnesilochus (121).

The nameless Scythian’s ethnicity is not all for which he is ridiculed: also ridiculed are his dialect, his coarse, crude comments, his alleged stupidity, and somewhat his treatment of a woman—all of which, of course, are Aristophanes’ constructions. The Scythians first two spoken lines: “You wanna shout, shout in da sky”; “lz no good begging me” (114). Later he calls a woman a “Chiky beetch!,” followed by, “Dat bloody woman, she talk too much” (118). After Mnesilochus again pleas to be released from captivity, the Scythian replies, “You shuddup! You soon die, still you no keep-a ya mouth shut?” (118). Aristophanes’ rendering of non-standard Greek to represent the Scythian’s speech both ridicules those who do not speak standard Greek and results in the Scythian seeming ridiculous for being unable to speak like a normative Greek: he not only mispronounces words due to his accent but also fails to use proper verb forms—“she talk too much”; omits verbs—“You soon die”; and perverts standard grammatical constructions while adding extra syllables to common words—“still you no keep-a ya mouth shut?” After another failed attempt to rescue Mnesilochus, Euripides wonders, “Alas, what can I do? What can I say? / His barbarous mind—it will not understand. / ‘To use new schemes upon a witless fool’ / Is just a waste of time. I must devise / A stratagem
more suited to this man" (119). The “stratagem” Euripides devises, his final one of
the play, is less creative than any with which he tried to dupe the women, revealing
that Euripides (and possibly by extension Aristophanes) constructs the Scythian as
more easily duped than Greek women as well as driven more by emotion than by
reason.

For a final time Euripides performs in costume. He cross-dresses as an old
woman and introduces a new character, “a young DANCING-GIRL” (121), to bait the
metic. The bait is the young female’s body, which functions as a means of appealing
to the Scythian to take advantage of the Scythian’s sexism. Euripides assumes that if
he offers the Scythian the young female that the Scythian will forget about his
charge, taking off with her, allowing Euripides to get off his relative safely. Euripides
encourages the Scythian to objectify and fondle the young female, pushes her to
perform a lap-dance for him—“hitch your skirt up,” Euripides tells her, “and sit
down a moment—here you are, on the Scythian gentleman’s knee” (121)—and then
requests her to “Give the gentleman a kiss” (122), after which the two disappear off
stage for an implied sexual encounter, as suggested by the Scythian’s words when
the two return: “Ol’ woman, your daughter she so nice! She no complain, very
willing” (122). In this scene, Euripides uses the barbaric, dense Scythian’s sexism
against him, baiting him with a young female. That Euripides would contrive of and
then follow through with such a scheme also points to his own depreciation of
women as mere objects of exchange between men. Moreover, Euripides in this scene
refers to the Scythian on several occasions as a “gentleman,” the effect of which is to
flatter the Scythian, even though it is clear throughout the remainder of the play in which Euripides confronts the Scythian that he does not believe him to be anything like that implied by the word “gentleman.” As Euripides opined earlier, “His barbarous mind—it will not understand.”

In the last moments of the play, its main target of ridicule is made evident. When the Scythian realizes he has been fooled, he begins to look around for Euripides and Mnesilochus. Observing this, the Chorus-leader asks, “Are you by chance looking for the old woman with the harp?” (123). By asking that question, the Chorus-leader, who is fully aware that Euripides performed the part of “the old woman,” has become complicit with Euripides’ duping of the Scythian and is now acting the part of accomplice. The Chorus-leader then “point[s] the wrong way,” according to a stage-direction, and adds, “She went that way” (123). The entire Chorus then joins in on the joke: “That’s right. You can still catch them, if you go that way” (123). The play uses ridicule to separate and divide women from their claims to power (specifically, from challenging and deciding the fate of Euripides), in effect controlling women to maintain power for males.

In *Women*, Aristophanes’ ridicule ranges widely, targeting sexuality and sexual practices, women and ethnicity. What he does not ridicule are privileged males, masculinity, or anything associated with manhood (while Agathon can be raised as a counter-example, Agathon is not ridiculed for being male but for performing in ways that may be considered to compromise masculinity), except when associated with a non-Greek male. Although the title would indicate—and the
brunt of the play would suggest—that women are the main targets of Aristophanes’ ridicule in this play, by play’s end women—or, at least, the women at the festival who are wives of Athenian citizens—are relieved from ridicule, join with Aristophanes to ridicule a subject with even less social capital and privilege than them as wives of Athenian males: a foreigner, an ethnic “other.” In the maintenance of social order and perhaps domestic peace, Aristophanes offers women a reprieve, turns his barbs on an ethnic, cultural outsider. Women are thus contained and controlled, re-assimilated into the dominant hegemony. Able to unite some while dividing others, ridicule can be used both to upset and to maintain domestic, social, and political order, depending on who uses it and on whom it is targeted.

Aristophanes’ *Women* skewers women’s claims to power in order to control them and then ridicules an ethnic “other” as a means to rehabilitate or reclaim women as part of the dominant hegemonic power. While the humor of *Women* often fits incongruity theory, the play’s ridicule in general operates as the superiority theory of humor outlines: it invites its audience to laugh at “the infirmity of others,” in the process evoking “some eminency” in those who laugh. Laughter as a result of such ridicule is the sound of power, of the “superior” powerful exerting itself to maintain its power. What it laughs at is what it conceives of itself as not, subalterns who lack power equal to itself—women and ethnic “others,” mainly. Ridicule used in this way, monologically, commands those who would challenge power to cease, attempts to control and reduce competing claims to power, and thus ultimately
serves to maintain power. Arguably, then, those who laugh at monological ridicule of this sort are complicit with its aim of maintaining power.

**Ridicule in a Contemporary Advertising Campaign**

Since the appearance of the first GEICO caveman-themed television commercial in 2004, I have been maintaining a record of them. By my count, 23 have appeared from 2004 to 2011, the most recent two in 2011 altering the caveman’s demeanor considerably.\(^4\) I have followed these not because I have a particular interest in television commercials, in insurance corporations, or in representations of Neanderthals. Rather, it’s because, upon seeing the first one, I was immediately bothered by it, though initially I could not exactly explain why. It’s also because shortly after these commercials began airing I had commenced this study of ridicule. All variations of these commercials ridicule cavemen and thus allow opportunity to ponder a contemporary—and popular—application of ridicule.\(^4\)

The first caveman-themed commercial, a 15 second affair, seems rather benign on the surface. The setting is the filming of a GEICO television commercial.\(^4\) A spokesperson walks toward the camera, exclaiming a slightly longer version of the now familiar tag-line, “It’s so easy to use GEICO dot com a caveman could do it.” The camera then pans to the production crew, focusing on one member, a “caveman,” who, clearly upset, drops a microphone, points at the spokesperson, emphatically exerts, “Not cool!,” and then storms off the set. The spokesperson, seemingly perplexed at this outburst, offers a weak apology, “I did not know you were there.” On the surface, the advertisement plays up the incongruity theory of humor.
Neanderthals, after all, do not exist in the present, do not hold jobs in the advertising industry, do not speak English, and do not protest perceived insults. Moreover, the advertisement poses a complicated ridicule event: although the spokesperson ostensibly did not intend to ridicule the caveman, the caveman felt ridiculed nonetheless (the tag-line, that is, berates his intelligence). Despite the caveman’s protests in this and other commercials, however, none of the spokespersons ever apologize for the statement, for ridiculing the caveman, nor attempt to recant it. The apology they offer, rather, is limited: they apologize that the cavemen have heard the statement—“I did not know you were there”—not for the statement and its import. The ridicule was unintentional, the “logic” goes, even though the statement contains truth. This ridicule act is monological in effect—exerted by power with the intent of maintaining power.

With that first commercial, the master-plot is set that all subsequent caveman adverts would follow.44 GEICO advertises its services with the familiar tag-line, and an overtly sensitive representation of a caveman becomes visibly upset from a perceived act of ridicule, usually, but not always, voicing complaint. So why were these particular caveman-themed advertisements so popular among television audiences? According to a Reuter’s story posted 28 September 2008, “America Voted” the caveman “Favorite Advertising Icon” for that year. Moreover, the commercials’ popularity resulted in the creation of a prime-time television series featuring the cavemen, called “Caveman,” which, according to a Wikipedia entry, ran on ABC from 2 October to 14 November 2007.45 The television series’ short shelf-
life—altogether 13 episodes were produced, though only six were aired in the US—is surprising given the popular appeal of the advertising campaign. Moreover, both the advertisements and television series were created and written by the same person, Joe Lawson. Ridicule of cavemen remained rampant in both, and both rely on incongruity humor. Lawson’s hope for the television show he created: it would be a “unique buddy comedy that offers a clever twist on stereotypes and turns race relations on its head.” But the television series failed, I would argue, because it radically altered the cavemen’s sensibilities, transforming them from sensitive, civilized beings into simple fools (which will be discussed further below). While the adverts ostensibly play up incongruity humor, they are really subversively peddling superiority humor, critiquing the US’s racial formations and relations. The television series lacked the subtlety of the commercials, pushed superiority humor to a degree that bothered many reviewers. In a 4 October 2007 review in *The New York Times*, Ginia Bellafante put it, “I laughed. But I laughed through my pain.” Bellafante’s response evokes relief humor. Whereas the television series offers up cavemen as simple fools for audiences to laugh at, allowing laughers to feel a sense of superiority, the advertisements present cavemen as sophisticated, civilized beings whose prime desire is to assimilate seamlessly into modern society—incongruity humor dominates the surface. Emphasizing incongruity humor over subtle superiority humor, the caveman advertisements indirectly ridicule people of color who are discontent with racial formations and relations in contemporary US.
The cavemen are not to be confused with humans, even though they talk, walk, dress, and act human—they are anthropomorphized as human. They are “other” than human—pre-human, pre-historic. That the cavemen do not accept this order or reality—incongruity—is part of the humor: they believe they are as good as humans, deserve civil treatment, toleration from, and acceptance among humans. In popular and media culture, the pre-human has its place and is often represented as either savage or in child-like humorous scenarios. But most filmic and television representations of cavemen and prehumans are of the latter variety, the humorous. These latter sort do play up relief theory—part of the laughter arises from observing the uncivilized broaching taboo topics and acting uncivil. But that’s not what’s occurring in GEICO adverts—the Neanderthals not only act and perform human but believe they’re due basic human rights. What these cavemen want is civility, to be assimilated into modern society as equals to humans. But in these adverts all humans prove quite uncivil, ridiculing their targets, insulting, ignoring, or dismissing their desire to be recognized as equals and afforded respect and human rights.

The unstated and unexamined premise—or, really, foundation—of these advertisements is scientific racism and its preoccupation with a dichotomous construction of difference centered on notions of “civilized” and “uncivilized.” Attempts to classify humans by type, a project began in western history with the ancient Greeks, proliferated in the 17th century. While some developed phylogenetic trees, as they were called, to catalog and taxonomize relationships among all living
organisms, the human included as just one among many life forms, others took up this effort in regards to humans only, thereby creating classification schemes based largely on speculation concerning perceived physical, cultural, and social differences. These various projects produced schemata such as the Evolutionary Tree of Man, which both reflects and results from a racial hierarchy presupposing superior and inferior races of people and in the process creates that construct called "race." The combination of the rage to taxonomize humans and the metaphor of arrangement, a tree, shifted the emphasis to finding the common root-ancestor and thus identifying the so-called “missing link” between humans and pre-humans. Though these efforts continued largely unabated through the mid-20th century, until both realization of the intents and “logic” of Eugenics through Nazism and Jim Crow’s confrontation with Civil Rights served as change agents, they continue to manifest in the present as “Human Zoos,” two prime examples of which bookend the US: in southern California, Disneyland’s “It’s a Small World” and, in Florida, Disney World’s Epcot Center, the latter of which, according to a Disney promotional website, “shares with Guests the culture and cuisine of 11 countries.”

By evoking discourses of racism, the caveman-themed adverts circulate and—indeed, since they are advertisements—promote racist formations. Again, I am not claiming that the cavemen are raced. For that matter, GEICO is careful to avoid racing the cavemen—they may be rather hirsute, but they speak Standard English, their clothing is rather benign, and in all representations the color of skin is always a grayish, sort of pale shade of white, what one would expect naturally of a
cave dweller. Although they may not be raced, they are clearly gendered—all the ad’s cavemen are male—and they are distinctly classed, enjoying leisure class pursuits such as tennis, eating out at fine restaurants, lounging in a spa, etc. In terms of gender and class, then, they are privileged, have nothing to complain of. There is no “logic” to the adverts. Neanderthals no longer exist—hence, incongruity humor. In this way, these GEICO ads can be said to be humorous because they are nonsensical, pose non-sequiturs, juxtaposing the incompatible—walking, talking, sentient, and sensitive cavemen among insensitive and intolerant humans. But even though part of the humor of the caveman ads is due to the juxtaposition of incongruities, the humor of the ads at the expense of cavemen nonetheless confirms notions of superiority and inferiority—unless there are indeed cavemen running amok among us, which would constitute a sort of metrosexual nightmare. If a viewer recognizes the implicit obvious—the superior ridicule the inferior—then relief theory of humor may be at work here, presuming that the viewer is laughing at the self—releasing tension—for behaving as cruelly as the ad’s humans do toward the caveman. But unless there is a law of etiquette that says to be nice to cavemen, then the caveman are representing or registering as something other than cavemen.

The laughter evoked by uncivil treatment of civilized caveman is the laughter of the superiority theory of humor. Moreover, it’s laughter complicit with ridicule, condoning the ridicule of social subalterns. The ads present a sort of syllogism, yet it’s a logical, or rather illogical, conundrum. The audience is to provide the enthymeme—the implied premise that brings the whole together to make some sort
of sense. And the implied premise, the “missing link” is racist discourse. What the cavemen want is to assimilate—they want respect and understanding, civil and fair treatment, social and political equality—which has been throughout US history and remains in the present a prevalent desire among the traditionally and presently oppressed, who have been largely people of color and women. The caveman speaks for the subaltern. The humans the cavemen interact with, or try to interact with, do not understand this, are oblivious to their desires. Given their power to belittle, dismiss, or ignore the desires of subalterns, the advert’s humans represent the privileged.

And the subaltern gets it. An April 2007 blog posting by “The Angry Black Woman” was the first I noticed to offer a similar analysis of these ads. ABW, the site’s authorized acronym, admits to being ambivalent about the adverts—she’s not sure whether to be “full-out angry or just annoyed or ignore the whole thing”—but despite the ambivalence nonetheless articulates parallels between the experiences of the caveman and those whom she refers to as “black people.” ABW asserts that “the Cavemen are really thinly veiled pastiches of black people! [...] They’re seen as simple, stupid creatures. [...]In the end, the prevailing opinion is that the slogan is fair because the cavemen really are what others think they are, despite the evidence.” ABW observes further parallels concerning attempts to alter power relations: “They have a hard time getting white people to understand their feelings about the issue.” Further, ABW notes that the caveman are perceived as overtly sensitive, just as people of color have been when voicing critiques about racism:
“And, let’s not forget, that the cavemen are really just being oversensitive to begin with.” ABW concludes,

I have to wonder if the advertisers are being racist or if they’re making a point about how far we have and haven’t come in terms of race relations and the media. Are they sending out a veiled message that people should stop being so damn sensitive about racism (or sexism or queerism or whatever) in commercials and making fun of people [who] are [sensitive]? Are they being subversive? Or are they just a bunch of people who are too stupid to understand the message they’re sending and just think it’s a funny, funny joke?

Though in the end ABW asks more questions than provides answers, respondents were less curious, more sure in their convictions. The first response—of 274 total—from one “John B.” is pithy, “Man, that’s just stupid.” The second, from “Former Marine,” is also succinct: “Think you might be reading to [sic] much into this one. See your points, but I feel you answered your own question, ‘people should stop being so damn sensitive.’” The third response simply, “Stop complaining.” The fourth respondent, the first to self-identify as female, Angel H., is sympathetic: “Damn, girl, it’s not even noon yet, and we’ve already got three people who need a lesson on privilege!” And so the thread goes, with the majority disagreeing with ABW’s analysis, many of them blaming her for being “oversensitive” and “perpetuating racism” by “seeing racism” in the caveman ads. The irony here is that many
respondents show a similar obliviousness to ABW’s trenchant analysis as that of the commercials’ white males to the cavemen’s objections.

Responses to ABW’s blog are revealing, indicating degrees to which some people accept or reject ridicule as a normative function, as an exertion of power to maintain power, and generally relate to whom they identify with in the adverts—the spokespersons’ assertions of power or the cavemen’s complaints and rejection of a ridiculing claim to power that renders them “inferior.” The vast majority of those respondents who identify as being of color—but not all—concur with ABW’s analysis and acknowledge that racism remains a problem of the present, whereas the vast majority of those respondents who identify as white—but not all—reject the analysis—“You have completely missed the point of these commercials”—believe ABW is merely hypersensitive—“Are you kidding me? I cannot believe the childish sensitivity on display here”—claim the critique is perpetuating racism—“You know what irks me? Black people playing the race card every chance they get and trying to find something racist in everything. I think this mindset is by far the largest contributor [sic] to racism in this country. Let it go”—and in many cases just resort to ad hominem—the blog is by “a ridiculously sensitive, confrontational, childish crybaby who spends more energy looking for things to be mad about instead of just going on with life.” I’ll side with Angel H.: “Damn, girl, it’s not even noon yet, and we’ve already got […] people who need a lesson on privilege!”

In an *Esquire* magazine interview with Eric Shulte, the creators of the advert campaign, Martin Agency, were asked whether there’s any “social commentary that
Joe Lawson, associate creative director, answered, "The cavemen on a very subtle level are reflecting and commenting on something that’s going on in culture, yes. The ad campaign acknowledges the world we live in, and ours is a politically correct country. People seem to feel victimized in some way no matter who they are, and that’s reflected in the ad" (emphases mine). Lawson’s response, then, takes race out of the commercial, essentializing all difference into a generalized “people” who equally share in victimization or discrimination “no matter who they are.” This is a response of privilege, the privilege of not having to be aware of privilege nor of the experiences of others who do not share that privilege.

In the five years since I became aware of ABW’s analysis of the caveman-themed adverts, many others have taken to the Internet to post assessments of and responses to the commercials. These generally fit two categories: those who approve of the adverts, generally for their “humorous” content, and those who disapprove of them. Of the latter, the majority have become fatigued from overplay, do not necessarily dislike the commercials or recognize their racist content but have merely grown “tired” of the “joke.” Of the former type, a blog of 9 January 2011—entitled “Whatever Happened to the Geico Caveman? I Love Those Commercials”—gushes approval of the cavemen, noting the incongruity humor while lamenting the suspension of the “so random and so funny” adverts, “hoping the caveman avoids extinction and make its return to society’s ads!”50
But despite the claim of the 24 September 2008 Reuters’ article mentioned above—“America Voted: GEICO Caveman Named Favorite Advertising Icon”—there has been some backlash against the caveman adverts, but not for the reasons that I or ABW identify. The backlash is due to consumer overload, to too much exposure to the adverts. While some protestors have endeavored to rally social support, others have taken up the cause individually. Two facebook pages were created to protest the caveman adverts. A facebook page created on 11 February 2009, which garnered 141 likes, is titled pointedly: “The Geico Caveman commercials need to die already.” The reason: it’s an “old joke” already that needs to “go the way of the caveman!” A second facebook page created on 1 November 2009, entitled “Put a Stop to Geico Caveman Commercials,” which only has a mere 41 likes, thanks GEICO for its “creativity,” then adds, “but we are done with the caveman thing. Time to move on to bigger and better things.” Other individuals proffer additional reasons why the caveman as advertising ploy should be abandoned. One undated blog complains that the commercials have focused too much on the struggles of the cavemen rather than informing potential consumers about the services the corporation offers.\textsuperscript{51} Another blogger complains in a 1 December 2011 post that the adverts “effectively stopped being humorous after episode four, which, as far as [he] can tell, came out in 2006,” and then provides a meticulous, screen-by-screen breakdown of a recent advert to determine its production cost, concluding that “Our grand total of wasted money each time this commercial airs: $140,000” means that GEICO should “hire a new marketing team.”\textsuperscript{52} Again, though many consumers have come to reject the caveman
as advertising gimmicks, they continue to overlook the overt racist foundation within the incongruity of the adverts’ architecture.

One website, however, took notice of ABW’s blog, even reproduced a portion of ABW’s critique, asking for its members’ input. A website called “Dave Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections” posted the topic—“Are the Geico ads racist”?—under its “General Politics” thread. While a counter claims that the post was read 1694 times, only seven comments follow, and all but one identify as Republican. The topic was begun on 17 February 2008 by “Reluctant Republican,” which quotes from ABW’s blog and then asks for responses. Acknowledging that he is a “white male” and thus “obviously can’t relate to the very real problems that people of color face on a daily basis,” “Reluctant Republican” concedes that after reading the post “I can kind of see how they could offend a person of color,” but then asks whether the adverts are indeed racist or whether this “is just another case where people need to ‘lighten up’.” “Citizen Ben,” a self-identifying Republican from Virginia, protests, “I love those commercials! I don’t think they’re racist at all; they’re funny! I am so sick of people seeing racism in everything.” “Reluctant Republican” tries to push “Citizen Ben” further, offering that while he “hate[s] to over analyze media like almost everything else,” he does “have to admit [...] that the critics of Geico have a point here.” “Citizen Ben” concedes with qualification but remains ambivalent: “I guess there is a difference between cavemen and actual, current ethnic groups.” “Willy Woz,” a self-identifying Independent from Connecticut, refuses to join the exchange, declaring, “I thought I had seen the dumbest thing I had ever seen, and then this
came along.” A self-identifying Republican from Georgia then offers the following, “I thought both the commercials and the show had a pretty strong anti-racist message. Yes, it’s a thinly veiled social commentary about race, but the article has it backwards.” While “Reluctant Republican” alone reveals a willingness to consider ABW’s analysis of the adverts, his compatriots outright dispute him, one of whom rejecting ABW’s analysis as dumber than “the dumbest thing [he] had ever seen.” Here, ridicule is employed monologically as a means of dismissing an analysis that does not cohere with the ridiculer’s perspective.

The laughter resulting from ridiculing cavemen as intellectually inferior, hyper-sensitive beings can fit any one the three dominant theories of humor. If incongruity theory obtains, then the laughter is merely a result of the absurdity of the situation—cavemen among humans—and the reversal of values—the cavemen out civil humans. If relief theory is at work, then the cavemen can be interpreted as the protagonists with whom the audience is to identify, in which case the laughter is at the recognition of privilege, of privileged insensitivity toward those who have experienced discrimination like that of the cavemen, which would constitute a sort of nervous, confessional laughter. But if the laughter is consistent with superiority theory, then the laughter is aimed at the ridiculousness of the cavemen’s hypersensitivity toward discrimination, which is ostensibly laughable only to those not so plagued by sensitivity—the superior privileged. That is, if the cavemen symbolically represent and voice the concerns of those who have felt and experienced similar discrimination, then it’s the laughter of racism.
However the humor and resultant laughter of the caveman-themed adverts is to mean, at the center of the joke is ridicule. Ridicule in these ads is monological, issued from power with the intent to maintain power. Those who accept, find humor in or are entertained by the ridiculing of cavemen or of those whom the cavemen may be said to represent or symbolize do not object to such uses of ridicule. Indeed, they may believe they benefit from it. In this way, ridicule of this sort serves to unify, creating agreement or group cohesion among those who accept it and its implications. Yet, some will reject it, which results in a sort of disunity in relation to those who unify or join in complicit agreement with such uses of ridicule. Those who reject such uses of ridicule, moreover, may also cohere, group in common protest, as some have as evidenced by commentators on ABW’s blog. This sort of latter movement, as the next chapter will discuss, is more likely to occur when ridicule functions dialogically, as a means of inviting or creating response and negotiation. Either way, the effects of ridicule are often indeterminate, a matter of audience interpretation.

Monological ridicule is often issued from power as a means of maintaining power. As such, it generally (but not always) targets those who lack power equal to those who issue it. Yet, monological ridicule can also be issued to affect or to attain power, as in the example of Stewart’s ridiculing the House Republicans who “shutdown” government. Aristophanes’ *Women* ridicules women as a means of controlling them. The play then turns its barbs to an ethnic “other,” a foreigner, as a further power play: the effect of ridiculing a social outsider such as a metic is to
reintegrate into the main social body the women it had ridiculed earlier. In a popular television commercial, cavemen are ridiculed as less intelligent than humans. This act of ridicule should not even raise a laugh (naturally, humans are more intelligent than pre-humans, especially since humans reserve the right to define intelligence according to their own human standards). Yet much laughter ensued. While some of that laughter may be the result of incongruity, it mainly appeals to superiority, to laughing at inferiors. Whether the “joke” is at the expense of cavemen or of others who the cavemen may be perceived as representing, the “joke” is not shared by all. For that matter, while the human males of the GEICO adverts ridicule and reject the cavemen’s desires for civil treatment, the various women who appear in the adverts do not: rather, they desire the company of the cavemen, in some adverts even offering themselves sexually. Who possesses less intelligence, the adverts imply, than a caveman? Women. Racist and sexist constructions—or, affirmations of white and male power—must appeal to some segments of television audiences given the popularity of these advertisements. The intent of such ridicule is to affirm and maintain power—humans should not have to cave to the protestations of Neanderthals—and as such it is monological: issued by power to maintain power.

Whether as a command, directive, or “joke,” monological ridicule will achieve its effects with those who agree and comply with it. Though such an insult or “joke” may be intended to belittle its target or dismiss it as irrelevant or not worthy of serious consideration, audience response matters much. To laugh at such a “joke,” in
other words, is to be complicit with its aim of maintaining power, whereas to disagree with or protest the “joke” functions to reject its truth-claims. However, an indifferent response or silence can be construed variously, depending on context: in a group of people familiar with each other, such a response may not even register as significant, whereas an audience failing to appreciate by not laughing when a comedian tells such a joke would likely signal that the audience does not agree with the “joke” or its intent. Monological ridicule does not always achieve the obedience it wants. As will be examined further in the next chapter, to embrace a racist joke by laughing at it functions to approve of the “joke” and its expression, thereby serving to affirm extant power relations. Yet, one can also “joke” not only as a way of contesting power but also as a means of inviting others to contest and challenge power as well, the intent of which is to beget transformation.
Chapter 5: Dialogical Ridicule

The previous chapter examined monological ridicule—that is, ridicule employed to serve monological ends. As that chapter explained, monological ridicule often occurs in the form of a unidirectional directive or command informing a subject to change behavior, language-use, or the like to conform to ideological formations or social norms. It can also take the form of a failed or bad “joke.” Ridicule of this type does not want to negotiate. It does want a response, however: for the subject to respond as directed or commanded. Although the aim of all ridicule is to cause or result in change, the change implicated by an act of monological ridicule is limited in that it calls for its subject only to comply.

Ridicule can also be used or issued in another way, however, one that serves dialogical purposes. When functioning dialogically, such ridicule invites discourse, discussion, mediation, or negotiation. Dialogical ridicule urges its subject or audience to reconsider some preconceived notion. Though both monological and dialogical ridicule are a means of effecting change, they do not want the same sort of change. Monological ridicule merely wants compliance with the argument issued as ridicule. Dialogical ridicule, in contrast, does not offer a neat argument; rather, it provokes and challenges, mocks or makes fun of inconsistencies, hypocritical tendencies, obtuseness, rigidity, and inelasticity—anything that a ridiculer may consider ridiculous. Its aim is not often to enforce compliancy but to challenge conformity. Dialogical ridicule may also be indirect, covert, oblique, even masked, depending on the contexts in which it is uttered. As such, dialogical ridicule invites
its subject(s) and audience to experience catharsis, with the aim of creating conditions for transformation, for a reconfiguration of some extant configuration of ideas. Dialogical ridicule, then, is often subversive, presenting a challenge to power and authority.

Whether monological or dialogical, ridicule is freely available for any person to use, and likewise it may be directed at any person, idea, concept, or material object—anything that exists or is thought to exist, so to speak—even though there may be consequences when it is used to challenge power. For example, a parent may ridicule a child for not combing his hair, for speaking non-standard English, or for not observing proper rules of etiquette during a meal. Likewise, a child may ridicule a parent for not having hair to comb, for speaking in ways that the child cannot fully fathom, or for demanding that the child observe proper rules of etiquette while eating at a fast food restaurant. In each example, the intent of the ridicule is to direct the subject to change some behavior in some measurable, appreciable way.

Of these examples concerning parent-child experiences, the ridicule could be issued monologically, as a directive or command, which would imply that the ridicule is to be complied with, without negotiation. Such ridicule may be issued forcefully, perhaps with anger or with increased volume. Given the power dynamics of the typical parent-child relationship, a parent can issue ridicule forcefully. While the ridicule may achieve the change or consequence it wants—the child conforms—there may be additional consequences as well, perhaps best termed “non-material consequences”—the child may become “hurt” or develop a fear of the parent. For a
child to use ridicule similarly, however, there may be other potential consequences, for sake of balance termed "material consequences"—from additional harassment to physical abuse to restriction of liberties. The possible material consequences of such a ridicule act will more likely be determined by the more powerful of the entities engaged in the ridicule event, as a parent is generally invested with powers that a child is not—i.e., the power to make decisions that affect the child, that the child is to conform to. These observations concerning consequence remain accurate even as the subjects of the examples may be altered, provided that the two reflect a similar asymmetrical power imbalance—e.g., teacher-student, police officer-citizen, male-female, Committee Member-Dissertation Defendant, and so on.

This chapter will examine dialogical ridicule’s capacity to create transformation—specifically, individual and cultural transformations. Given that transformation implies change to an extant order, ridicule intended to do so usually must be covert or oblique—that is, indirect—since the effect is generally a challenge to power, which has consequences. Tricksters, Signifyin(g) Monkeys, and clowns are common types that often employ dialogical ridicule to challenge and unsettle established power relations. In US history particularly, the cakewalk, an original artistic creation of slaves to ridicule the dancing of slave masters, functioned dialogically to push toward cultural transformation, a push or urge that at the time was embraced by some whites, resisted and rejected by many others. Given the potential consequences of black folk challenging white supremacy, dialogical ridicule issued with the intent to invite and provoke transformation was generally
indirect, often masked. After all, if too direct, charges of insolence—of not knowing one’s presumed place, space, and rank—and a lynch mob might soon follow. One type of ridicule that can serve this purpose is self-ridicule. To ridicule the self is to draw attention to the condition within which the self exists as well as to invite others to ridicule the self. Dialogical ridicule, whether intended or not, invites and/or provokes discourse, negotiation, and mediation, with the aim of creating transformation, of altering extant power-relations.

**Ridicule and/as Transformation**

Dialogical ridicule aims to create transformation. By *transformation*, I mean significant change, a major reorganization or reconfiguration. This differs from the sort of change desired by monological ridicule, which is changing or altering to conform to the preconceived notion implied by the ridicule act. Whereas *Oxford University Press*’ online dictionary offers a basic, very broad definition of “transformation” as “a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance,” *transformation* as a term and concept has been defined by various fields more specifically to fit the needs and contexts of those fields, from business through psychology to religious studies. The commonality among all definitions of “transformation” is that it is a “radical” or “profound” alteration that results in something new or different from the original state—not merely a superficial or material change, nor merely a change or alteration that results in compliance with a demand. The online *Business Dictionary*, for example, defines “transformation” in context of its field: “In an organization context, a process of profound and radical
change that orients an organization in a new direction and takes it to an entirely
ew level of effectiveness. [...] Transformation implies a basic change of character
and offers little or no resemblance with the past configuration or structure.” Two
fairly recent anthologies in the field of psychology that examine how and why
people change offer implied definitions. In the 1991 study How People Change:
Inside and Outside Therapy, editors Rebecca C. Curtis and George Stricker, both
practicing clinicians at Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies, imply
that “transformation” among humans is akin to metamorphosis, a radical changing
from one state of being to another, such as that of seeds transforming into other
vegetative states (1-4). In the 1994 collection Can Personality Change? editors Todd
F. Heatherton of Harvard University and Joel L. Weinberger, like Curtis and Stricker
also a member of the Derner Institute, examine transformation in relation to human
personality, noting that it generally either occurs gradually and subtly or becomes a
“quantum change—sudden and dramatic changes that appear to alter an individual
to the core” (8, 9). Examples of “quantum change” include people who experience
“religious or spiritual transformations, individuals who make abrupt changes in
career aspirations or in occupation, and individuals recovering from traumatic
events” (9). In his 2006 essay “The Meaning of Spiritual Transformation,” Kenneth I.
Pargament defines “transformation” in context of spirituality as “a fundamental
change” in “the life of the individual” that results in “new configurations of strivings”
(18). Raymond Paloutzian’s 2005 study “Religious Conversion and Spiritual
Transformation: A Meaning-system Analysis” defines transformation as “a change in
the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns” (334). As these various definitions agree, transformation involves radical or profound change from one state of being to another state that is perceivably different from the former state—or put succinctly, according to Heatherton and Weinberger’s formula, “alter an individual to the core.”

While much can instigate human, social, and cultural transformation, dialogical ridicule’s means of precipitating transformation is through the creation of cognitive dissonance. In his study of racism and the dehumanizing practices of colonization, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon observes that “cognitive dissonance” can occur when “a core belief” is challenged by “evidence that works against that belief” (42). In context, Fanon is referring to colonists who are unwilling to recognize the humanity of those they exploit. But, considered another way, cognitive dissonance can lead to or result in transformation. In a contribution to the volume edited by Curtis and Stricker, Barbara Benedict Bunker and Jacqueline J. DeLisle cite Kurt Lewin’s “social psychological model of change,” which posits that change occurs through a tripartite process involving “unfreezing, change, and refreezing” (137). According to Bunker and DeLisle, unfreezing “is a state of disequilibrium in a normally balanced state” (137). Drawing from “a group of widely accepted social psychological theories,” Bunker and DeLisle postulate that “human beings are motivated to change their cognitions and attitudes when they find themselves in a state of imbalance or dissonance in order to restore balance and an
internal state of harmony” (137). Following unfreezing is change: people develop, learn, and try out “new” “attitudes,” “values,” and “behaviors” in an endeavor to restore equilibrium (137-38). Refreezing then occurs as people accept or internalize the alterations that result in the intended effect: “the new response becomes integrated into the person’s belief or value system, which locks the change into place” (138). Bunker and DeLisle conclude their examination of this process by noting that “While the first two stages are necessary for change, the third, refreezing, is necessary to sustain change” (138).

Monological ridicule does not want change of the sort that Bunker and DeLisle trace. Rather, it only wants its subject(s) to conform, to become frozen (in contrast to “unfreezing”) in accordance with the argument issued as ridicule. Dialogical ridicule, in contrast, invites its subject(s) to unfreeze, to reconsider some notion or belief, be willing to change or, more to the point, transform. To draw an analogy from Composition Studies, monological ridicule wants editing for correctness, whereas dialogical ridicule asks for revision. Whereas monological ridicule wants conformity, dialogical ridicule wants fluidity, openness, a willingness to try out some alternative ontological orientation. As such, dialogical ridicule is usually aimed at and a critique of established orders, taxonomies, orthodoxies, ideologies, and the like. Because it is often issued at power, dialogical ridicule is usually covert or indirect in order to avoid potential consequences that may result from challenging power. Generally but not always subversive, dialogical ridicule’s ultimate aim is regeneration.
Examined in Chapter 2, Renate Lachmann’s study “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture” observes that the aim of carnival culture’s dialogical laughter is to unsettle and challenge authority—that is, official culture—through “inversion” and “negation” (128). Such cultures of laughter prefer a culture of ambivalence versus the culture of dualisms privileged by the culture of the agelasts (the enemies of laughter) (Lachmann 129). As noted in Chapter 2, this laughter of ambivalence is “integrative” and “inclusive” as well as “generative,” inviting “change” (129, 131, 130). Through carnival’s ambivalent laughter, “The temporary immersion of official culture in folk culture leads to a process of regeneration that sets in motion and dynamically energizes the notions of value and hierarchy inverted by the parodistic counter-norms of the carnival” (Lachmann 132). “The language of the carnival,” Lachmann puts it,

has at its disposal a certain number of paradigms determined by the principle of laughter. These paradigms are: gay relativity, instability, openness and infiniteness, the metamorphotic, ambivalence, the eccentric, materiality and corporeality, excess, the exchange of value positions (up/down, master/slave), and the sensation of the universality of being. (137)

Whether in a carnival or in a carnival-like setting, the laughter of ambivalence can evoke and challenge for its audience a number of officially-sanctioned and culturally-accepted social norms or “paradigms.” In Rabelias and His World, Bakhtin emphasizes that the function of carnival acts of “debasement, uncrowning, and
destruction” and of “[a]busive expressions” is to transform or regenerate that which is critiqued with the aim of “renewal,” of upsetting or altering prevailing hierarchies (372). By playing out and ridiculing a number of norms, including mocking by “exchang[ing]” extant “value positions,” ridicule can function dialogically, if not prefiguring then inviting the possibilities of individual and cultural transformation. In genuine carnivals and in carnivalesque settings, tricksters and clowns abound.

**Tricksters, Signifyin(g) Monkeys, and Clowns**

By yoking these three together, I am fully aware that I could be accused of denigrating—that is, ridiculing—the tropes that are Tricksters and the Signifyin(g) Monkey. Such a charge would be based on a misconception of clowns and clowning. That is, “clown” is generally a pejorative term. Indeed, to label someone a “clown” is to ridicule the person, just as applying the phrase “clowning around” to a person’s activity is a means of criticizing it as frivolous, not worth serious attention. In a US context specifically, clowns are perceived as functionaries of popular and consumer cultures: they travel with circuses, provide entertainment for children, have been appropriated to market consumer products and services (Ronald McDonald, for example, or the various waving “clowns” hired to stand on sidewalks to catch the attention of potential consumers), or in some extreme cases are represented as frightening (the “scary clowns” that appear in some films of the horror genre). In a global context, however, clowns often serve a serious cultural function, providing a safe means of critiquing extant political formations, as this section will later examine. Moreover, whereas tricksters and the Signifyin(g) Monkey are primarily
verbal gymnasts who play language games, clowns are often silent, practitioners of physical comedy rather than language players. I have chosen to discuss the three concepts together, however, because while each independently can offer insight into the cultural function of the cakewalk (to be examined in the subsequent section), the three together capture a fuller range of the ways that the cakewalk—and the developments it spawned—played out in plantations, on vaudeville stages, and in public and private reactions to the various cultural phenomenon and developments that followed the cakewalk.

After all, the sites on which the cakewalk had been performed, initially as a part of plantation ceremonies and later on stages across the US, functioned something like Bakhtinian carnivals. In carnival culture as Bakhtin analyzes it, the aim was initially to allow the free-play of folk culture toward ritually unsettling and upsetting power and established orthodoxies and the like. In such cultural events, various manifestations of tricksters and clowns signified, performed, directly and indirectly challenged power. While however a given performance was ultimately to mean remained the hermeneutic task of audience members, carnival of the sort Bakhtin celebrates, not capitalistic Carnival in the contemporary US, was subversive in intent. For that matter, by bringing masses of people together under one tent or in one auditorium, difference becomes suspended in laughter. As Lachmann puts it, “Carnivalized speech is a means of tying together the ‘unconscious’ and the social milieu, whereby the opposition of ‘we’ experience and ‘I’ experiences […] is suspended: the ineffable ‘I’ and the expressible ‘we’ merge in the language of the
collective carnival” (146). Carnival is thus an apt metaphor for examining ways that language and action as well as other Discourses—the later as described in Chapter 2, defined by Gee (7)—could perform subversively to challenge dominant formations.

The trickster is an international shape-shifter, found across history and cultures. Whether in the shape of the Aztec’s Tezcatlipoca, of Latin America’s Pedro de Urdemalas, of the Coyote or the Crow of various Native American traditions, of Brer Rabbit and his diaspora from Africa to the US, of Charles Waddell Chesnutt’s “Uncle Julius” in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), or of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Signifyin(g) Monkey*, the trickster, as Gerald Vizenor clarifies in his essay “Trickster Discourse,” is “a comic trope”: “The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative” (Vizenor 282). A comic figure that traffics in comedic speech as a means of indirectly challenging and upsetting dominant orthodoxies, the trickster constitutes a voice, a representative voice of a community, “a communal sign.” This is not to imply that all acts of ridicule constitute tricksterism. Rather, as the previous chapter examines, monological ridicule demands obedience and as such is not a communal act a hierarchical imposition. The ambivalence and slipperiness of ridicule that functions dialogically, however, fits well with the concept of the trickster, as such a ridiculer becomes a type of trickster: the intent or specific meaning of such ridicule is not easily discernible.

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates explores how the trickster “manifest[s]” itself “in the search for a voice” (21),
a “double voice” (22) that through signification becomes “(re)doubled” (44). The
discourse of tricksters “is a meta-discourse, a discourse about itself” (xxi), as well as
a discourse pointing away from the self to structures, literally and figuratively, that
the trickster as trope occupies. But “self” here is misleading—the trickster is not a
“self,” an individual, but rather a “technique, or style” (54). The trickster is, to use
Gates’ formal term, a Signifyin(g) Monkey, a performative figure or trope that
specializes in “language games” as “a mode of formal revision” that “turns on
repetition of formal structures and their differences” (52). The trickster challenges
power, that is, using a variety of techniques, which Gates identifies as the “poetry of
signification” (51). The trickster speaks in metaphor and with irony. The trickster
utters hyperbole, satirizes and ridicules, and is expert in the “rituals of insult and
naming” (54). The trickster’s barbs are not often direct, however; the preferred
method is intentional indirection (54), a technique of expressing in a “double voice,”
of meaning yet seeming-not-to-mean simultaneously. Both the trickster and the
trickster’s utterances are slippery. The trickster is a practitioner in “modes of
Signifyin(g),” a “rubric for various sorts of playful language games, some aimed at
reconstituting the subject while others are aimed at demystifying a subject” (54-55).

Gates draws out these practices of the Signifyin(g) Monkey from a traditional
oral poem in which a Monkey and Lion engage in verbal play and insult concerning
what an Elephant may or may not have purportedly expressed about the Lion (55-60). The Lion represents power and authority—the monkey’s oppressor. The
trickster Monkey outwits the Lion, however, through his use of figurative language,
symbolic code. The Monkey’s language confuses the Lion, who fails to comprehend the Monkey due to his “inability to mediate” the Monkey’s various levels of signification (55). The Lion, too dull to perceive the various significations of the Monkey’s language games, becomes frustrated, angry. The double-voiced verbal play essentially unsettles the established order. The Monkey’s language games, that is, function dialogically—not for the Lion but for the audience for whom the tale is told. While the Lion finally realizes that the joke has been on him, trouncing the Monkey at last, the audience for the tale is to comprehend the import of the Monkey’s significations, appreciate the capacity of carefully-wrought barbs to challenge and upset power and order, yet still recognize that power—the Lion—can trounce the Monkey in the end. The trickster may challenge power but must be careful of the potential consequences.

Just as tricksters can be found in all cultures, so too clowns and—like tricksters—in various guises. In his 1994 study *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy*, Ron Jenkins, a graduate of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College turned academic, examines practices of clowns and clowning in several nations—among them, Bali, Lithuania, South Africa, Italy, Japan, and the US. For Jenkins, clowns serve a serious social function well beyond merely providing entertainment to please an audience: “Every generation and culture invents new costumes and settings for its clowns, but the basic confrontation between the powerful and the powerless remains the same” (10). Like tricksters and signifying monkeys, clowns are a trope, a metaphor, a means of and technique for challenging
power indirectly. While the business of clowns is to evoke a laugh, Jenkins elaborates, even that laughter has a purpose: “In a world fraught with danger and despair, comedy is a survival tactic, and laughter is an act of faith” (1), and “When humor undermines the forces that stifle the basic human needs for freedom, justice, and dignity, laughter is experienced as a wave of liberating release” (2). In Jenkins’ appraisal of them, clowns function as a sort of Everyman: “To watch a clown emerge unscathed from impossible dilemmas gives us hope that we too may escape the forces that oppress our daily lives” (1). Clowns are thus “comic heroes,” who “seem to spring up wherever new forms of oppression threaten a community’s physical or spiritual survival” (10). Like tricksters and signifying monkeys, clowns overcome difficulties, provide audiences relief, the hope that perseverance against adversity is possible, that a seemingly formidable power can be effectively challenged.

While each of Jenkins’ case-studies centers on this theme of clowning as a means of challenging power, each also reveals how clowns and the practices they engage in are mediated according to the needs of the particular context. Clowns in Bali confront “cultural threats”—“the corrosive forces of Westernization”—by symbolically incorporating comedic representations of Westernization into comic dance to “insure the spiritual continuity of their traditions” (16). In Lithuania, clowns offer the populace respite and hope: “Ridiculing the [Soviet] enemy became a collective ritual that helped give [Lithuanians] the courage to fight for their freedom against all odds” (50). Due to the potential consequences of challenging a dominant power, Lithuanian clowns, like their trickster and Signifyin(g) Monkey counterparts,
developed covert techniques for challenging power indirectly: “Lithuanians channeled their hope of freedom into ridicule aimed at the hypocrisy of the Communist regime. Denied free speech, they resorted to coded forms of comic speech, waging an underground war of laughter in which parodies, jokes, and satire undermined the credibility of Soviet propaganda” (emphasis added; 57). Against the forces of South African apartheid, clowns in that context issued “scathing ridicule” at puppet-authorities in mock-trials as a form of “political protest” (85). According to Jenkins, in apartheid South Africa, joking at and of oppressors “signaled a demand for mutual respect and dignity” (86). While Italian clowns make fun of corrupt government officials (109), clowns in Japan mock conformity by celebrating “human eccentricities that are not tolerated in the mainstream of Japan’s orderly, efficient, and productive society” (143). Jenkins summarizes the circumstances and the effects of these sundry acts of clowning thusly:

[T]he most deeply liberating function of humor is to free us to hope for the impossible. Our sense of humor is a mirror of our aspirations, reflecting our desires to escape the limitations that circumscribe our lives. This is one of the reasons that comedy is so frequently censored. Authorities that maintain control by relying on the public’s diminished expectations are threatened by the power of unbridled laughter. Clowns are emblems of insubordination whose talent for subversion inspires the powerless with a hunger for revolt. (emphasis added; 10)
Tricksters, Signifyin(g) Monkeys, and clowns are mediators: they are positioned between power and the powerless, offering the latter both techniques and examples of how to challenge and ideally subvert authority and power.

In his 2005 study of comedy entitled *Comedy*, Andrew Stott explores the subversive power of humor. Humor in general, Stott notes, has “this strange ability simultaneously to recognize the social order and comically subvert it” (11). To Stott, this is the “logic” of humor: “Comedy thereby has the dual function of celebrating human relationships and merrymaking, while mocking what it considers ‘unnatural’” (32). As it mocks and ridicules humans and human relations, comedy may function subversively, especially some forms of comedy that fit the incongruity theory of humor, Stott contends: “As incongruity plays with taxonomies and hierarchies it suggests that these hierarchies are permeable and fluid rather than rigid and permanent” and thus the humor and concomitant laughter raised by incongruities occurs from the recognition of “a displacement of order that simultaneously acknowledges order and reveals its absurdity” (137). Some humor befitting incongruity theory, then, is potentially subversive—it can challenge accepted orthodoxies, epistemologies, taxonomies, hierarchies, suggesting that other ways of knowing and of being are possible. Tricksters, Signifyin(g) Monkeys, and clowns all use comedy subversively in ways that Stott identifies.

Clowns become “emblems of insubordination” primarily by manipulating tense, difficult situations fraught with crisis that they eventually overcome, allowing an audience to recognize that crisis is manageable, can be challenged and mediated.
That is, clowns allow an audience to experience catharsis, a notion this study examined in Chapter 3. As Aristotle put it, both tragedy and comedy work on the emotions to affect catharsis (Poetics 288), which, in Martha Nussbaum’s rendering of the term, results in a “clarification” (390)—an audience in experiencing catharsis gains clarification about some aspect of their lives. Further, such catharsis or clarification becomes a vehicle for “urging a course of action” (Rhetoric 35): what it realized or clarified is what can be altered or transformed, acted upon, staving off the need for catharsis or clarification. Or, in Jenkins’ words, clowns elicit “laughter to unsettle the audience into an awareness that something is wrong” (180).

A method clowns use to unsettle an audience, to provide it with an opportunity to experience catharsis and, perhaps implying a course of action, is the “double take” (Jenkins 207). The double-take is an act of re-seeing, of re-examining something to reconsider in order to revise its meaning. In this way, clowning can be subversive: “double takes present the public with the irrationality of social conventions they had assumed to be reasonable, and shock them into taking a fresh look at their cultural assumptions,” the intention or effect of which is to undermine “the stereotypes of a culture’s mythology by rendering them absurd” (207). As with ridicule with which an audience agrees and coheres around, subversive double-takes and the laughter they elicit can create unity or “community”: “By providing common targets for ridicule, contemporary clowns give audiences common ground for laughter and free them from the isolation that pervades so much of modern life” (208).
While in some contexts acts of clowning may symbolize insubordination, may create community, and may function to subvert dominant powers, this is less the case, Jenkins explains, in highly industrialized nations. After all, as Jenkins puts it, “the most prominent function of clowns in America is selling hamburgers” (171): “More fully industrialized countries like Italy, Japan, and the United States, which have distanced themselves from the subversive power of humor, are less prone to transform the insights of comedy into widespread social benefits” (207). This reduction has occurred in the US specifically, according to Jenkins, because “Eventually all comics in America are reduced to the status of consumer commodities through their appearances in sitcoms, talk shows, and Hollywood star vehicles” (171). As Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* posits, the category of “the public” has been coopted by capitalistic forces. Whereas the public sphere, as Habermas describes, once consisted of a rising middle-class of individual merchants and professionals who engaged in discourse that served as checks and balances against the powers-that-be and resulted in what came to be called “public opinion”—a unitary “opinion” ostensibly arrived at by consensus through critical discussion and debate of diverse private individuals concerning their private and public needs—following the advent of industrial capitalism, the former “public” sphere has come to be dominated by the interests of private, and very wealthy, individuals through mass media and advertising. Public culture has been transformed into consumer culture; as Habermas puts it, “The public sphere [...] was
replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” (160). The category of “the public,” that is, has given way to “publicity” in the modern sense of the term, a controlled and regulated discourse orientated toward “one tendency in common”: “abstinence from […] political debate” (163). The subversive potential of clowns in the US, following Habermas’ analysis, has been deflated through cooptation, as in the US under the capitalistic paradigm clowns have primarily become marketing-functions or balloon-shaping entertainers for children. There are of course some clowns who do not follow this formula—for example, art clowns, clowns who perform as members of Cirque de Soleil and in the Blue Man Group, and some comedians who use clowning methods as part of their routines. But clowns of this latter type are more the exception than the norm.

When un-coopted, tricksters, Signifyin(g) Monkeys, and clowns all employ ridicule as a means of resistance. Each ridicules covertly to critique dominant forces, indirectly and/or directly, depending on the particulars of the context. Ridicule-acts speak “directly” to those who comprehend the meaning within the double-voice and the double-take that constitutes a ridicule act, to those who share in the experience or who may identify with it from a similar conception of power relations. Moreover, such utterances may move through a subject or disputant to an audience, even potentially an audience of “third parties.” As will be examined at length in Chapter 6, Richard Dawkins shares that in some rhetorical situations he is not necessarily trying to sway an opponent nor an immediate audience but rather “a third party (or
a large number of third parties) who are listening in, or reading along,” a condition that especially applies to arguments that occur on the Internet.

Whereas clowns perform much of their cultural work through physical comedy—body movement, pantomime, and the like—tricksters and Signifyin(g) Monkeys primarily do theirs, as discussed above, through verbal utterances. One way to engage a target directly is through the creation of the agon known as “playing the dozens.” Despite the various racist assumptions and pronouncements embedded within it, Roger D. Abrahams 1962 *Journal of American Folklore* essay entitled simply “Playing the Dozens” remains a foundational text for grasping the linguistic practices and performative nuances of this “most interesting folkloristic phenomena” (209). As Abrahams describes, the “dozens” is a game, a “verbal contest” of showmanship in which participants exchange rounds of verbal “slurs,” “jabs,” and “insults” with the intent to best one another or win the competition (209-10). The dozens is a game of “verbal dexterity” involving “rhymes and puns,” “subtlety and innuendo,” and “linguistic (or paralinguistic) elements such as changes in pitch, stress, and sometimes syntax,” in which “the use of rhyme” itself becomes “a type of wit,” as each participant continues to build upon the established rhyme pattern (Abrahams 210, 211). As that final clause suggests (and Abrahams does not appear to notice), the dozens is a variation on the call and response tradition of gospel, work-song, and blues music, African-American cultural contributions in which a singer calls out a line, to which other singers or perhaps audience members respond, which is built upon through a process of accretion. In
the dozens, typical topics of exchange are mothers and fathers, often concerning compromises of social norms related to sexuality (Abrahams 211). The dozens shares a “unity of approach,” Abrahams puts it, with “signifying,” which he defines as “a technique of indirect argument or persuasion” (212). To Abrahams, the dozens as an “institution” serve several purposes, among them: the development of linguistic elasticity, the expression of emotion, the release of tension and anxiety, and the recognition of “the power of words” (213-15).

But the dozens is more than just a game of playful bullying through ridicule: it is a practice that conditions participants to ridicule and to accept ridicule—that is, being ridiculed. As Abrahams puts it,

> Being tested in a verbal battle in a group of this sort has immense potential repercussions because of the terror of disapproval, of being proved ineffectual and therefore effeminate, in the eyes of peers. This leads to the apparent paradox that those who are [presumably] most afraid of public humiliation have institutionalized a procedure of humiliation for the purpose of releasing aggressions and repressed instincts, while at the same time learning verbal skills. (215)

Abrahams then quotes Robert C. Elliot, who in his 1960 book *The Power of Satire* opines that “It is astonishing to find that the same people for whom ridicule’s destructive power holds such terror institutionalize it for therapeutic purposes; they turn its primary function inside out as it were, and ridicule properly conducted becomes a thing to be enjoyed [...]” (qtd. in Abrahams 215). Here, ridicule is a
learned technique: not just a matter of learning to use it productively and effectively but also learning how to take it, how not to be humiliated, experience shame or embarrassment, which, according to Bergson and Billig, as discussed in Chapter 2, is the prime function of ridicule as a corrective, the type and function of ridicule I call monological. By playing with ridicule, participants (to borrow from Elliot) turn it inside out—that is, transform ridicule from monological to dialogical.

Dialogical ridicule, unlike monological, does not just issue a corrective but wants engagement. As such, dialogical ridicule is at base performative. By “performative,” I mean that as Judith Butler uses it—in “the phenomenological tradition” (900)—in her seminal 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” which articulates how a category like gender is not “stable” but rather signifies “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts,” acts composed of “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds [that] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (900). Identity is thus “constructed, a performative accomplishment” (900-01).

So too, albeit in different ways, with that category called race, as Nadine Ehlers and others have convincingly demonstrated. Drawing from Butler, Ehlers asserts that “race is performative” “in much the same way” that Butler articulates concerning gender: “racial identity is formed [...] through a discursive name or assignment, that is, as black or white,” which the subject “is compelled to assume” (153-54). For the subject so named—or, hailed—“it is imperative that regularised norms be recited to
the degree that they are recognisable as reaffirming a certain discursive designation": race is thus “an action and activity—something one does” (155).

Although monological ridicule is not necessarily performative but can be, dialogical ridicule is always performative, always an act or, in Erving Goffman’s words, an “activity [...] transformed into a show”: a “performance [that] is ‘socialized,’ moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (44). To invite response, elicit engagement, dialogical ridicule must perform to the occasion—to adopt and re-enact certain stylized practices to a degree that they are recognizable as evoking or referring to some discursive designation or formations. A ridiculing performance that fails to effect this recognition-work will be misunderstood, if understandable at all, the ridiculer as a result likely considered ridiculous. Clowning is clearly performative, excessively—from over-sized shoes, baggy clothes, and enlarged hair to make-up galore, exaggerated gestures and bodily movements, and a smile—or frown—painted on to achieve a semblance of permanence. Indeed, the performative aspect of clowning is often so exaggerated or excessive that clowns can be said to embody the ridiculous, to be ridiculous. Like Shakespearean fools, then, clowns are part of but not fully in the social fabric—they are always to degrees outside of it. It may be that the excessive performance that is clowning, that embodies ridiculousness, is how clowns are able to make fun of, potentially upset and subvert orthodoxies and the like without impunity. Clowning may be serious business, but clowns aren’t often taken seriously.
Tricksters and Signifyin(g) Monkeys, for all they have in common with clowns, do not clown around as clowns do. Their performance is based in linguistic acts, in indirect, sideways, and inside out utterances that lead disputants to unfamiliar grounds. Recall the tale of the Monkey, Lion, and Elephant above that Gates, Jr. features. Master of the jungle, the Lion could just as well ignore the Monkey, without any loss of power whatsoever. But the Monkey tricks the Lion, angers the cat into believing the pachyderm has been making fun of him—that is, challenging his authority as master of the jungle. In the tale, this constitutes the Monkey’s performative element, which the Lion does not recognize as a performance. As a result, the Lion experiences what Fanon calls cognitive dissonance—he is (to appropriate Fanon’s terms) “made uncomfortable,” shocked by “evidence” that “works against” his “core belief” of himself as master of the universe that is the jungle. Unable to “rationalize, ignore, even deny” that which does not cohere with his belief, the Lion becomes angry.

Dialogical ridicule functions according to this logic. It intends to create disequilibrium. Effective dialogical ridicule—in the form of verbal play—aims rather to create conditions that result in some subject “unfreezing” (Bunker and Lisle’s terms) in order to effect change, to cause a subject to try out “new” “attitudes,” “values,” “behaviors,” and the like to arrive at a new understanding of relations. When dialogical ridicule is most effective, it instigates these processes and catalyzes transformation.

The Cakewalk and/as Ridicule
The cakewalk provides a fascinating glimpse into ways that an act of ridicule—especially a covert, indirect, and thus largely misunderstood act of ridicule—can function dialogically to interpolate and commence cultural transformation. With its origins in indigenous African musical forms and dance, the cakewalk was an original artistic creation developed by slaves to ridicule the dance style of slave masters. Whites who initially witnessed the dance, however, failed to recognize its subversive intent: instead of recognizing it for what it was—a caricature making fun of them—they attributed it to the buffoonery of social inferiors. As the dance continued to be practiced throughout southern plantations, however, soon whites joined in, competing among blacks to win the cake awarded for most ludicrous—or, rather, best—dancing. Soon the cakewalk would be conjoined to other African American cultural creations—the “Coon” song and ragtime music. These hybrids were performed on theatre stages throughout the country, thereby resulting in even greater exposure to white audiences, and in time these acts would travel to Europe, where they were highly esteemed. Though possibly not intended to, the cakewalk thus served to invite and promulgate processes of cultural transformation.

The cakewalk is an original black cultural production. As Brooke Baldwin notes, “the cakewalk can be identified as an Afro-American folk form with roots in African music through its traits of syncopation or suspended beat, polyrhythmic structure, signifying, improvisation [...]. All combine to make it a genuinely black cultural product” (211). With its origins in Africa, the cakewalk's purpose is peculiar
to the American context in which it was developed. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s entry “Cakewalk” in the compendium they co-edited in 2004, *Africana: Arts and Letters: An A-to-Z Reference of Writers, Musicians, and Artists of the African American Experience*, slaves developed the cakewalk to imitate “the Grand March that concluded cotillions and fancy balls given by whites” (121). The cakewalk was a parody, then, an exaggeration of what blacks perceived of as the stiff, rigid, formal-dancing practices of white plantation owners. Its function was to provide a means for blacks to ridicule whites, for subalterns to ridicule power, without evoking potentially violent consequences. “Although plantation owners often mistook the dance for childlike play,” Appiah and Gates observe, “the cakewalk in fact had a satirical purpose” (121). The cakewalk thus “uniquely combined” and represents, according to Eric Sundquist, “a consciousness of resistance to white subjugation” and “the creation of a new African American culture” (277): “the cakewalk necessarily fused African elements and New World acts in a conscious reaction to the world of the masters” (278). The cakewalk, a hybrid resulting from indigenous practices adapting to New World strictures, embodies ridicule with a purpose.

While it may be difficult to conceive of dance as subversive, as a means of challenging power, it should be noted that slaves had few safe means of expression available. To express discontent or dissatisfaction with slave life, let alone to critique it outright, would be a dangerous position for a slave to occupy. As this study has stressed repeatedly, to challenge power has consequences: the
consequences are even more amplified in the context of a slave economy. In his 1830 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, for example, David Walker explicitly ridiculed whites, especially so-called religious whites as hypocrites and slave owners as tyrants. Born free, Walker had never been a slave, and he resided and wrote in the north. His ridiculing and challenging of power had grave consequences nonetheless. Soon after publishing the *Appeal*, attempts to suppress its circulation in the south were underway. Moreover, Walker himself was threatened: the state of Georgia offered a reward of $10,000 for Walker alive, $1000 for Walker dead (Zinn 180).

One prominent former slave was unwilling to appraise dance as a potentially subversive act. In his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Frederick Douglass is highly critical of the few entertainments slave owners permitted slaves. On some Sundays and during the brief time between Christmas and New Years that some slaves were allowed entertainment, Douglass explains, slaveholders encouraged slaves to engage “in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, [boxing,] running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky” (51). These activities were permitted not because slave owners believed slaves needed recourse to such entertainment, Douglass continues, but because they would “much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” who may desire, like Douglass, to learn to read (55). To Douglass, these entertainments
are part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery. They are professedly a custom established by the benevolence of the slaveholders, and one of the grossest frauds committed upon the downtrodden slave. They do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it. (52)

As Douglass recognizes, entertainment was enforced to occupy the time, bodies, and minds of slaves in part to stave off potential rebellion; such entertainments “serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity”: “From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave,” Douglass contends, “I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection” (51). Douglass’ analysis of entertainment, in particular dance, however, may be tempered by the rhetorical purpose of his Narrative, whose audience consisted primarily of northern abolitionists. Throughout the Narrative Douglass is careful to avoid describing black behavior that could be considered buffoonery, instead stressing the desire, ability, and necessity of blacks to attain literacy and other activities prized by northern whites. A celebration of dance, music, and sport as potentially subversive expressions, that is, could potentially undermine Douglass’ emphasis on the value of literacy.
Despite Douglass’ analysis of dance as an entertainment of distraction, the cakewalk not only allowed blacks to make fun of whites: it also intrigued many whites to a degree that they soon came to mimic the dance, appropriating it, holding contests among themselves to determine who could develop the most ridiculous—which qualified as “best”—dance moves. The irony is thus doubled, even tripled, as the dance resulted in “whites imitating blacks imitating whites” (Appiah and Gates 121). In these ways, ridicule served a dialogical purpose: despite or perhaps in spite of the potential consequences of subalterns attempting to ridicule power, blacks ridiculed whites, whites appropriated the form, with both blacks and whites at times competing against each other for the prized cake from which the dance got its name. While it may be tempting to claim that, by participating in cakewalks, whites ridiculed ridicule of themselves, this would be so only if some whites recognized the intent of the cakewalk. Most probably believed they were merely ridiculing by imitating dancing blacks. However this may be, the cakewalk, at base a physical act of ridicule, functioned to precipitate conditions that could allow for dialogical ridicule to occur: though it may not have been intended to invite white participation, it eventually became “a white dance craze” (Sundquist 277). Though it was likely not intended to invite white participation—rather, had those whites realized that is was intended to mock them they would likely have become as angry as the Lion was with Monkey—the result was participation—blacks and whites initially competed against each other—and eventually appropriation: whites took the dance as their own.
The cakewalk was so enormously popular later in the nineteenth-century that it moved from plantations to the stage, traveling with white, black, and mixed-race minstrelsy shows. Throughout the 1890s, “cakewalk contests popped up nationwide” and by the turn of the century “spilled over” into “even European society” (Baldwin 214). Moreover, the cakewalk gained even greater acclaim when it was coupled with two other original black artistic creations: “Coon” songs and ragtime music. In 1898, Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s musical Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk, featuring 26 black performers, opened at New York’s Casino Theatre Roof Garden, which, Sundquist expresses in pun, “represented a real step forward” (283). Or, as Cook had joyfully exclaimed, “Negroes were at last on Broadway, and there to stay. Gone was the uff-dah of the minstrel! Gone the Massa Linkum stuff! We were artists and [...] nothing could stop us, and nothing did for a decade” (qtd. in Sundquist 283). Cook’s proclamation notwithstanding, the show’s success was paradoxical, as Sundquist notes. It may have resulted in blacks occupying stages once reserved only for whites, becoming “artists” performing in front of white audiences, but Clorindy nonetheless propagated what became other stereotypes of black life—namely, the “coon” epithet, a term which lead performer Ernst Hogan sang in his number “All Coons Look Alike to Me.”

Appearing in the same year as Clorindy, 1898, A Trip to Coontown further cemented the stereotype, even though the musical was “the first entirely produced and managed by blacks” (Sundquist 282). While it may seem as though both the
cakewalk and the “coon”-type can be perceived as maintaining and thus perpetuating racist stereotypes, thus continuing to justify white subjugation of blacks, both also contributed to altering and eventually toppling some then-dominant racist formations, allowing increasing desegregated contact among blacks and whites. Just as whites mimicked blacks mimicking and ridiculing whites in the cakewalk, “coon shouting” also took on its own life: “contestants, both black and white, vied for audience approval and vaudeville roles, with mimicry of pretended black manners—the proper way to eat a watermelon, for example—an essential part of the portrayal” (Sundquist 284). While whites who participated in blackface minstrelsy and who competed in “coon shouting” contests may have felt a “sudden eminency” of superiority by ridiculing blacks, the many black people who likewise corked-up or performed the “coon” role to gain access to the stage would have not had the same psychological experience as whites. But participating in acts perceived as self-ridicule, a concept to be discussed later, can be an effective rhetorical move for drawing attention to power imbalances in ways that direct confrontation with power would likely fail.

In the 1890s another artistic hybrid was invented when black performance-partners Bert Williams and George Walker danced the cakewalk to the rhythms of ragtime, creating “a national craze among both blacks and whites” (Appiah and Gates 121). As Gates and Cornel West note in the book they co-authored and published in 2000, The African-American Century: How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country, Williams and Walker recognized throughout the north both the waning
popularity of whites in black-face performing minstrelsy and the increasing appeal of new forms of black dance and of the newly developed musical form rag-time. Williams and Walker had spotted a niche in the entertainment market that the two could take advantage of:

Black movement, pace, and style were being appropriated by white entertainers drifting away from outdated minstrelsy. Williams and Walker knew they could provide black entertainment better than white people pretending to be black, so they billed themselves “The Two Real Coons” and went on the road. [...] Williams and Walker’s genius lay not in their innate talent, but in their marriage of the cakewalk and ragtime. (Gates and West 40)

From a dance form invented to ridicule slave masters to a dance craze shared among whites and blacks, the cakewalk through Williams and Walker became the rag-time musical, which appealed to and reached even greater audiences as Williams and Walker took their act across the nation to San Francisco. So popular was the newly-developed form that even President Theodore Roosevelt led “a cakewalk promenade down the East Room at a White House party”: “The first black music and the first black dance had ‘crossed over,’” Gates and West stress, “and begun an unstoppable cultural process” (40).

The popularity of the cakewalk resulted, as might be expected, in some backlash. One means of attempting to maintain and control its potential subversive power and influence was its appropriation and cooption by white capitalists.
Baldwin’s 1981 essay “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality” catalogs many appropriated representations of the dance. Exaggerated, racist caricatures of wide-eyed, thick-lipped blacks dancing the cakewalk were created to sell all sorts of products, from cigars and coffee to Arm and Hammer Baking Soda:

Similar derogatory images proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and not only on postcards, Sunday comics, illustrated humor magazines, children’s toys, advertising, lithographs, sheet music covers, stereo cards, product boxes and assorted knick-knacks all featured stereotypical racial imagery in which blacks stole chickens, devoured watermelons, wielded razors, picked cotton, gambled, imitated white dress and speech, smiled widely, and danced and danced and danced. (Baldwin 205)

In all its appropriated, racist renditions, according to Baldwin, “the purpose of the caricature was the same”: “to portray cakewalking blacks as buffoons who could never take that final step, no matter how high-kicking, into white culture and high society” (207). One intention of this cultural practice was to allow “one group the chance to laugh at the ‘inferiority’ of another” (Baldwin 207). Such ridiculing of blacks, that is, fits the superiority theory of humor—it means both to degrade blacks and to highlight the eminency of whites. Another intention of the creation of these stereotypical representations is to attempt to control and contain black encroachments on white power: if black artistic productions are appealing to white audiences, attracting white involvement, and thus influencing whites, to ridicule
blacks is a means of reminding both blacks and whites of the presumed proper (to apply Foucault’s terms) space, place, and rank that each is to occupy in the maintenance of white power. An additional intent or effect, it may be noted, follows from Habermas’ analysis of the cooptation of publicity: by reducing the cakewalk and its potential transgressive effects into essentialized, stereotypical images to market products, “political debate” and potential concomitant political reconfigurations are elided, consumed by the “pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption.”

After Walker’s early death, Williams continued to act, sing, dance, and joke, to increasingly larger—and whiter—audiences. From 1910 to 1919, Williams became a member of Ziegfeld’s Follies, a company whose club served a segregated—all white—audience. As a member of the Follies, Williams met Australian comedian Carl Errol, the two together producing “what many think the funniest sketch in Follies history” (Cullen 1211). While propriety did not allow the two to reverse roles of master and servant, Errol portrayed a befuddled employer with Williams as the wily servant, a reversal of the subservient role Williams had usually assumed when performing with Walker. As partner to Errol, that is, Williams acted the role of trickster, linguistically discombobulating his partner to elicit laughs from the audience: whether directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly, Williams as partner to Errol was able to play with and challenge white notions of propriety. A “star of big, splashy, white revues,” describes Cullen, Williams when paired with Australian comedian Errol “represented a first onstage” performance “between a Negro and
Caucasian comedian” (1205, 1211). As Cullen speculates, Williams quite possibly performed in front of more white audiences than any other vaudevillian of color (1208). A dancer, singer, and comedian, Williams “appeared in the most famous mainstream revues of his time, was half of a comedy team that was among the best-paid acts in big-time vaudeville, costarred in a series of highly successful black musical comedies, [and] made 80 sound recordings” (Cullen 1206)—a rather prolific career for any performer, black, white, or otherwise.

Though not the first black vaudevillian, Bert Williams was to vaudeville what Jackie Robinson was to baseball. Remaining on the stage as long as he could despite being gravely ill from pneumonia and complications due to alcoholism, Williams collapsed onstage in February of 1922. On 4 March 1922, Williams died, at the age of 46. Cullen notes, “Thousands, both black and white, attended funeral services” for Williams, at which Errol served as a pallbearer (1211-12). W. C. Fields characterized Williams as “The funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew.” This description suggests Williams had the blues, which contemporary Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, in his second volume of poetry published in 1927, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, defined as the condition when one “laughs to keep from crying” (3)—which resonates with Jenkins’ contention, cited above, that laughter may be “experienced as a wave of liberating release.” More significantly, Field’s characterization bears out W. E. B. DuBois’ theory in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that black folk in the US—even those like Williams not truly “black” but considered so due to the US’s often conflicting notions of race—experience a
“double-consciousness,” a self-conscious awareness tempered by a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (45). Such a person, Du Bois articulates, “simply wishes to [...] be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (45-46). Indeed, just as Jackie Robinson later did for baseball, Williams faced the doors of show-business and opened them widely, providing an opportunity for many other black and mixed-raced performers to follow his footsteps onto the stage and into the limelight. Williams’ various accomplishments and the respect afforded him at his funeral are considerable, especially considering that only two generations prior slavery was a social norm throughout much of the US.

As a member of the Follies, Williams sang “the song most identified with him,” as Cullen puts it, “Nobody” (1209). Full of pathos, “Nobody” is a purposefully pitiful tune, its lyrics representing a lonely, unappreciated, unloved, socially-bereft persona. Its six stanzas, each concluding with the common refrain “Nobody,” emphasize the persona’s isolation. The second stanza, for instance, stresses the effects of temperate weather and poverty—“When winter comes with snow an’ sleet, / and me with hunger and cold feet, / who says ‘Ah, here’s two bits, go an’ eat!’ / Nobody”—while the penultimate fifth stanza highlights the persona’s personal and social isolation—“When all day long things go amiss, / and I go home to find some bliss, / who hands to me a glowin’ kiss? / Nobody.” While it may be tempting to interpret the song as a rendition of William’s condition as a black male in the largely
For the purposes of this study I will instead focus on the song as a form of self-ridicule designed to contest the then-dominant racial formations.

Self-ridicule—that is, ridicule of the self—intends to draw attention to the condition within which the self exists to invite others to ridicule, humiliate, or make fun of the person ridiculing the self. Self-ridicule can serve several purposes. I have found it useful to ridicule myself as a writing teacher, for example, as a means of contesting the authority bestowed upon me by the institutions for which I teach. Given that I appear to students as a white male, thus automatically invested with authority in a culture dominated by patriarchal white supremacy, my aim is multiple: on the one hand, I mean to contest the authority allotted to me culturally, to allow students a sense of freedom to critique both masculinity and whiteness; on another hand, I self-ridicule because one of my main pedagogical aims as a writing teacher is to assist students to become their own authors and authorities, taking control of and responsibility for their own writing acts. Of course, such self-ridicule is really just an act, a performance, as throughout the term I still maintain the authority invested in me by the institution of higher education to assess and judge student writing, to determine grades and, ultimately, whether students will pass the course. But to draw attention to myself in such a way that challenges my authority, even if artificially, encourages—or, rather, invites—students to assume some semblance of authority, to take risks, to be willing to challenge me or the ideas and
recommendations I present so that they can take ownership—or, that is, responsibility—for what and how they write.

As should be evident in this example, even though I may employ self-ridicule as a means of seeming to dilute or weaken the power allotted to me culturally, I am nonetheless invested with and working from a position of power. While my ridicule of my self is a performance intended to benefit students, it is also a low-stakes performance in that I do not actually lose power as a result. That said, subjects lacking white privilege can still effectively employ—and throughout western history have employed—self-ridicule.

In the face of power historically, slaves often resorted to self-ridicule as means of diffusing the potential of violence. While not exactly a means of self-ridicule, defacing as it may be, a means of survival in such conditions is resorting to the concept known as “the mask.” In the 1853 production Twelve Years a Slave, for example, Solomon Northrup critiques those who doubt the injurious effects of slavery and attempt to ameliorate its effects: “Let them know the heart of the poor slave—learn his secret thoughts—thoughts he dare not utter in the hearing of a white man” (158). That is, to elide the violence that may follow should slaves voice what they truly feel and believe about the conditions of slavery, Northrup here reveals, slaves masked their selves, acted and spoke in ways that fit slave master conceptions of reality. In her 1891 narrative From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom, former-slave Lucy A. Delaney divulges, “Oh! The impenetrable mask of these poor black creatures! How much of joy, of sorrow, or
misery and anguish they have hidden from their tormentors” (18). In *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, Frances Smith Foster observes how slaves and especially narrators of slave-narratives had to express covertly “without raising suspicions that they were advocating social equality or seriously challenging theories of racial superiority” so as not to “threaten” or “unnecessarily antagoniz[e]” whites (4, 9, 13). Reliance on potentially subversive linguistic techniques such as those Gates, Jr. identifies above—intentional-indirection, double-voicing, and other “modes of Signifyin[g]”—allowed slaves to mask their voices, speak in way that could mean one thing to the slave-master and quite another to those who shared in the experience and thus could comprehend the complex discursive formations embedded within. The mask is thus a performance.

Though the institution of slavery had been out of force for half a century by the time Williams joined *Ziegfeld’s Follies*, the conditions that could justify slavery largely prevailed. Should Williams directly challenge the systemic, institutionalized systems that dictated that he be servant to Errol’s role as master, unemployment might have been the least of Williams’ problems. Instead, Williams throughout his career engaged in acts of tricksterism and signifyin’, often adopting a double-voice so as to seem-not-to-mean for some audience members, whilst potentially being heard and comprehended by other, perhaps third-party audiences. In “Nobody,” for example, Williams’ persona’s lyrics invite ridicule. The persona is unloved, unappreciated, unacknowledged, a loner in a social system—basically, an outcast.
By the final refrain it becomes clear that this condition was not just foisted upon the persona but that it is also one the persona has had to acclimate to, accept:

I ain't never done nothin’ to nobody,
I ain’t never got nothin’ from nobody, no time!
And until I get somethin’ from somebody, sometime,
I don’t intend to do nothin’ for nobody, no time!
Nobody, no time!

Isolated, bereft of community, just as the persona has had “nobody” do anything resembling kindness for him, he in turn will not engage in the social compact, will not bother to help or be kind to others. How audience members respond to the song is significant. Some may interpret it as the ravings of a “loser,” a social outcast. Some may perceive of it as a plea for companionship. Some may hear it as an analysis of the modern condition accentuated by urbanity—a critique of a condition that results in isolated, atomized individuals lacking community. Other interpretations are possible. However these may be, by drawing attention to the self in such terms, by self-ridiculing the persona’s lack of human contact and kindness, the all-white audience that constitutes a Ziegfeld’s Follies’ audience should recognize that the singer is a black man in a sea of white faces, that while Williams may have “made it,” “crossed over” to become a member of the Follies, Williams is nonetheless a social and racial “Nobody” whose movement and possibilities are curtailed by segregation and the racist social and legal system dominating the US at that time. By a fiction of
law, Williams is “Nobody.” But his song “Nobody” calls for love, for respect, for recognition as a fellow human, with human needs, among humans.

Whereas monological ridicule demands a change—conformity to or compliance with some configuration of ideas—it is a limited, circumscribed change. Through intentional indirection, puns, and other forms of language play, dialogical ridicule invites its subject(s) and audience to re-see some configuration with the aim of reconstituting it, revising it. It means to create conditions that allow for transformation. As such, dialogical ridicule is often subversive, challenging prevailing hierarchies and power.

The next chapter, the final of this dissertation, examines ridicule on the Internet. In that domain, where ridicule can function either monologically or dialogically, it tends to be used mainly for monological purposes in the sites the chapter analyzes: comment-sections on social websites and in memes. Moreover, those who post ridicule on the Internet are often masked, shielded by anonymity. But rather than use that trope to contest or challenge prevailing hierarchies, the tendency is to affirm dominant ideologies and social norms. Finally, the chapter will speculate on how use of the Internet affects human consciousness.
Chapter 6: Internet Ridicule

As it has always been, ridicule is adaptive. This is among the central tenets of this dissertation. It is no surprise, then, that especially in the 21st century, ridicule has adapted to the peculiar conditions that mark the World Wide Web, an expressive medium quite different from its predecessors. Whereas the book, newspapers, radio, and television, for example, transmit information more or less unidirectionally—from creators through media to users—the Internet (and the World Wide Web it supports) provides space for users to respond to content as well as to interact with each other. It is in these exchanges that ridicule has mainly flourished, appearing in nearly every Internet space that allows for user interaction. Though this study of ridicule certainly has bearing on all aspects of the new media—especially on mobile interactive devices and multicasting, narrowcasting, and even unicasting technology such as cell-phones and Twitter as well as virtual social spaces such as interactive video games and Second Life—the particular focus is on websites where the public tends to socialize and interact with each other, sites in which ridicule appears most commonly as a mode of expression. Entire social websites such as Reddit, Gawker, and Digg, among many others, ridicule celebrities, political figures, and private people engaging in activities perceivable as ridiculous, to which users respond accordingly—ridiculing content as well as each other. Facebook’s “News Feed” is another area in which one may be exposed to ridicule. Comment-sections on corporate-owned websites featuring articles on sport, music, and other popular phenomena are also replete with ridicule. Many memes traffic in
ridicule. In this purportedly shared world, interactions are not limited geographically or demographically, no one entity “owns” or controls the Internet, and thus ridicule can be used by any person—provided that person possesses the technology and skill to access the Internet and produce and post content—in any way she or he sees fit. Wherever humans travel in this virtual world, ridicule has followed.

This study of ridicule both as a rhetorical trope and as a function of discourse has direct application to ridicule on the Internet. Whether issued on a sidewalk, on a school playground, on a stage, or on the Internet, some ridicule acts are unidirectional demands for compliance, while others invite negotiation or mediation with the aim of instigating individual, social, or cultural transformations. The theory of how ridicule works elaborated in Chapter 2, moreover, has direct applications to how ridicule functions on the Internet: some notion of “normalcy” or of “right” or “wrong” is always implied by and in an act of ridicule. Additionally, the implications in Chapters 4 and 5 concerning usages of ridicule by and against power also have some bearing on the uses of ridicule on the World Wide Web. In the maintenance of power, some nation-states such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea routinely censor and reduce access to the Internet to suppress information and to control and regulate users. Website hosts, chat-room moderators, and bloggers may flag, censor, or ban guests who ridicule. Furthermore, some acts of ridicule—once cast as “bullying”—have now been renamed cyberbullying to reflect the proliferation of Internet ridicule and its deleterious effects, especially among youth. The creation of
the term cyberbullying would seem to indicate that bullying as an act of ridicule operates according to a different logic or functions differently than traditional, face-to-face bullying.

Though ridicule has adapted to the new medium that is the Internet, it is not “new” ridicule. It may be called cyber-ridicule, for example, but the appended word only extends to the medium in which it appears. When conceiving this study of ridicule, I had initially presumed that ridicule on the Internet would operate by a different logic than ridicule in other domains and in other media. However, Internet ridicule does not operate according to a “new” or different logic. Ridicule may have adapted, but it has not altered in function or in effect. Rather, it remains an interpretation issued as an argument either to demand change—compliance with a configuration of ideas, ideology, or social norm—or to invite transformation—a revision or reconstitution of some extant formation. Nor have ridicule’s forms radically altered. Whereas in traditional public spaces it is more likely to be issued orally and on the Internet in writing, both constitute discursive acts. Memes that ridicule combining a visual with text do not differ considerably from “old”-media newspaper and magazine comics and other forms of traditional memes. Although ridicule as a means of effecting change has not altered following the advent of the Internet, in its adaptation to the Internet, however, ridicule may be said to have evolved, but only in so far as the Internet can be considered an evolved media.

Although similar in function and effect to ridicule pre-the Internet, ridicule on the Internet does nonetheless differ considerably in some ways. On the Internet,
ridicule as an act seems to have increased, but possibly only because it has become more permanent—it can be recorded, stored, and traced—and is thus less temporal, especially when transmitted among individuals publicly as then it is only experienced by its direct target and possibly an immediate audience. Ridicule on the Internet may seem to have a greater, vaster reach, but only because the Internet allows it to travel farther, especially when some Internet artifact becomes or is deemed “viral.” One major difference concerning ridicule before and after the advent of the Internet, most significantly, is possibly the reduction of consequences of ridiculing power. Excluding uses of ridicule in those certain nation-states that directly censor or limit Internet access and use, any person with the means and skill to post ridicule on the Internet can ridicule nearly anyone or anything she or he wants, usually without serious personal consequence other than perhaps being banned from accessing or posting to a particular website comment section or blog. (This is not to infer that some who have experienced Internet ridicule have not been affected profoundly, as many suicides, among youth especially, have been attributed to Internet ridicule, to cyberbullying.) While Internet anonymity has allowed for ridicule to proliferate without much if any material consequence to its issuer, ridicule in function and effect has not altered at all on the Internet: Internet ridicule still operates monologically or dialogically.

Ridicule is so prevalent on the Internet, in comment-sections especially, that it would be impossible to catalog. For that matter, what qualifies as “the new media” in many cases is not “new” media, especially as it concerns the Internet: it's
traditional, “old” media uploaded on and posted to the now not-so-new medium that is the Internet. As a result, much of the Internet’s content that engages in acts of ridicule is initially from traditional media—clips of early twentieth-century cartoons or recent segments of “The John Stewart Show,” for example—but in a “new” format. The new media, that is, has assimilated all previous media into a new synthesis.

What particularly makes the new media new, along with its ability to assimilate all previous media, is several factors, all of which relate to ridicule’s presence on the Internet. Unlike previous media, the Internet provides immediate accessibility, its content can become permanent (if not erased or deleted), it has an open nature—nearly any one anywhere can contribute as a creator and/or as a commentator—and Internet users are often anonymous, thus shielded from repercussions that may follow from ridiculing in non-cyber spaces. A result of these factors, as will be discussed below, is that issuances of ridicule, cyberbullying especially, can reach a far larger audience than that of ridicule uttered orally or gestured physically in material spaces. Like monological ridicule as examined in Chapter 4, ridicule posted in comment-sections not only effects group cohesion but also functions to exert and insist on the power of the ridiculer: it becomes a means of establishing a presence, of announcing that any who challenge the ridiculer may also be subject to ridicule. As a result, ridicule in the form of cyberbullying from an anonymous source may be more impactful than traditional bullying done by a familiar person. Ridicule on the Internet, moreover, sometimes becomes viral, as evidenced by the many memes featuring ridicule that circulate widely. Because
Internet ridicule can reach far more many people than ridicule issued in material spaces, it can even affect unintended audiences who may happen upon the ridicule years if not decades after it has been posted, which enlarges the potential, as Richard Dawkins intimates, of ridicule as persuasion. In a space with few to no consequences, where users may post ridicule at will, the restraints typical of non-cyber spaces do not obtain. The Internet thus takes on and perhaps even inflates various features of a Bakhtinian carnivalesque environment. As this chapter will conclude, users do not just extend themselves onto the Internet; rather, the relationship is reciprocal, as use of the Internet has affected human consciousness as well. In social sites especially, ridicule has become a dominant form of expression on the Internet.

**Ridicule on the Internet’s Vast Virulence**

Many theorists and critics of the new media are concerned with the medium’s potential to give rise to a utopian or dystopian future (Everett and Caldwell xii; Hassan and Thomas xvii; Torr 13-14). The title of Alex Lightman’s 2002 book synthesizes various allusions (or, mixes many metaphors) from literary and scientific realms to capture the optimism of the former camp: *Brave New Unwired World: The Digital Big Bang and the Infinite Metaphor*. In contrast, John David Ebert’s 2011 book, *The New Media Invasion: Digital Technologies and the World They Unmake*, laments that, “if the new media universe is to thrive,” then it will hasten “the murder of an entire way of life that has existed for centuries” (3). Others have traced the Internet’s effects on what Mark Federman, in an online publication, calls
“inter-personal dynamics.” In his 2009 book You are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto, Jaron Lanier asserts that the Internet “tend[s] to pull us into life patterns that gradually degrade the ways in which each of us exists as an individual” since they are “oriented towards treating people as relays in a global brain” (120). The solutions to such potential problems have become common-place—turn off the computer, go outside, interact with humans. Curiously, these moralizing criticisms of the Internet’s potential to alter traditional life patterns and experience echo the Aristotelian and 17th- and 18th-century critiques of ridicule, as described in Chapter 3: used properly by the right people, both the Internet and ridicule may enrich life; used improperly, both may degrade life.

A 2011 television-commercial for a Toyota product captures this sense of anxiety about the alleged attraction of the Internet—its presumed ability to deter people from “life”—and, by association, gently ridicules those who, like the commercial’s protagonist, substitute Internet experience for social and outdoor experience. As should be expected, the thirty-second advertisement has been uploaded to Youtube and thus had been assimilated by the Internet. Within the commercial’s first five seconds, the site for ridicule is established. The first screen is a close-up of the female protagonist’s face, her eyes focused on a laptop in the foreground. She begins, “I read an article, well, I read the majority of an article online[...]” As she speaks these words, her face and eyes then lift from the laptop’s screen to focus on the camera, engaging the advertisement’s audience with direct eye-contact. The implication is she will speak to viewers intimately, personally, even
though before the commercial concludes she will once again be seduced by Internet attractions. Already the commercial has signaled that the audience is to be amused by her: she embodies a sort of unselfconscious ridiculousness. While she initially claims to have “read an article,” that phrase is quickly amended: she did not read the entire article, only possibly skimmed it—“the majority” of it—and read it online, which is to suggest for some of the audience a sort of superficial reading. She continues, sharing that the article is “[…] about how older people are becoming more and more anti-social.” At the words “older people,” the camera shows the marketed product cruising along a wooded road, two bicycles racked to the top. Two “older people,” a male driver and a female passenger, are then shown in the front seats of the car, talking and laughing—that is, socializing—as the protagonist connects the article’s claim to her immediate life-concern: “So I was really aggressive with my parents about joining Facebook.” To the protagonist, time indoors on “Facebook,” not out and about in nature, constitutes a social life.

All the while, the camera shifts between the two locations—at a table in a kitchen sits the rather pale, sedentary female, with camera-cuts to the active, laughing parents removing bicycles from a roof-top rack. She goes on, her tone judgmental—“My parents are up to 19 friends now,” she says sarcastically, then appears to mouth the words “So sad”—while the camera cuts back to the couple, sustaining them in the frame for several seconds, as they bicycle along a wooded trail with others around their age, smiling and laughing along the way. The camera then cuts back to the actress’ face, eyes still engaging the commercial’s audience, as
she contrasts her online profile to theirs—“I have 687 friends”—and then zooms in for a close-up as she proclaims in all seriousness, “This is living.” Not even a second later, a duration of time intended to emphasize her inability to disengage from the Internet, she is absorbed by her laptop, and then mouths, “What?” before smilingly exclaiming, in a kind of cutesy, teasing tone, “This is not a real puppy. That’s too small to be a real puppy.” For a final shot, the camera then cuts back to the parents returning from the bicycle ride, with friends, to the featured vehicle. A male voice over then identifies its make and model, followed by the slogan “Keep on rolling” as the camera fades to an all-white screen promoting the corporate name and logo.

This is a crafty commercial, one that makes fun of online experience while eventually becoming a part of the Internet experience it has mocked. The protagonist is set up for ridicule from the beginning. Her reading habits suspect, she is essentially immobile, lured in by online attractions. She believes possessing 687 social media friends—a number so vast she could not have personally met all of them—is really, truly “living.” The audience is to perceive, in Lanier’s words, “the ways” that she “exists as an individual” has been “degrade[d].” Meanwhile, her fictitious parents are—the automobile maker wants its audience to believe, thanks to its use of its product—really “living” as they cruise along in the marketed car in a bucolic setting, windows up, before setting out to bicycle through the woods with alleged friends, clearly enjoying the experience as signaled by their smiles. In contrast, the actress only smiles once, immediately after making the paradoxical claim concerning an online image not being “a real puppy.” Even if the image she
observed had been of a genuine adolescent canine, it is still not “a real puppy.” At best, it’s merely a conglomerate of pixels approximating the visual form of a dog.

More to the point, her captivation by an Internet meme, posted image, or Youtube video of a “puppy”—the source is never revealed—is juxtaposed with a meaningful life in which adventure, exercise, and friends signal what is right, good, and appropriate. She thus becomes ridiculous, a ripe site for ridicule. Her use of the medium that is the Internet has resulted in her conflating Facebook and life, pixels and a dog.

For some audience members, this advertisement sets up its protagonist to be laughed at, mocked. Such is the laughter of superiority theory humor. “Facebook” is not “life”: life is comprised of social experiences, ideally—at least as the advertisement juxtaposes the two—in a natural setting. Yet, those who identify with the commercial’s protagonist, those who spend much of any given day online—whether for work, educational, or social purposes—may laugh the laughter of relief theory, which is really laughing at the self—a recognition of some aspect of the self in the protagonist. Laugh as an audience may, it is Toyota who enjoys the last laugh. The corporation creates this fiction of anxiety over the Internet subsuming supposed real-life experience and then offers its product as resolution. Moreover, the advertisement becomes a part of the culture it critiques. Though the commercial initially and fleetingly appeared on the medium that is television, thereafter it is uploaded to the master medium that is the Internet, for anyone to revisit as long as the Internet remains. Uploaded to Youtube on 6 July 2011, the advert as of 30
October 2013 has been viewed by 338,729 users, garnered 928 thumbs-up and 91 thumbs-down, and received 603 comments. Of the comments, most express appreciation of its humor, some even playing up and forwarding the ridicule. More so, some only see what they want to see, commenting on the appearance of and thus objectifying the protagonist—e.g., the first of the two “Top Comments,” from one year ago, “That girl is cute,” is among the least offensive of comments made about her—thereby maintaining and promoting sexist ideology. This, too, is authorized by the advertisement’s depiction of a female as a site for ridicule—she is to be mocked and made fun of, continuing a tradition of which Christine de Pizan protested several centuries ago.

For all that is new on and about the Internet, the medium reproduces and thereby maintains many established traditions. It is not the Internet itself, however, that has done this: the medium’s users create and post content, surf it, circulate it, make some aspects become “viral,” and comment on content. Ridicule is prevalent on the Internet, at social sites especially, because users want it that way. If users ceased to visit, comment on, and thus not support websites that ridicule, then these sorts of websites would not exist on the Web. Instead, user activity ensures not only their continued presence but also contributes by posting comments replete with ridicule. Ridicule is present on the Internet because users want it there.

Comment-sections of websites and blogs that report on current events and entertainment such as sport and music and that provide views on potentially controversial topics such as religion and politics are rife with ridicule. While the
functions and effects of the ridicule are consistent with ridicule as monological and as dialogical, concepts the previous chapters examine, the targets of the ridicule vary. In general, Internet users ridicule two targets: a website itself—including host, platform, content, and creator—and other users. Website “content” can include anything from the design of a website to a sidebar advertisement, an image accompanying an article, and especially the content of an article. As for the latter, any aspect from the subject of the article to the article’s writing can be subjected to ridicule. Ridicule among and between comment-section users generally takes several forms. Intra-user ridicule can target any aspect of a user. Some users ridicule the content of other users’ postings: opinions they disagree with; poorly articulated posts; posts that include spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Some ridicule user avatars, including even the lack of an avatar, as if accepting a website’s generic, default avatar instead of selecting a specific, representative avatar is some sort of moral shortcoming. Also common is ridicule as insult, especially ad hominem attacks.

Would those who ridicule on the Internet in these ways also deploy it thusly in non-cyber social spaces? Would those who post sexist comments about the automobile advertisement’s actor utter those same statements to her in person? Of course, some would—and perhaps be met with a quick slap to the face. But I suspect that many would not suffer the potential consequences. A commonplace Internet joke involves a young male who posts demeaning and slanderous comments from the safety of his mother’s basement. Had this young male made such comments in a
public space, the joke implies, he’d have been responded to in kind: an ad hominem attack might be met with fisticuffs. But in an environment in which typical social restraints do not obtain, in which Foucault’s gaze is virtually blinded, some Internet users resort to behavior or to expressions that they very well may not display or utter otherwise. In this way, the Internet has taken on some features of a Bakhtinian carnival.

Although the social world of or within the World Wide Web has taken on some features of a carnival, it has not, so far, achieved something like the ultimate purpose of carnival, which is transformation or regeneration. In Rabelias and His World, as discussed in previous chapters, Bakhtin emphasizes that what “prevails” at carnival is “renewal”: the function of carnival acts of “debasement, uncrowning, and destruction” and of “[a]busive expressions” is to transform or regenerate that which is critiqued with the aim of “renewal” (372). That is, carnival rituals and acts and the laughter that ensues aim to upset or alter prevailing hierarchies. As Renate Lachmann’s study of Bakhtin puts it, discussed at length in Chapter 2, the purpose of carnival rituals is to undermine “the prevailing institutions of power through its symbols and rites of laughter” (124). “In the carnival,” Lachmann continues, “dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter” (130). Carnival laughter is therefore “generative” (Lachmann 131). Clearly, “debasement, uncrowning, and destruction” and “[a]busive expressions” are commonplace on the Internet. But the laughter, emoticons, and “like”-orgies that follow ridicule on the Internet rarely go so far as to challenge “dogma, hegemony, and authority” or to
undermine prevailing hierarchies. Rather, what appears to be most critiqued, mocked, and laughed at—and becomes viral as a result—are acts that compromise social norms—twerking, for example—or memes that reaffirm dominant ideologies. Internet laughter is often the laugh associated with the superiority theory of humor, or sometimes that of relief humor. Rare is the laugh intended to challenge or undermine prevailing hierarchies, even though the Internet—a relatively safe space in which to critique or ridicule without consequence—certainly allows for this possibility.

Comments following most any article at any social website featuring popular phenomena are indicative of the trends identified above. Consider two—one which appeals to a select affinity group and another on a topic which for a brief period was viral. At espn.com’s website on professional football, for example, a brief article posted 30 October 2013 of four paragraphs, entitled “QB Watch: Chiefs’ Alex Smith,” summarizes the Kansas City quarterback’s accomplishments from the previous week’s game and then concludes with a projection for the subsequent week: “Look for another couple touchdowns from Smith.” Given that on the date the article was posted the team featured in the article was the last remaining unbeaten team after eight weeks of play, one might expect nothing but positive comments. Instead, of the six comments posted, only one is ridicule-free. The other five ridicule the article’s author and content. Whereas one calls the author a “biased blind troll [sic],” another opines that the author “let his kid write this one.” A BuzzFeed entry of 25 August 2013 entitled “The 15 Weirdest and Craziest Moments from Miley Cyrus’ VMA
Performance,” which is not truly an article but an entry consisting of 15 visuals with captions, garnered over three million views and over 600 comments all on the day it was posted. As of 28 October 2013, of the more than 40 comments that appear on the first page of the comment-section, all either ridicule Cyrus’ performance or offer common tags of agreement—“Lolololol,” “hahaha!”—with commentator ridicule of the entertainer. As this small sample suggests, on the Internet (to borrow from Bakhtin as quoted above) “[a]busive statements” that ridicule and the laughter that follows tend toward “debasement, uncrowning, and destruction” of their targets but are not likely to result in transformation, regeneration, or renewal of extant hierarchies.

On the one hand, ridiculing Cyrus and laughing at or objectifying the female portrayed in and by the Toyota advertisement both perpetuate a tradition of belittling women that precedes the advent of the Internet. On the other hand, if not for the Internet’s carnivalesque environment, many of the comments posted at these websites would likely have been withheld or repressed. It is doubtful that a random sport enthusiast would call a journalist a “biased blind troll” to his face, for example. Nor was Cyrus’ twerking at the VMA show mocked or ridiculed by those in attendance. Rather, the comments came later, and increasingly so once depictions of the performance were deemed viral. The Internet operates according to a different set of social codes than those of non-cyber spaces.

The goal of the sort of ridicule discussed above is generally that as outlined in Chapter 2 and examined in Chapter 4—to sway someone to conform to or comply
with some configuration of ideas, in general one that the ridiculer believes is “correct” or “right.” Cyrus is to dance, for example, in a way her ridiculers find appropriate. However, ridicule on the Web also takes on another dimension: it can function as a way for its issuer to lay claim to or dominate a comment-section or the like, signaling to other users that to challenge the issuer is also to be subject to ridicule. As such, to issue ridicule in this way is a form of cyberbullying: even if it may not be aimed at a particular person, it is a means of asserting the self as dominant in a virtual space. Of the two examples above, on the one hand, those ridiculing the sport article’s author want the author to write in some other way more to their preference, whereas the ridicule of the entertainment figure implies some unstated assumption about matters of style, taste, or propriety. User-issued ridicule on the Internet is thus often a call for homogeneity: such ridicule wants uniformity and thus tends to call out some sort of difference perceived not to have conformed in some way that the issuer prefers. But on the other hand it is also a means for its issuer to assert the self as a powerful entity who may ridicule at will. As emphasized in Chapter 4, that is, a ridicule act often reveals more about the issuer than it does the target of the ridicule.

Some use ridicule on the Internet to affect conformity, which in effect creates group cohesion. Often, this sort of ridicule is consistent with that type Aristotle endorses and with that Shaftesbury asserts is preferable among the good fellows at “the club”: ridicule that teases, that does not offend or upset order but rather entertains in good taste. While such ridicule does not necessarily issue an argument
that its subject should change or alter some aspect of the self, it nonetheless does call for homogeneity: on the one hand, to ridicule so is to invite recipients to regard the ridiculer as humorous, to agree with the ridicule, laugh, and, ultimately, find its issuer a good person befitting membership in “the club”; on another hand, it’s also a means of establishing a dominant if not domineering presence in a social space, a way to lay claim to a space, to let others know that they as well may be subject to such ridicule if they challenge the ridiculer. Comments such as “Lololololol” and “hahaha!,” which do not themselves ridicule, endorse ridicule and thus function as a means of cohering a group. Just as monological ridicule as invective or insult reveals much about an issuer’s beliefs and values, so also does ridicule as teasing or as play: it reveals that the issuer desires to be considered a worthy person or member of the group to whom or to which the ridicule is issued.

The “like” function has become a measure of homogeneity and acceptance. Facebook’s “News Feed” feature, for example, allows users to view links that “friends” post and then offer either commentary or a comment in the form of a “like”—that is, clicking the “like” feature following a link. Moreover, the “like” feature has become a common staple of nearly all social website comment-sections. To “like” a post is not just to express agreement with the content of a link or a comment—it is essentially to express appreciation and acceptance of the person who posted it. A “like” function becomes, in ways, a measure of popularity. An accumulation of these is thus often a measure of acceptance among those who post to comment-sections.
As this speculation about ridicule to create group cohesion implies, such ridicule is often meant to be received favorably not just by its particular target but also by others who may frequent the space in which it is issued. That is, Internet ridicule, perhaps more so than ridicule issued in non-cyber public spaces, often intends directly to affect an unaddressed audience. Such ridicule may be said to be intentionally not-indirect. It may not be directed at an audience per se, that is, but it is very possibly intended to be read and, even if not intended, will likely nonetheless be read or viewed by an audience probably much larger than can be assumed.

Ridicule of this sort, which often appears in social site comment-sections as well as on listservs, serves as a means of gaining favorability, popularity, or acceptance as signaled by an accumulation of clicks on the “like” button following a post at websites that provide this function.

Ridicule intended to sway not a target per se but an audience has been endorsed by Richard Dawkins following a thread of discussions about a speech given by astronomer Dr. Phil Plait called “Don’t be a Dick,” delivered at the TAM8 Conference—The Amazing Meeting, Eighth Annual Conference—in July of 2010. Essentially, the speech is a plea against cyberbullying: Plait’s concern is that too often disputants resort to ridiculing interlocutors rather than rely on persuasion to convince an audience, which in effect undermines the cause of promoting openness to unfamiliar tenets and critical thinking. In the speech, Plait argues that civility should take precedence over “vitriol and venom” in argument since civility emphasizes “the merits of the argument, which is what critical thinking is really all
about, what evidence-based reasoning is all about.” Civility, according to Plait, is the proper tone for a reason-based argument, whereas ridicule may undermine the goal of forwarding an argument to sway opponents: “When you’re dealing with someone who disagrees with you on some matter, what is your goal? [...] Insulting them, yelling at them, calling them ‘brain damaged’ or ‘morons’ or ‘baby-rapers’ may make you feel good” but is not likely to convince the ridiculed subject. As Plait suggests, the effect of ridicule as insult is similar to that of the superiority theory of humor—its intent is not just to ridicule an “inferior” target, thus exerting that the target is “inferior,” but to allow the ridiculer to feel superior to the target, to “feel good.” Insult or humor that judges some as “inferior” and some as “superior” intend to establish a power imbalance.

Following a review and discussion of Plait’s speech—in a blog called “Are We Phalluses?” at the website Why Evolution is True—Dawkins had posted a comment (number 29 of 71 total comments), on 22 August 2010. Of the “plenty of skeptics who employ ridicule, who skewer pretentiousness, stupidity and ignorance using wit,” Dawkins offers: “Listening to such ridicule, and reading it, is one of the great joys life has to offer. And I suspect that it is very effective.” Here, Dawkins evokes both Aristotle and Shaftesbury, as referenced in Chapter 3 of this study. As Aristotle acknowledges in Nicomachean Ethics, “most people like fun and ridicule more than they should” (108), a claim which, despite Aristotle’s caution, Dawkins partly endorses: ridicule “is one of the great joys life has to offer.” Moreover, Dawkins here somewhat subscribes to—he “suspects” its effectiveness—the aphorism attributed
to Shaftesbury that “ridicule is a test of truth” since, as will be discussed below, such ridicule may result in some audience members reconsidering “truths” that they had previously accepted as incontrovertible.

More significantly, a “second point” Dawkins proffers about ridicule and its potential effectiveness is that some people wrongly presume that “the person we are ridiculing is the one we are trying to convert.” Rather, “[s]peaking for [him]self,” Dawkins asserts: “It is often a third party (or a large number of third parties) who are listening in, or reading along” who a ridiculer is attempting to sway. As an example, Dawkins cites “the most devastatingly barbed review [he] has ever read,” Peter Medawar’s critique of Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*. As Dawkins notes, Medawar “wasn’t trying to convert Teilhard” since “Teilhard was already dead”: “Medawar was trying [...] to convert the large number of gullible fools who had been taken in by Teilhard.” Dawkins continues, “when I employ ridicule against the arguments of a young earth creationist, I am almost never trying to convert the YEC [young earth creationist]. That is probably a waste of time. I am trying to influence all the third parties listening in, or reading my books.” The “goal” is not “to convert the target of our ridicule,” Dawkins clarifies:

Ridicule may indeed annoy the target and cause him to dig his toes in.

But our goal might very well be (in my case usually is) to influence third parties, sitting on the fence, or just not very well-informed about the issues. And to achieve that goal, ridicule can be very effective indeed.
A skilled rhetor like Dawkins recognizes that ridicule can be shaped to sway an audience, not just convince an opponent to alter his or her views.

Internet ridicule’s ability to reach a vast, indeterminate audience as Dawkins describes complicates a study reviewed in Chapter 2, Michael J. Beatty and Michael W. Kruger’s 1978 essay “The Effects of Heckling on Speaker Credibility and Attitude Change,” which found that when an audience identifies with a heckler, then “heckling lowered both speaker credibility and attitude toward the position advocated by the speaker,” whereas when an audience identifies with a speaker, then “heckling increased speaker credibility and attitude toward the speaker’s position” (50). Dawkins’s formulation adds another dimension: the speaker-as-heckler. Though his status as a well-known and highly esteemed scientist and thinker may have some bearing on audience disposition towards him (depending on the makeup of the audience, of course), Dawkins here appraises ridicule’s ability to sway not necessarily a favorable audience but rather an audience who is ambivalent, not certain which position to endorse or what to believe in a debate.

Another blog—Daylight Atheist—discusses Dawkins’ comment following the “Are We Phalluses?” response to Plait’s speech. In “On the Uses of Ridicule” (30 August 2010), blogger Adam Lee offers his take. Of ridicule’s uses, Lee contends, “If skillfully deployed in an argument,” ridicule “can be more persuasive than anything else—nothing gets someone on your side like making them laugh. It helps break down the stifling aura of solemnity and respect that religions have convinced themselves they deserve, and that they use to smother legitimate criticism.” As
discussed in Chapter 3, Erasmus had observed that truth “penetrates more readily into the minds of mortals when it comes recommended by the allurement of pleasure” (143). Truth couched in wit rather than vitriol, Erasmus continues, can “take the minds of spoiled men by surprise” (144). By making fun of while simultaneously critiquing a subject or disputant, Lee concludes his blog, ridicule “communicates, more eloquently than any cool and dispassionate argument ever could, that it’s okay not to believe this stuff!” Here, ridicule is not just a means of critique but also an affirmation that some concept or belief can be subject to critique, an act which in itself may sway others to follow suit.

Now, it must be noted that Dawkins was not referring specifically to ridicule posted on the Internet. For that matter, he did not define a specific context, though it can be inferred that he likely had in mind occasions when he as a speaker on a stage had ridiculed someone or some concept, whether or not present. Nonetheless, Dawkins’ assertion that “ridicule can be very effective indeed” in swaying an audience consisting of “third parties”—of people “sitting on the fence, or just not very well-informed about the issues”—applies directly to ridicule posted on the Internet, in comment-sections and at social sites especially. For example, following Lee’s blog, commentator “aerie” shared, “Ridicule did not cause me to become an atheist. What it did do, [sic] is cause me to think! And once you allow yourself to think, well...you can’t unring a bell.” As “aerie” implies, ridicule can serve to subvert a dominant paradigm by drawing attention to contradictions, hypocrisies, and the like—in a humorous way. Even though ridicule “did not cause” “aerie” to alter a
belief, ridicule tested a truth by exposing it in some way that resulted in “aerie” reconsidering that belief. Humor that engages may result in recognition, awareness, or an epiphanic moment in ways that insult, invective, or anger may not. As argued in Chapter 3, to mock or ridicule can be “akin to urging a course of action” (emphasis added; *Rhetoric* 35), which may be more effective than insisting on a course of action. In a sense, then, “aerie” experienced what Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson call a “dialogic moment” (*Moments* 174)—only “aerie” did not “turn toward” a “dialogic” partner but rather experienced a “focused awareness” ("Theorizing" 186) in turning to face and re-examine beliefs that “aerie” had once accepted without question.

Dawkins’ astute observation concerning the manifold effects of ridicule is particularly apt to online ridicule. The extended example Dawkins offers to illustrate the intent of using ridicule to sway an audience—Peter Medawar’s critique of Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*—reveals that the target of the ridicule need not even be present, that ridicule functioning as critique may be issued with the intent of swaying a direct as well as indirect, indeterminate audience. Further, as Lee and especially as “aerie” attest, such intentionally not-indirect ridicule can effectively achieve its purpose. While a speech given to an audience is generally a linear affair—the speaker speaks, the audience listens—audience heckling as well as a question-and-answer session can result in a far more dynamic, dialogical event. Other than direct one-to-one online transmissions such as email, ridicule issued in an online context such as a chat-room, comment-section, or blog
will reach a potentially undefined audience: except when membership restricts audience, any Internet user may come across and be exposed to such ridicule, even several years after a comment had been posted. The open nature of the Internet, that is, increases the potential of a given act of ridicule to reach an even larger audience than possibly intended. As I will now examine, this open aspect of the Internet has some relation to the pejorative effects of cyberbullying.

**Ridicule and/as Cyberbullying**

Ridicule in the form of cyberbullying has received much attention following the advent of the Web. Most studies of cyberbullying have focused on adolescents, while some have examined such bullying in other domains such as the workplace. Whereas some studies have attempted to trace differences between traditional, face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, most studies concerned with effects on youth offer school administrators and teachers, as well as parents, recommendations for assisting youth to cope with and to reduce cyberbullying. Even though most of the studies examined here concern students in international contexts, the findings have some bearing on and correlation to cyberbullying in the US. Cyberbullying is not only prevalent but increasing in frequency, Phil Mckenna observes in a 2007 study not concerned with the ages of bullies or the bullied, likely because online anonymity allows for aggression to occur without retribution, which increases the potential for humiliation among the bullied (27). Three recent studies reveal that traditional bullying does not differ markedly from cyberbullying (Vandebosch and Cleemput 503; Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross 187; Li “New Bottle”
265

1778), except that cyberbullying is more likely to result in depression than
traditional bullying (Wang, Nansel, Iannotti 416-17), perhaps because, as Mckenna’s
study implies, victims of cyberbullying often lack means of recourse or may not be
certain of the identity of a bully.

Like traditional, face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is intended to hurt and
be perceived as hurtful and most likely occurs within a context marked by a power
imbalance (Vandebosch and Cleemput 502-03). As this study has observed, ridicule
acts not only signal a power imbalance but also intend, should the imbalance not be
evident, to establish and enforce one. A power imbalance in which cyberbullying
often occurs among youth and in the workplace, according to several studies,
involves gender—males are more likely to bully and to be bullied (Agatston,
Kowalski, and Limber S59-S60; Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross 184; Erdur-Baker 120-
22; Li “Cyberbullying” 169), although one study of Canadian seventh-grade students
in an urban school found that females were 60% more likely to be victims of
bullying than males (Li “New Bottle” 1789). A 2009 study of 103 Australian
respondents in male-dominated manufacturing workplaces found that while
traditional bullying (34%) occurred more frequently than cyberbullying (10.7%),
bullying of both types has increased recently (Privitera and Campbell 399). Also
concerning a gendered power imbalance but in a different context, a 2004 study
found ridicule as a form of cyberbullying to be a prevalent means of silencing or
repressing online women’s groups and movements (Ferree 86-87). While ridicule as
cyberbullying occurs in many other contexts marked by power imbalances—among
them, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic class, dis/ability—perhaps gender has most frequently been studied because it is conveniently identifiable and a common site of harassment among youth especially.

One act of ridicule will obviously affect differently people differently. The effects of cyberbullying have also been studied within particular focus-groups besides youth—gelotophobes, for example, people who fear being laughed at—and as a means of social ostracism. Among gelotophobes, the particular type of ridicule studied was “good-natured teasing,” which among non-gelotophobes tends to result in low-levels of “negative emotion” versus among gelotophobes, who cannot easily distinguish “non-threatening teasing” from hostile ridicule (Platt 111, 127). A subsequent study that examined elderly gelotophobes found that, as age increases, so does inability to distinguish among types of ridicule (Platt and Ruch 242-43). Consistent with the findings of Leslie M. Janes and James M. Olson’s 2000 study, discussed in Chapter 2, that observing while not being targeted by ridicule “can create conformity” (282), Kipling D. Williams, Christopher K. T. Cheung, and Wilma Choi’s 2000 examination of silence as a form of cyberbullying—that is, ignoring Internet users—reveals that ostracism and conformity on a subsequent task both increase as a result of the use of silence as a form cyberbullying (760).

These various studies of cyberbullying corroborate much that this study has stressed concerning ridicule, as they ought given that cyberbullying is not a new form of ridicule but ridicule in a new format. Like ridicule in non-online contexts, cyberbullying most frequently occurs within a context marked by a power
imbalance and thus functions as a means of exerting and maintaining power. Moreover, cyberbullying, as a means of demanding conformity in regards to some social norm, may affect not only its direct targets but also, as Dawkins and others have noted, an audience who observes or is exposed to but not necessarily targeted by the act. Such bullying not only demands conformity but also remains a means of exerting power; moreover, it may also intend to accumulate power, to sway exposed audience members to agree with it.

But cyberbullying also differs in one significant way to traditional, face-to-face ridicule in that it can be issued anonymously, which may increase not only depression but also feelings of ostracism, in part because the ridiculed or bullied cannot identify the identity of the harasser, which may heighten the intensity of the bullying. Familiarity with a ridiculer’s identity can help to obviate harassment, as then the bullied may be able to rationalize the bullying as well as to discern a means of recourse. Cyberbullying, then, functions monologically: while it does not want to negotiate, it does want a response—if not for the bullied to conform to some social norm then for an audience exposed to the bullying to recognize the bully as force of power who may well ridicule others should they present a challenge to the bully’s claim on power.

What marks cyberbullying as a unique form of ridicule are: 1) the open-nature of the medium on which it occurs; 2) the possibility of the anonymity of the bully; and 3) the potential permanence of the ridicule issued: if not actively erased or deleted, such ridicule may well exist long after its issuer and its target have
ceased to breathe. Traditional, face-to-face bullying, for example, is often
temporal—it occurs in the moment, between bully and bullied and perhaps an
audience if one is within visual or aural range. Online bullying can seem to be
permanent and thus have a more lasting effect as well as a greater reach. Because
more Internet users may be exposed to cyberbullying than to public or schoolyard
bullying, the bullied cannot always discern exactly who becomes audience to the act,
which may potentially increase the perception of the harmfulness of the act. An act
of ridicule posted to Facebook or to another online social platform may be
witnessed by thousands of Internet users. In some social sites where users frequent,
there may be some familiarity with a ridiculer—recognition of an avatar and a
possibly invented name, for example, as well as perhaps awareness of some of an
issuer’s beliefs and values—but just as likely the ridiculer may remain more or less
an anonymous person masked by an online fictitious presence rather than an actual
physical presence. Such a context, moreover, makes it all the more difficult to
determine the intent of a ridicule act—whether “good-natured teasing” or a hostile
insult. The further removed the persons involved in a ridicule act are, the less that
additional clues are available—facial expressions and tone, for example—to try to
determine the intent of an act. Online, a simple teasing gesture has more potential to
be perceived as hostile, depending to some degrees on the recipient’s level of
experience with and ability to interpret such acts. Online ridicule may seem all the
more ominous and harmful, especially to ridiculed youth, because of the inability to
determine who may have observed or been exposed to it. For the ridiculer, however,
a single act of ridicule has the advantage—and sometimes the disadvantage—of reaching an even vaster audience than intended. Ridicule posted in chat-rooms, comment-sections, blogs, and social sites is, to use an analogy, like chumming. Whereas one hook may catch one fish, chum is intended to attract as many fish as possible, thereby increasing the fisherperson’s potential of hooking fish. Though traditional face-to-face bullying can be a one-time affair or can reoccur over time, its effects on its target are very likely to outlast the duration of the ridicule act itself. While the latter is also true concerning online ridicule, ridicule in the form of cyberbullying issued on the Internet has the potential to reach a far greater audience, well into the future, than that of face-to-face bullying.

**Ridicule and/as Memes**

Whereas cyberbullying as a form of ridicule generally functions monologically, memes that ridicule have the potential to serve dialogical purposes. The concern here is not to enter the mimetics’ debate about what constitutes a meme. For the purposes of this discussion, Internet memes are a digital extension of cultural artifacts that have “existed for centuries embedded in architecture, television, clothing, novels, religion and the like” (McAllister qtd. in Everett-Haynes). According to Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Memes include such things as popular tunes, catchphrases, clothing fashions, architectural styles, ways of doing things, icons, jingles, and the like” (199). Like ridicule, that is, memes also existed before the advent of the Web. And also like ridicule in its transformation to cyberbullying, memes are thus not a new form of “transmit[ting] certain types of
understandings” (McAllister qtd. in Everett-Haynes) but as they appear on the Internet become a means of relaying information in new forms in a relatively new medium. The fecundity of Internet memes—especially of memes that employ ridicule and, relatedly, satire—is the primary concern here.

Why do Internet memes, especially those that employ ridicule and satire, become “viral”? Why do Internet users recycle and circulate memes, passing them on to other users? In the process, what else is being transmitted besides the “understandings” contained in or suggested by memes? As Knobel and Lankshear posit, “Memes are contagious patterns of ‘cultural information’ that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group” (199). How and why do memes become something like a contagion? Given the plethora of meme-generating websites at which a user can choose a pre-made meme to disseminate or, should the user feel inventive, select one or another stock image to add text to, memes have become something like the Hallmark card of the Internet: websites provide these easily and quickly identifiable or recognizable means of relaying information by the hundreds, and users then select one (or more) to post and/or circulate as representative of their expressions. If memes are, as McAllister puts it, “embedded with a kind of collective cultural memory that reminds us of who we are and also shapes who we are” (qtd. in Everett-Haynes), then what do memes remind “us of” and how do they shape “who we are”? 
Besides coining the term *memes*, Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* identified three characteristics of effective memes: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (Knobel and Lankshear 201). Perhaps the least useful concept in relation to the adaption of the term *memes* to signify information posted to and circulated on the Internet, fidelity refers to the memorability of memes: like Hallmark cards, memes are easily recognizable for what they are and generally simple to remember as they are usually not complex, reason-based arguments but rather quick statements, often humorous, that want people to realize something, if not just be entertained, laugh. Memes employ humor to shock those exposed into recognition in much the same way that Erasmus had observed of the benefits of using humor rather than vitriol to sway people. Dawkins’ terms “fecundity” and “longevity” have most bearing here. As Knobel and Lankshear observe, fecundity, which “refers to the rate” at which a meme is transmitted, includes the sub-category of susceptibility: “Susceptibility is enhanced by the meme’s relevance to current events” (202). Longevity has to do with a meme’s virility, its rate of survival, which is determined by user replication.

While memes as an easily recognizable form has relation to memes’ fecundity and longevity, it is the style of the content of memes that has most bearing to this study of ridicule. Knobel and Lankshear’s study of memes identifies “three distinct patterns of characteristics” that, they argue, “are likely to contribute directly” to a meme’s fecundity, including:

Some element of humor, ranging from the quirky and offbeat, to potty
humor, to the bizarrely funny, to parodies, through to the acerbically ironic, and/or

A rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references to different everyday and popular culture events, icons or phenomena, and/or Anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images. (209)

As their analysis reveals, fecund or viral memes in particular use various types of humor, prevalent among them ridicule and satire—mocking and making fun of something, with a purpose. That is, as Knobel and Lankshear observe, memes commonly serve “[s]ocial commentary purposes,” offering commentary on and usually critique of “displays of good citizenship” or lack thereof as well as of political and social “activist or advocacy interests” (218). Like ridicule, that is, memes comment on social norms, ideology, and the like. Memes thus operate much like ridicule (even those memes that do not ridicule): memes issue an interpretation as argument which an audience must then unpack to determine the value of as well as what recourse of action to take in relation to the argument. Furthermore, the “rich kind of intertextuality” of memes is directly related to memes’ use of “[a]nomalous juxtapositions.” By yoking together several seemingly disparate facts, ideas, concepts, or representations, memes require unpacking—they draw in observers, forcing them to make sense from or meaning of a representation. In this way, memes like ridicule function as a kind of incomplete syllogism—the task becomes completing the syllogism, determining some unstated but suggested enthymeme to allow for the recognition of some realization about what a meme presents. That the
most fecund or viral of memes employ humor in the argument not only resonates with Erasmus’ theory of humor as a more effective means of suasion than vitriol but also fits with Dawkins’ notion of ridicule as a means of not necessarily converting a target but swaying an audience of “bystanders.” After all, a meme becomes fecund or viral when a person exposed to one determines the course of action to take in relation to a meme’s argument is to circulate it, to pass it on. Unless a caption is provided to disclaim or disagree with a meme, to circulate a meme is not just to endorse its content: it’s to allow the meme to “speak for” or represent the person who circulates it.

As Chapter 5 argued concerning ridicule, likewise memes that feature ridicule or satire can serve subversive purposes. In an online 2011 study of Chinese citizens’ use of the Web to satirize government, Lijun Tang and Syamantak Bhattacharya argue that online satire can serve several, sometimes contradictory, purposes. On the hand, “the weapon of online satire” provides citizens “reasons to be optimistic” and “can be said to be empowering” because it “has the potential to generate and prompt a chain of related satirical work within a short period of time, which in turn can create a satire movement spontaneously and subject power to sustained shame and ridicule.” Satire here is infectious: it spreads like a contagion as it inspires others into acts of resistance—“it is both exciting and cathartic”—“Releasing anger by attacking vice in turn brings about a sense of triumph”—allowing for a sense of “victory” that “serves to compensate for the sense of powerlessness felt by political underdogs.” In their discussion of the potential of
memes for resulting in social change, Kobler and Lankshear arrive at a similar conclusion: “Well-informed and savvy online meming may well provide [...] a fruitful and accessible practice for bringing about positive social changes in the ways people think and, perhaps, act towards others” (225). But, it must be noted, Kobler and Lankshear’s study focuses on memes as a type of literacy, and as such their optimism above implicates would-be creators of memes, not those who recycle the typical banal corporate-generated memes that merely confirm dominant ideological formations. On the other hand, though citizens may feel empowered by satirizing, shaming, and ridiculing power, Tang and Syamantak stress, they remain “unable to destroy” that which they critique. As this study has noted, regardless of the form or medium used, there may be consequences for challenging power, especially in nation-states that recourse to detaining citizens and censoring the medium of critique as a means of exerting and maintaining power.

For all their fecundity and virulence, memes as a potential for resulting in user transformation or for subverting power suffer similar limitations to those Tang and Syamantak outline in their case-study of online satire in China. Though they may offer clarity or relief from tension and anxiety, and they may provide one who circulates them a sense of having taken some action in relation to an implied argument about some entity, the relief is merely temporal, not sustained, not likely to result in meaningful alteration to social, cultural, or political formations. This is especially so given the vast number of memes that merely confirm some dominant ideological formation versus those few that offer some sort of challenge to such.
Memes that ridicule may raise a laugh and may allow some people a temporary sense of relief, but they do not necessarily promote social change. They may, however, promote social awareness, when, for example, the circulation of one that uses ridicule to challenge power perhaps results in a not-indirect bystander such as "aerie" reconsidering beliefs, values, and the like.

Perhaps the most common of Internet memes are those that combine an image and text. The production and tracing of memes has become a micro-industry on the Web. The website “Know Your Meme,” for example, is “dedicated to documenting Internet phenomena: viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, web celebs and more.” That is, “Know Your Meme” traces what's “trending” on the web—essentially, a meme’s popularity among users, which is based on how often a certain meme is circulated. Of the various trending memes featured on the website the day I visited (30 October 2013), more than half depict either cartoon or video game characters—for example, Calvin and Hobbes, Super Mario, Pokemon, a number of Japanese anime figures, and others. The website “Meme Generator,” which allows users either to choose a pre-designed meme to circulate or to select an image and then add text to it, also features many of the same as well as some additional animated characters. Other popular or trending characters include television show and commercial as well as movie characters.

As an aggregate, what mostly trends is commercially-produced, mass-market corporate-images. As a popular culture Internet trend, then, memes mainly recycle corporate images—hence, their fidelity. Whether or not intentional, on the visual
surface “trending” memes are loyal to, promoting corporate interests. However appended text may challenge or complicate corporate hegemony, the memes “trending” at the two websites discussed above either affirm dominant social norms or are so nonsensical—in Kobler and Lankshear’s term, “quirky and offbeat”—that only aspect of them that may linger with an observer is the image, a corporate image: cartoon, television, and movie characters. If memes as contemporary cultural artifacts transmit knowledge or meaning, then what so-called trending memes mostly relay is recycled corporate images. With added text they may become satiric or parodic or even engage in ridicule, but the general effect is to reproduce and thus confirm the dominant corporate structure, affirming its fictionalized characters as representative “voices.” Memes may seem to offer a form of genuine expression, may even harbor, as Tang and Bhattacharya’s China study implicates, a satiric movement to challenge dominant power. But memes that feature corporate images, thereby reproducing and maintaining corporate interests, are more likely to result in affirmation of than challenge to hegemony. If memes, as Knobel and Lankshear put it, “directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group,” then recycled corporate images may shape viewers to think, behave, and act in ways consistent with corporate interests.

As an example of the complexities of sussing out meaning from a meme to determine how a meme may mean for an audience, I will draw attention to one that does not portray a popular corporate character or celebrity but that nonetheless references a specific genre that has recently returned with a vengeance—
superheroes. Top-center and much larger than the sentence that runs across the meme’s middle, its title is appropriately capitalized and punctuated to represent visually its content: “ANXIETY GIRL!” The meme’s background is of a soft blue typical of infant-clothing designed to signify that the form within is male. The font of the title and the lower-case sentence below approximates a hand-written scrawl, the shapes of the letters projecting a comical rather than a serious or professional tone. The main line reads, “able to jump to the worst conclusion in a single bound.” Below that appears a penciled representation of the upper-portion of what is to pass for a female superhero. The image is cropped to exclude, or was not drawn to include, legs. The body shape lacks development, suggests a girl-child—she is not “Anxiety Woman!” The outfit is colored in a slightly darker but nonetheless soft blue with a soft green top, with what appears to be a seven-pointed star as emblem in the center. The requisite superhero-style bottoms puff out in a way that could be taken for diapers. One, nearly stick-figure arm angles out and then back in to the torso, a finger-less circle for a hand held up against what would be the chest-region, while the other is straight, raised upward at a forty-degree angle. This “she” lacks a face: a thin blue line acts as a mask; two dots represent eyes; there’s no semblance of a nose; a long line stretches below the mask, across the diameter of the circle-head, which is likely to serve as a mouth. Yet, it does not appear much like a mouth—it’s just a long line that, if taken as a mouth, would represent a closed mouth.

Is “ANXIETY GIRL!” a subversive meme? Does it challenge and thus complicate dominant assumptions about women, evoke and critique ideologies of
femininity? Is it promoting feminism? It could be interpreted to affirm these questions. The blue background is the first obvious crossover. This figure dares to appropriate a color ideologically yoked to masculinity. The strong, straight lines of the arms and their positioning could be read as symbolizing strength and defiance—she thumps her chest with a closed fist, reaching upward with the other arm, perhaps pointing to the sky as if she is about to “jump” a tall building. The meme’s theme, after all, alludes to Superman’s alleged ability to leap a tall building in a single bound. The tight-lipped mouth, to call it that, could be interpreted not as a sign of voice-less-ness but as a purposeful rejection of the smiling, open-mouthed females so often depicted in advertisements. So how is this meme to mean? Is it to inspire its female observers to act as superheroes, to combat the untruths and injustices of the American way of delegating women as lesser beings than men? Perhaps. Perhaps if someone wants to read it this way.

But, I suspect, most will interpret it is as confirmation of what they already believe they know. Visually, it’s comical, meant to be laughed at. After all, laughing at someone with pretentions to power is an effective means of dismissing that subject, as Andrew A. King reveals in his 1976 article “The Rhetoric of Power Maintenance,” reviewed in Chapter 2. Moreover, as I argued in Chapter 4, to laugh as a result of such ridicule is to be complicit with its aim of maintaining power—or, specifically in this case, a power imbalance. The meme’s title renders the image to the level of “girl,” does not allow her the powers of a mature woman. The word “ANXIETY” fully capitalized not only emphasizes “anxiety” but confirms, for many, the assumption
that females are anxiety-ridden creatures, always worried about and stressing over something. Should the title be inadequately suggestive, the motto implies the to-be-presumed evident: lacking sufficient reliance on reason, if not the capacity to reason itself, she is controlled by emotion, will make illogical, speculative leaps to untenable conclusions. And not just any conclusion: “the worst conclusion.”

Like ridicule, memes also are susceptible to failing to achieve their intended purposes and effects. In both cases, meaning is a matter to be determined by the recipient, as well as what to do with or about the meaning or thesis of a ridicule event or a meme. “ANXIETY GIRL!” could be read as a positive message for young females. One could take it as ironic, as a meme that mocks anxiety and that means to empower women to be strong and capable as a superhero, for whom reason is to hold sway over emotion. Read this way, it is a subversive meme. Or, for subjects who do experience anxiety, the meme can raise a laugh of the sort that fits the relief theory of humor, in which case perhaps the subject, in laughing at the self, is able to attain a temporary release from the grip of anxiety. But seen as just another affirmation of a tradition in which females are rendered unreasonable, then the meme merely reproduces ideological sanctioned “cultural knowledge,” functions to confirm current-traditional notions of gender and thus to maintain present power imbalances. After all, on the same day the “ANXIETY GIRL!” meme found its way to my Facebook “News Feed,” so did another meme, which reads: “I’m honestly convinced that some women don’t pass gas. They just hold it in and it comes out as drama.” While “ANXIETY GIRL!” at least allows for a potentially subversive
interpretation, this latter statement does not: it is tautological, fitting and referencing dominant conceptions of females as overtly emotional beings. “ANXIETY GIRL!” will indeed have to perform super, heroic feats to be able to leap that tautological tradition to become subversive. But more likely “ANXIETY GIRL!,” along with depictions of females such as that of the automobile advertisement discussed above or representations of Cyrus’ attention-getting performances, will be conceived as fitting a tradition of women as sites for ridicule.

The fecundity of a meme relates directly to a meme’s fidelity. If the characters are recognizable—as are most of those available to select at corporate-meme tracking and generating websites—then they are more likely to be circulated, regardless of what the content of the appended text, sensical or not, may add up to. While memes may have the potential to subvert dominant paradigms, a meme featuring Dos Equis’ “The Most Interesting Man in the World” is unlikely to, for what is reproduced regardless of added text is the patriarchal, condescending, patronizing tone that is the character’s trademark voice. Since “The Most Interesting Man in the World” is always right, one who circulates or clicks the “like” feature of a meme depicting that character is also announcing that he or she, in agreeing with that character, is also right, a person whose pronouncements are sound, who judges others correctly. Memes in general reproduce a certain style and tone—that associated with the character depicted on a meme. Memes featuring Willy Wonka, for example, contend that some subject is silly, frivolous. Moreover, memes substitute for expression. Meme generators that provide ready-made memes
function reductively—they allow users to select rather than to create, thereby substituting the potentiality of expression with limited choice, which allows those who circulate them to believe they have expressed something, even when the content is canned, pre-determined, and mostly likely attached to a corporate image. Even when a meme intends to challenge a dominant paradigm, perhaps by ridiculing it, the circulation of the meme allows one to feel a sense of having done something useful even while circulating a meme is not per se a form of social action. As a popular Internet phenomenon, memes tend to function as a substitute for thought, expression, and action.

**Reaching toward a Conclusion: Ridicule and/as the Medium of the Message**

I’d like now to reconsider what I have argued about online ridicule in relation to Marshall McLuhan’s paradoxical assertion in *Understanding Media* that “the medium is the message” (151). For that matter, ridicule in the context of McLuhan’s “best-known aphorism,” to use Paul Levinson’s term (35), or “Equation,” as Mark Federman calls it, can and thus will serve to conclude this study of ridicule.

As Levinson, Federman, and others have pointed out, McLuhan's meaning is not that the content or information delivered by any medium is more significant than the medium itself. Several pages after introducing the insightful phrase, McLuhan explains, “The ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (158-59). That is, too often users of a medium become distracted by a medium's content—“the juicy piece of meat”—in the process overlooking the medium itself. (Indeed, memes of the type
described above are a sort of distracting, substitute “meat”—processed meat.) By “medium,” McLuhan means its user: it is “not the machine” or a technology or any media “but what one [does] with the machine” or a technology or medium that becomes “its meaning or message” (151). Media are, following McLuhan’s observations, an “extension of consciousness” (149). And any “extension”—“whether of skin, hand, or foot” or of radio, television, or the Internet—“affects the whole psychic and social complex” (149). As McLuhan elaborates this process, “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (151). It is precisely the “new scale”—“the change of scale or pace or pattern” that is “introduced into human affairs” by a user’s interaction with a medium—that McLuhan emphasizes as more significant than any media itself or the content a medium delivers. Levinson puts it this way: “our use of any communications medium has an impact far greater than the given context of any communications, or what that medium may convey” (35). Regarding the Internet as a medium in relation to McLuhan’s claim, then, the concern is neither the medium itself nor the great range of assimilated and new content that the new medium provides for users: the concern is what users do with that medium and how this affects users.

McLuhan’s contention that “the medium is the message” draws attention to the ways users of a medium change as a result of the use of a medium or of any media. Significant here is “use”—for what and how people use the medium. While
for some the Internet is a means of creation and production, a tool for learning, or an access point for information, among other uses, for many it is a social arena, a place to check up on current events and the like as well as to interact with “friends” and to make and maintain friendships. That is, as Federman puts it in an essay posted online, the use of a medium amounts to a “change in inter-personal dynamics.” That “change,” according to Ronald S. Laura, Tim Marchant, and Susen R. Smith in their 2008 book *The New Social Disease: From High Tech Depersonalization to Survival of the Soul*, is increasing “social isolation”: the Web’s attempts to mimic face-to-face, social communication, with methods such as the “like” function and emoticons for expression, inadequately represent that which it endeavors to replicate, resulting in a shabby simulacrum (67). Just as early commentators worried over ridicule’s potential to degrade life, so too of many who have examined the Internet’s effect on its users: the Internet has become a regulator of reality.

At public social sites especially, ridicule is a dominant form of expression that influences how others engage with the Web. People do not just extend themselves into or on the Internet; the Internet extends into or on people as well, affecting consciousness. The relationship is reciprocal. Ridicule dominates the content of social sites—whether as article subjects or when employed by memes or advertisements—and thrives as a major form of user expression in social site comment-sections. Though the use of ridicule pre-dates the Internet, its prevalence in this newest of mediums reveals its hold on consciousness. The Internet, that is, has become a sort of carnivalesque space—albeit, largely lacking the Bakhtinian
elements of regeneration and renewal—in which people can do what they want without the restraints typical of traditional non-cyber public spaces, which results in an alteration of consciousness. In my few explorations of the depths of Second Life, for example, I have visited virtual spaces that I would not dare to enter the material equivalent of and have observed avatars engaging in acts that I would prefer not to witness in actual life. But in Second Life, why not? I am not held accountable, nor need be concerned with potential repercussions. No one I know would know what I have seen on Second Life, not even those now reading this. In the digital carnival of pixels that is Second Life, there are few to no restraints. Consciousness becomes relieved of the usual super-structures that hold jurisdiction over it. Despite the invisible reach of the NSA, tracking-cookies, and other forms of tracing use of the Internet, it is a medium in which Foucault’s gaze holds less sway. If ridicule is a dominant form of expression on the Internet, at social sites especially, it is because people have consciously chosen to use ridicule as form of expression in those spaces. When nearly anything—from presidents and popes to principals, principles, and popsicles—may be subject to ridicule, may be made fun of and laughed at, then a kind of degradation—or perhaps equalization—of values results: whatever can be subject to ridicule or be deemed ridiculous cannot be of much value or significance. Ridicule ranks and rates.

Ridicule represents the ridiculer. Whether in the form of insult or of teasing, a ridicule act reveals something about that ridiculer’s sense of order and of propriety, essentially the ridiculer’s senses of “right” and “wrong.” Since an issuance
of ridicule is an interpretation as an argument—it interprets, according to the ridiculer, the degrees to which its subject is perceived to have transgressed a social norm or the like—the ridicule itself discloses some aspects of the ridiculer’s values and beliefs. More so, the form or force of a given act of ridicule also suggests something about a ridiculer’s sense of self in relation to power. An issuance of monological ridicule, regardless of the domain or medium in which it occurs, represents the ridiculer as an individual who believes he or she possesses the right to ridicule, to demand compliance from others. Should a ridiculer purposefully insult or bully a subject, then the ridiculer is exposed as an individual who believes that he or she possess the right to treat people with force. Should an act of ridicule function dialogically, then it likewise discloses something about that person’s value system as well as relationship to power and sense of the use of force. As a means of attempting to change, alter, or shape targets, ridicule is a tool. And like any tool, it can do or accomplish many things besides that for which it is intended, sometimes even unintentionally. Even a hammer can open a bottle of wine.

There is no conclusion—or, rather, obituary—that can be written for ridicule. As Gee elaborates concerning the Discourses of which people are “‘carriers,’” so too of ridicule: “The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came onto the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history” (18). Across and throughout history and cultures, ridicule has always existed and, as many users of the Internet have made evident,
will likely continue to exist. Perhaps in some utopian future devoid of power imbalances, certain types of ridicule—monological ridicule as insult, for example, and ridicule as a means of asserting and maintaining power—will not need to exist, not be continuously recycled. But I doubt it. Even other mammals besides humans seem to have some capacity for ridicule, at least of the form called teasing.\textsuperscript{54}

Ridicule is something like a cosmic joke. Whether by random act or fluke, natural processes or design, humans have come to populate this one small globe in some obscure corner of The Milky Way. In relation to the impenetrable immensity that is the universe, humans appear as insignificant, ridiculous little forms who take themselves and their systems and structures so seriously. In ridiculing each other, humans embody ridiculousness in Aristotle’s terms—the inherently ridiculous are justifiably subject to ridicule. As such, the best joke is on those of us who issue and exchange—and perhaps guiltily revel in—ridicule.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{1} This joke, the form of which I altered slightly, is translated by B. Baldwin and located at the following website: \texttt{<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/apuleius/renberg/PHILOGELOS.HTML>}.  
\textsuperscript{2} When initially planning this study, as my dissertation proposal states, I had conceived of a third type of ridicule, digiological ridicule, which would be specific to how ridicule functions on the Internet. However, since I now realize that there is no unique “logic” concerning the function of ridicule on the Internet, I have dropped the use of this term. Ridicule on the Internet, as Chapter 6 will demonstrate, does not operate according to a unique logic—it is either monological or dialogical, as I theorize those terms in this chapter.  
\textsuperscript{3} Both Janes and Olson’s study and Beatty and Kruger’s are limited in various ways, as the latter acknowledge: “Further research investigating the effects of heckling in various contexts, controlling for audience member differences in personality, intelligence, sex, and social status is needed to determine fully the impact of heckling” (50). As shown in the previous chapter, the effect of a given act of ridicule will vary based on many, sometimes often indeterminate, factors, including the gender, race, class, and sexuality and other aspects of a ridiculer, of the ridiculed, and of the audience of the ridicule; the specific form and content of a given act of ridicule; and much else.  
\textsuperscript{4} One curious outcome of Bryant et al.’s study relates to participant gender: “Although the apparent motivational potential of a gentle reminder was highly similar for males and females, males’ test performance was superior to that of females when students were insulted for their past performances, and females performed better than males when ridicule was the chosen motivator” (725-26). Why this is so the authors do not speculate.
\end{footnotesize}
Ridicule has cropped up in nearly every war recorded in the annals of history, Waller notes, including in the US’s war for independence from England: Brits created the jingle “Yankee Doodle Dandy” to mock colonists. To Waller, “Ridicule serves several purposes”: ridicule directed at an enemy “raises morale at home,” “strips the enemy/adversary of his mystique and prestige,” “erodes the enemy’s claim to justice,” “eliminates the enemy’s image of invincibility,” and when “[d]irected properly at an enemy […] can be a fate worse than death.” In a brief section of only two paragraphs, Waller notes ridicule’s ability to result in group cohesion among those opposing a dominant power: “That collective payback, that last laugh, can empower the powerless.” When the colonists who were to be mocked by “Yankee Doodle Dandy” adopted it as an anthem, according to Waller, this “counter-ridicule operation unsettled the Redcoats. One British soldier recorded, ‘After our rapid successes, we held the Yankees in great contempt, but it was not a little mortifying to hear them play this tune.’”

Brienholt does not elucidate, however, to clarify how he believes the US should employ ridicule against terrorism. Curiously, a disclaimer following Brienholt’s piece reads, “The views in this article do not reflect those of the Department of Justice.”

The review claims that in January, 2006, Bin Laden was allegedly recorded as admitting, “‘I swear not to die but a free man even if I taste the bitterness of death. I fear to be humiliated or betrayed.’” The review follows this with, “If he’s not afraid to die, let’s pour on the humiliation.”

As Kanaana notes, the more tense and anxiety-ridden the situation became for Palestinians particularly, the more vicious the jokes became (65-66), so much so that near the war’s conclusion the “humor became more and more bitter, vulgar, and obscene” (73). The jokes served the function not only of relieving tension and stress—“most of the jokes simply direct swear words and obscenities at the Allies” (66)—but also of creating group cohesion: of the 92

5 Peter Yarrow, a member of the 1960’s folk singers Peter, Paul, and Mary, founded Operation Respect in 1999, whose mission is “to assure each child and youth a respectful, safe and compassionate climate of learning where their academic, social and emotional development can take place free of bullying, ridicule and violence.” To abet the creation of that climate, Operation Respect “disseminates educational resources that are designed to establish a climate that reduces the emotional and physical cruelty some children inflict upon each other by behaviors such as ridicule, bullying and—in extreme cases—violence.” Its “educational resources” include books like Yarrow et al.’s, summer camps, after-school programs, curriculum including “inspirational music and video,” and “assembly programs and professional development workshops”—all of which are “based on the well-tested, highly regarded conflict resolution curricula developed by the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).”

6 According to Brendtro, neither boys nor girls are immune from ridicule, and both make use of it. Particular to young females, “traditional role expectations restrict overt aggression by girls, who instead rely on ridicule and character assassination. They mock peers who don’t have the right clothes or fail to conform to cultural stereotypes about femininity” (48). Of course, boys use ridicule in these ways, too.

7 Brendtro proffers a remedy for squelching bullying: “Changing these persons will involve nurturing their empathy for others and challenging their distorted thinking” (48).

8 Two Media Studies essay on ridicule are not included in the above discussion. Zillmann and Bryant’s essay “Guidelines for the Effective Use of Humour in Children’s Educational Television Programs” (Journal of Children in Contemporary Society 20.1-2 [1988]: 201-21) is not included because it is particular to British television standards and does not offer much of use to this study other than the undeveloped claim that “ridicule as a behavior corrective” may be useful in children’s television programming if wrought carefully (218). Also not included above is Peter Keighron’s mistitled “The Politics of Ridicule: Satire and Television” (in Dissident Voices: The Politics of Television and Cultural Change. Ed. Mike Wayne. London: Pluto, 1988. 127-44) since, like Zillmann and Bryant’s essay, it is particular to British media and, more to the point, is mostly only a catalog of some notable uses of ridicule on mid- and late-twentieth century British television, not an examination of the “Politics” of ridicule.

9 The Greenberg et al. study concludes that “there were a few positive findings in terms of portrayals of overweight characters”: “One was evidence that larger female characters receive more respect and larger male characters receive less ridicule; it is notable that the greatest amount of ridicule was aimed toward the thinnest male characters” (1347). Although the authors do not speculate why diminutive rather than larger characters may be ridiculed more—nor define how they mean “ridicule” or offer examples—I would suggest that this may relate to the Aristotelian contention that some things are conceived as inherently ridiculous in themselves; that is, obese characters, especially as they are associated with the characteristics and behaviors found by the Greenberg et al. study, are already in the US culturally conceived of as ridiculous, as reprehensible for failing to conform to social norms, and thus are perhaps less likely to become direct targets of ridicule than their thinner counterparts.

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jokes Kanaana examines, all were shared among Palestinians only and “[a]ll the jokes in the collection are directed against one side of the warring nations: the Allies” (66).

Bogad studies several satirical electoral campaigns—“a relatively recent innovation in the tactical repertoire of modern social movements” (2)—or, electoral guerrilla theatre—“guerrilla” because the movements operate and “exist on the extreme margins of the social system, constantly on the move” (4). Bogad’s book examines three case-studies: Netherland’s Kabouter (gnome) campaign of 1970–71 (43–120); drag queen Joan JettBlakk’s “camp-pain”, one for Mayor of Chicago in 1991 and one for President of the US in 1992 (121–64); and Pauline Pantsdown’s successful efforts, including satirical drag and musical performances, to derail Pauline Hanson’s reelection to the Australian parliament in 1998 (165–201).

In Tucson, Arizona, at the annual Dia De Los Muertos parade, for example, a diverse group of people coalesce to walk in honor of various concerns. The event is completely community organized, with no corporate sponsorship or interests, for the community, and it is inclusive, including a wide range of people, from children to the elderly. Some walk to honor a dead friend or relative. Many others walk in protest, often in representative costumes or with signs indicating that which they are protesting, whether a political figure (former President G. W. Bush is a popular favorite among walkers), the war on terrorism, the military’s use of drones, or racism, sexism, homophobia, and much else. Some of the walkers wear makeup and some masks, effecting anonymity. The causes may be many but the effect is a group coheres, though in the example of Dia De Los Muertos not necessarily a group allied around a common cause. Within the mass that is the parade, however, micro-groups form: protestors of common targets often walk together.

Kercher draws upon several notable cultural critics to support his argument, including, among others, Langston Hughes and Howard Zinn. Kercher’s title for this chapter is inspired by Hughes: “Since we haven’t been able to write them [KKK] out of existence with heated editorials,” Hughes wrote, “maybe we could laugh them to death with well-aimed ridicule” (emphasis added; qtd. in Kercher 281). Concurring with Hughes, Kercher offers: “Satire and humor can often make dents where sawed-off billiard sticks can’t” (284).

Granted, there was then some risk in ridiculing the powerful: “As Howard Zinn recounted, Gregory’s performance in Selma [Alabama, on 7 October 1963, as part of a voter registration drive now known as ‘Freedom Day’] was in many ways remarkable. ‘Never in the history of this area had a black man stood like this on a public platform, ridiculing and denouncing white officials to their faces,’ Zinn wrote. ‘It was […] something of a miracle that Gregory was able to leave town alive’” (qtd. in Kercher 297).

I am drawing the term “stabilization” from Cowan’s speculation on what he calls ridicule’s “cultural functions.” These are: 1) “stabilization, that is, ridicule preempts or reduces deviance within both the aggressor group and the aggressor audience”; and 2) “hierarchization, that is, ridicule reflects and reinforces a dynamic of status ascription within a given domain of social interaction.”

This very notion has been explored in a Seinfeld television show called “The Pick.” Whether the protagonist’s digit penetrated his nostril is not the matter: the matter is that it was perceived to have done so, resulting in social ostracism. See it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU3Q4nRWq7I>.

Althusser is sure that subjects are free, possess free-will, to accept the hail. I would amend this to include that the subject also has free-will to reject, but not ignore, the import of the hail; a hailed subject may freely choose, for example, to de-subject themselves from one Subject to adopt another ideological Subject. Whether the import of a hail is accepted or rejected, the subject in being hailed is entrapped in, subjected to ideology: “The whole mystery of this effect” is that “the individual is interpellated as a free subject in order that he [or she] shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he [or she] shall freely accept his subjection”: “There are no subjects except by and for their subjection” (249). Unless she or he chooses freely to reject the hail—“which cannot be done without first recognizing the hail for what it is”—the subject so subjected by the Subject thus complies with the hail’s invoking of ideology and the concomitant behavior implied.

There is more to the disciplines than methods, than techniques and the like, however. As Althusser stresses about the function of ideology, similarly with the disciplines—the disciplines hail subjects, certain sorts of subjects: regulated, ordered, compliant subjects. In this “historical moment of the disciplines,” when “the disciplines became general formulas of domination,” Foucault contends, “an art of the human body was born,” an art that intended to effect “the meticulous control of the operations of the body” to assure “the constant subjection of its forces” (137). To complete the outline of this particular schema, activity is primarily a matter of controlling the body—its movements, gestures, articulations, all of which are to be exhaustively exercised—to effect maximum efficiency of production (149–56). The aim is the creation of a disciplined, machine-like body, a useful body “susceptible to specified operations, which have their order, their stages, their internal conditions, their constituent elements” that
In some ways, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault can be said to have identified the base-structure of all ideologies. Although ideologies differ in subject and focus—gendered ideologies, for example, treat gendered bodies, while racial ideologies focus ostensibly on pigmentation of skin—all ideologies have in common an assertion of power—a presumed right over an alleged wrong—and employ in common the instruments Foucault identifies: sensitivity to time, place, activity, and rank, with hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the examination (of the “offending” body) as ways to enforce conformity. Time and place both have bearing—both are called attention to as normatives, and one who deviates from a normative time or place is presumed to be on the wrong side of an ideological divide. Instances of these include what’s called “CPT” (“colored-people time”) and “Indian time”; the recent tragic murder of Trayvon Martin, on 26 February 2012, was allegedly due to his being “out of place,” the “wrong” sort of person to be in a particular neighborhood. These judgments are arrived at through hierarchically-biased observations, through a gaze that examines a body to determine whether in its occupation of space, place, and time it is within its presumed rank.

As Foucault’s genealogy demonstrates, the disciplinary methods of the military system informed those of the prison system and through institutional state apparatuses such as the school, hospital, and workshop—the latter of which in time transformed into the factory and later the corporate structure—trickled down into and eventually flooded the entire social system—anywhere a mass-body was to be regulated and controlled to maximize efficiency. “[E]merge[ing] from the classical age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and instruments of its exercise” (170): “The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society; but [she or he] is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology that [Foucault] ha[s] called ‘discipline’” (194). Similar to Althusser’s observation that ideology interpellates subjects, discipline too makes subjects—well-behaved, subjected subjects.

As a procedure of subordination of bodies and forces” (208), the panoptic schema, whether in the prison or the public space, has the same effects on a general as well as on an individual level: in general, “its aim is to strengthen the social forces—to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply” (emphasis added; 208), since the individual as the presumed-to-be-gazed-upon becomes the principle of his [or her] own subjection” (203), regulates the self so that others need not. Of this schema, Foucault is prescient: “The panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function” (207). Transparent and ubiquitous, not observable itself but always potentially observing all, panopticism as a forced-upon function of the social body has become “a network of mechanisms” that is “everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption in space or time” (209). The gaze is a sort of unseen, all-seeing eyeball—both nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

Bakhtin offers a neat example of dialogical discourse: “[t]he scholarly article—where various authors’ utterances on a given question are cited, some for refutation and others for confirmation and supplementation—is one instance of a dialogic interrelationship among direct signifying discourses within the limits of a single context” (188). The artifact that is the scholarly article is never monological: it is always in reference to some extant discourse, often synthesizing various discursive fields toward a unitary goal, and hungers for reception and response. It is an invitation to discourse.

In an online publication "Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: Debates on Immigration and Ethnic Issues," Teun A. Van Dijk argues that racism and ideology are functions of discourse: “both racism and ideology are prominently produced
by social practices and especially by discourse.” That is, racism—and other discriminatory practices such as sexism—is made possible through discursive formations that represent racism as natural and thus justifiable. An ideology may define racism—racist ideology—but discourse circulates ideology, creates the discursive field that represents racism (or sexism or the like). Van Dijk elaborates: “Racism does have an ideological basis, but cannot be reduced to it alone. As a form of dominance and social inequality, racism also needs to be defined in terms of various types of social practice, such as discriminatory discourses and other acts of interaction.” Discourse informs knowledge, opinions, and attitudes, while ideology serves to offer definition for one or another piece of knowledge, opinion, or attitude. Although ridicule hails ideology, ridicule is finally a function of discourse, a discursive act—one that comments on, issues an interpretation of or argument about, difference.

While for this one passage from Poetics I have quoted the Leon Golden (1968) translation, all other passages drawn from Poetics will rely on the Malcolm Heath (1996) translation. Heath translates the passage quoted above as: “comedy is an imitation of inferior people—not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful. The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain” (9).

According to Halliwell, “Aristotle is said to have advised, in a lost work, against exchanging laughor or smiles with one’s slaves” (317). While the veracity of this imputation cannot be ascertained, the notion is consistent with the relations of “superiors” and “inferiors” as delineated in Aristotle’s discussion of the (im)propriety of uses of ridicule in Nicomachean Ethics.

The poems of Catullus discussed in this section are those translated by A. S. Kline, available at the following location: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Catullus.htm#Poem57>.

According to Anselment, Voltaire began the tradition of belief that the “ridicule” of Socrates in Aristophanes’ play The Clouds “ultimately destroyed Socrates” (175). As I’ve shown above, however, Erasmus’ Praise of Folly, published in 1511, precedes Voltaire’s The Death of Socrates, published in 1759, and so the initiation of that tradition belongs not to Voltaire but to Erasmus.

This debate engaged many prominent (and today many largely unheard of) figures, among (but not all of) them Joseph Addison, Mark Akenside, George Berkeley, John Brown, Charles Bulkley, Anthony Collins, John Hildrop, Corbyn Morris, William Preston, Allan Ramsay, Philip Skelton, William Warburton, James White, and William Whitehead. Hugh Blair and George Campbell, although they did not engage directly in the debate, also commented.

Shaftesbury: “How comes it to pass, then, that we appear such cowards in reasoning, and are so afraid to stand the test of ridicule?” (I.10) and “‘Twas the saying of an ancient sage [...] that humour was the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour. For a subject which would not bear raillery was suspicious; and a jest which would not bear serious examination was certainly false wit” (I.52).

For example, one point of contention was the relation of ridicule to reason—whether it is a faculty, a sense, a taste, or something else altogether, a matter that cannot even be settled in the present despite the scientific and psychological developments since then.

Two years later, Ramsay plagiarizes Brown: “Ridicule is one of the most powerful engines, by which error can be maintained and established” (49).

Despite convention, I have purposely listed these three non-chronologically. If conforming to chronology of invention, the order would be: superiority, incongruity, and relief. Because my concern is developing a theory of ridicule as part of and apart from these three theories. I have chosen to follow superiority theory with relief theory since the two share much in common: both place humor internally, as psychological reactions to external conditions, and as such both are really psychological theories of humor. In contract, incongruity theory is far more plastic, finding its humor in unusual or discordant arrangements and combinations, including in verbal word-play such as puns. While this also results in an internal reaction to external phenomena, a major difference is that incongruity theory is not bent on plumbing the psychological ‘health’ of laughers.

Parody also is uncomfortable about its relation to ridicule, even as the two are at times inseparable. In his 2000 book Parody, Simon Dentith defines parody broadly: “Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production of practice” (9). While Dentith recognizes that parody can become ridicule, Margaret A. Rose, in her 1993 book Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern, goes to great lengths to keep the two apart, dedicating several pages (22-28) to argue “that if aspects of ridicule or mockery are “present” in parody then they are “additional to its other functions” (25). Here, ridicule is once again an excess or tool of parody. This is because, to Rose, “the modern understanding of ridicule and its laughter as something more negative or destructive than humour as such” (25) means that it cannot be wholly contained by parody since parody—“the comic refuncting of preformed linguistic or artistic material” (52)—may just be “fanciful” fun or
simply amusing, need not always serve the function of “malignantly ridiculing” (10). As with Dentith, that is, Rose also observes that parody has multiple functions and may resort to ridiculing its subject.

Who exactly sat in the audience then is indeterminate. Generally, entertainment such as plays was produced mostly for the privileged with the time and leisure to be entertained, citizen males. It is inconclusive whether women attended plays in ancient Greece. While there is some speculation that women may have attended plays but would be required to sit in the back of the theatre, if women did attend plays it was probably not in significant numbers (Dutta xx). Whether or not women were in attendance of the particular play discussed above, the play slanders and abuses women in ways that centuries later would raise the ire of one like Christine de Pizan and would still be sensical and familiar to a 21st century audience.

The number of caveman-themed commercials cannot be verified at GEICO’s website nor anywhere else that I have come across researching.

Sections of this chapter had been presented previously under the title “Cavemen and Ridicule, Racism and Sexism: So Easy Even an Insurance Company Can Do It,” at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association of America Conference, 10 October 2009.

The advertisement, entitled at the following link “Geico Caveman Commercial, The Original,” may be viewed here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8aj1AfYxl].

During this time period, GEICO has also released a number of other non-caveman commercials, some of which also play with personification and anthropomorphization—a talking gecko, for example, and a talking pig on an airplane—all of which also traffic in incongruity humor. GEICO’s commercials, for that matter, follow a common advertising trend nowadays: television commercials do not often provide a logical demonstration of why a given product or service is superior to another; instead, many commercials just present a humorous scenario not directly related to a product or service but which attract and maintain the interest of an audience through the use of humor. And that humor, evident in the example of GEICO’s advertisements, is often incongruity humor. As a result, it may be said, modern advertisement itself has become incongruous. The trend, again, is not to offer logic but to play up pathos, to “sell” something not related to the product itself but that attracts audiences to the product—soft-drink adverts peddle lifestyle choices, fast-food outlets sell happiness, automobile commercials channel freedom. What, then, is GEICO emphasizing? While some of the advertisements focus on economics—the green gecko always stresses the “15% or more” savings that a consumer may reap from switching to GEICO—the adverts featuring Neanderthals on the surface never sell anything more than the “ease” of attaining the product: “It’s so easy even a caveman can do it.”

All information in the following and subsequent paragraphs related to the “Caveman” television show is from a Wikipedia entry entitled “Geico Cavemen.”

The phenomena known as the “human zoo” places of “native” people of color on display, usually in cages, in zoos, museums, and world fairs. According to Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, as late as 1906 the Bronx Zoo in New York put on display in a cage alongside apes and other animals a Congolese pygmy named Ota Benga, who shot arrows at a target and even wrestled with an orangutan named Dohong. A sign by the cage read, “The Missing Link.”

For centuries, then, people of color, the darker the skin the more likely, were constructed as just above cavemen, as arrows at a target and even wrestled with an orangutan named Dohong. A sign by the cage read, “The Missing Link.” For centuries, then, people of color, the darker the skin the more likely, were constructed as just above cavemen, as arrows at a target and even wrestled with an orangutan named Dohong. A sign by the cage read, “The Missing Link.” For centuries, then, people of color, the darker the skin the more likely, were constructed as just above cavemen, as arrows at a target and even wrestled with an orangutan named Dohong. A sign by the cage read, “The Missing Link.”

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While GEICO does presumably take some pride in its various television commercials—one link on its homepage is to 38 different television adverts, many of which predate the caveman campaign—it might be suggested, also, that GEICO has been careful recently to dissociate itself with the ads: there have been at least four new campaigns since—including the disaster-prone British documentarian shadowing the iconic green gecko and the above mentioned anthropomorphized, glasses-wearing stack of dollars—while of those 38 collected on GEICO’s website as of 3 October 2011, only two are of the cavemen series, and neither of those two include any human characters. As of 1 October 2013, GEICO’s Youtube channel showcases 20 of its advertisements, none of which feature a caveman.

There is one ad, however, in which a caveman is clearly depicted as white or of European descent: this one offers a metanarrative—internal references to the advertisement’s own mythology—in that it presents what appears to be a young blue-eyed white male with a hyperbolic mono-brow in caveman costume, thereby mocking the so-called genuine Neanderthals represented in and by the ads.

I first encountered Angry Black Woman’s blog on 10 April 2009. As of 6 September 2013, the number of responses remains at 274; no new comments have been contributed since my initial 2009 study of the blog.
Whereas several websites lament the disappearance of the cavemen, some others merely provide summary of the adverts along with general information about actors and filming, which attest to consumer interest in the adverts: <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2006/geico-cavemen/>.

See “Gecko vs. Caveman.”

See “Geico’s Brian Orakpo Caveman Commercial—Enough Already.”

From my own experience, far from exhaustive, I can only identify one sub-genre of website types in which I’ve never come across ridicule in comment sections: those that offer recipes for cooking food. This may be due to the content as well as to the users who frequent such sites. Recipes themselves are generally not controversial, do not provide disputable material, and they are rather unidirectional—intended to be received, not debated. Moreover, users are most likely seeking information for which they are grateful. If a particular user does not like a particular recipe, there’s no gain in complaining or ridiculing the website or recipe’s creator. It’s more beneficial just to move along, seek out a preferable recipe.

Over the course of this study, I have often wondered whether animals—mammals specifically—engage in ridicule. Dogs, cats, and horses—domesticated mammals—have been known to tease each other as well as humans. While it may be that through the experience of domestication each learned ridicule from humans, this does not necessarily account for very young puppies and kittens who tease each other. A few past experiences I have had with non-domesticated mammals may undermine this assumption. The first involved a baboon. On a school field-trip to the Denver Zoo when I was about ten years old, I was admiring a baboon when a young human female approached the cage, standing beside me. The baboon then leapt from its perch, latching onto the cage’s bars just above us. As the two of us giggled gleefully, the baboon’s penis emerged, urinating on the female beside me. A few years later, at a zoo in Colorado Springs, Colorado, I was standing up against a concrete-wall that separated a pod of hippopotamus from onlookers. A young boy, I could barely peer over the wall into the pool of water containing the hippos, while behind me stood a crowd of adults who could easily view the hippos. A large hippo slowly turned till its rear faced the crowd and then shot a spray of excrement over my head, onto the crowd behind me. While emitting bodily fluids is a natural function, in both cases the act appeared premeditated, conscious, purposefully aimed at human onlookers. Granted, as zoo animals, both do experience a kind of domestication. It would be more tempting to call these subversive acts of defiance, perhaps even acts of anger, than to perceive of them as acts of ridicule. But then a third experience, with a wild animal in its natural habitat, complicates this conjecture. About a decade ago, I was backpacking in Glacier National Park, about a dozen miles in-country. Having just climbed a long, steep ascent, I stopped to wait for my hiking partner, who was at least a half-mile back. A minute or two of enjoying the view of the wide, deep canyon below me was suddenly interrupted by something rustling leaves and breaking branches in a copse of dense aspens and willows beside me. Apparently I was not alone, had stopped on a portion of the trail that was shared with some rather large, obscured animal. I slowly peeked back a few branches, hoping not to come face-to-face with a grizzly bear. Instead, to my delight, there stood a very large bull elk, perhaps the largest I had and have ever observed, munching on a potpourri of leaves. Just a few feet in distance, with only a few meaningless branches between us, we made eye contact, maintaining it for several minutes. During that time, as is my wont, I struck up a conversation with the bull. What I said I cannot now recall, though I’m sure my tone was pleasant. After a few more minutes, the bull slowly turned till its posterior was directly in my face. Its tail lifted. And then it shot out a stream of piss and ordure, clearly aiming for me. While it has been demonstrated that some animals use urine to mark territory, I cannot say that the animals in these instances were marking territory, particularly when, in the example of the bull elk especially, the intent of that mix seemed to be to mark me. Perhaps these were acts of aggression. I cannot say with certainty. But as I have pondered these three experiences as I’ve been writing this study of ridicule, I cannot help but wonder whether these mammals were ridiculing humans.
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