

Over a Barrel:
Ralph Ellison and The Politics of Black Laughter

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Abstract: The laughter of black Americans has long constituted a site of intense white anxiety, police intervention, and democratic resistance. This essay turns to Ralph Ellison's 1985 essay "An Extravagance of Laughter" in order to examine the politics of black laughter. Through a remarkable joke about "laughing barrels" – barrels into which Southern blacks were supposedly required to laugh during Jim Crow – Ellison illuminates the central role that black laughter plays in the construction and democratic transformation of a white supremacist social order. The paper makes four arguments. First, I argue that Ellison demonstrates how a racialized social order constructs itself through and is in turn reproduced by a particular "regime of laughter." The oppressive conditions of white supremacy produce the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter, and the latter are in turn understood by white society as evidence of the black subject's intrinsic inferiority. Second, I contend that Ellison reveals the intensely dialectical character of the politics of black laughter. The capacity of black laughter to resist and transform the white supremacist social order depends crucially on the latter's racist understanding of it as an irrational, dangerous force. Third, I argue that Ellison shows how the democratizing power of black laughter consists in how this laughter puts white supremacy "over a barrel" by creatively subverting the police mechanisms that attempt to stifle it. Fourth and finally, Ellison's essay illuminates his conception of democracy as a mode of political life characterized by processes of "antagonistic cooperation" among individuals, collectivities, and the social order as a whole.

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That must be the reason, thought Sandy, why poverty-stricken old Negroes like Uncle Dan Givens lived so long— because to them, no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter (Hughes 1995, 249).

This race has the greatest of the gifts of God, laughter. It dances and sings; it is humble; it longs to learn; it loves men; it loves women. It is frankly, baldly, deliciously human in an artificial and hypocritical land...The white world has its gibes and cruel caricatures; it has its loud guffaws; but to the black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle (Du Bois 1968, 148).

It's the breaks in the pattern of segregation which count, the accidents (Ellison 2003h, 71).

On August 22, 2015 police removed ten African American women from the Napa Valley Wine Train (Rocha 2015). The Wine Train company, which offers luxury dining along historic rail routes in California wine country, accused the women – members of a book club – of disturbing their fellow passengers by “laughing too loudly.” This incident generated national media attention and inspired the Twitter hashtag #laughingwhileblack that highlighted other incidents of white hostility toward African American laughter (Rocha 2015). Such a preoccupation with the styles, tonalities, and volumes of black laughter is hardly new, as the laughter of black Americans has long constituted a site of intense white anxiety and attempts at regulation (Chasar 2008; Parvulescu 2010, 59–77). Indeed, as scholar of American popular culture Mike Chasar notes, “we must recognize the extent to which race relations in the United States have been conducted via African American laughter” (Chasar 2008, 60). In light of this history, the present paper asks: in what ways is race an essential concept for grasping the politics of laughter? And conversely, what role does laughter play in American racial politics?

I turn to Ralph Ellison’s masterful 1985 essay, “An Extravagance of Laughter” to address these questions. In this piece Ellison – the African American writer most famous for his Cold War classic, *Invisible Man* – carefully weaves together American racial history, African American folklore, and personal anecdotes to elucidate the political origins, effects, and

possibilities of black laughter. Through a remarkable joke about “laughing barrels” – barrels into which Southern blacks were supposedly required to laugh during the Jim Crow era – Ellison demonstrates that the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter are historical products of white supremacy and that the latter maintains itself in part by regulating this laughter. Despite the central role black laughter plays in the construction of a racialized social order, Ellison insists that it can – under certain conditions – function to radically undermine and democratize that order. I employ Ellison’s essay to examine this status of black laughter as a privileged site in which white supremacy is both reproduced *and* resisted. I then show how Ellison’s reflections on black laughter illuminate his distinctive conception of democratic politics amidst white supremacy.

Unlike most philosophers who conceive of laughter as an experience that originates and exerts political effects on the level of the individual human subject, Ellison theorizes laughter on the level of the social order as a whole. More specifically, Ellison examines laughter within the nineteenth and twentieth century American *racialized* social order. The latter is characterized by *white supremacy*, or what Ellison describes as the “myth” that white Americans “by the mere fact of race, color, and tradition alone were superior to the black masses below them” (Ellison 1986, 176–77). Not simply an ideology of racial difference, white supremacy entails a political program of systematic racial subjugation: “Whiteness was a form of manifest destiny which designated Negroes as its territory and challenge. Whiteness struck at signs, at coloration, hair texture, and speech idiom...It thrived on violence and sought endlessly for victims” (Ellison 1986, 172). In concrete terms, white supremacy operates by way of a denial of fundamental rights to blacks (e.g., slavery and segregation), rituals of physical violence against blacks (e.g.,

lynchings and beatings), and various anti-black stereotypes (e.g., the lazy black man) (Ellison 1986, 174–78). While the “geopolitical center of white supremacy” was the antebellum and Jim Crow South, the inextricability of white supremacy from the social, political, and economic development of the United States as a whole ensures that it continues to haunt subjects and institutions far removed from those times and places (Ellison 1986, 173, 175–76; see also Mills 1997; Olson 2004). Ellison argues that the structuring “myth” of white supremacy cuts against the democratic principles of freedom and equality enshrined in the country’s foundational political documents and espoused by leaders of all eras and ideologies: “democratic ideals...were rendered absurd by the prevailing mystique of race and color” (Ellison 1995, xiii; see also Ellison 1986, 172–76). This contradiction between white supremacy and democracy motivates Ellison’s broader literary project (Ellison 1995, 2003c, 2003g, 2003l) and forms the backdrop for the examination of black laughter he offers in “An Extravagance of Laughter.”

The present paper proceeds in four sections. Section I reconstructs Ellison’s claim that the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter are products of a history of racial oppression and that white supremacy sustains itself by treating these differences in laughter as evidence of essential racial difference. Ellison shows how the American racialized social order produces and is in turn reproduced by what I will call the white supremacist *regime of laughter*. Section II turns to Ellison’s rendition of the laughing barrel joke to contend that the politics of black laughter are *intensely dialectical*. Black laughter is neither simply the “irrational,” “primitive” force imagined by white supremacy nor an inherently democratic force opposed to racial hierarchy. Black laughter democratizes the American racial order only when its “irrationality” and “primitiveness” function to reveal the very same characteristics in the laughter

of whites. The racist conception of black laughter as irrational and primitive thus contains within itself the resources for its own democratic overcoming, and the democratizing power of black laughter depends paradoxically on its association with these attributes. Section III contends that the democratizing effects of black laughter materialize not when black subjects disobey or laugh *at* the white supremacist regime of laughter but rather when their laughter turns this regime against itself. Section IV concludes by considering what Ellison’s account of black laughter reveals about Ellison as a theorist of democracy. Challenging recent scholarship that focuses on Ellison’s exploration of the paradoxes of democratic government (Allen 2004a, 2004b) or attributes of democratic individuality (Turner 2008; Morel 2004), I contend that Ellison advances a unique account of democracy as a *mode of political life* characterized by complex, contradictory, and even Janus-faced processes of “antagonistic cooperation” (Ellison 2003b, 850; 2003c, 602; 2003k, 496) among individuals, collectivities, and the social order as a whole.

I. The White Supremacist Regime of Laughter

Shortly after arriving in New York City in 1936, Ellison found himself the guest of the famous African American poet Langston Hughes at the Broadway adaptation of Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, a comedy about a poor Southern white family that embodies all the Depression era’s worst anti-black stereotypes (Ellison 1986, 181, 186). Ellison recounts falling victim to a fit of laughter during a scene where sixteen year old Ellie May Lester seduces her older sister’s husband at the encouragement of their father who wants to steal the poor man’s bag of turnips: “I was reduced to such helpless laughter that I distracted the entire balcony and embarrassed both myself and my host” (Ellison 1986, 181, 186). Ellison describes his laughter as “an extravagance of laughter,” or “a virtual uncontrollable cloud-and-dam-burst of laughter, a

self-immolation of laughter over which I had no control” (Ellison 1986, 186). While Ellison emphasizes how his extravagance of laughter demonstrates the importance of comedy for navigating the complexities and paradoxes of modern American life (Ellison 1986, 146, 197), I would like to put this frequently commented upon question of genre (Allen 2004a, O’Meally 2003; Rovit 1960) aside and reflect more closely on how Ellison describes his fit of laughter *itself*. What are the political origins, meanings, and effects of Ellison’s laughter at *Tobacco Road*?

Ellison connects his extravagance of laughter to a joke from African American folklore. As his seemingly unquenchable laughter angered other theater-goers and even distracted the actors on stage, a mortified Ellison worried about the impression he was making on his famous host. Ellison writes that he imagined Hughes thinking, “Damn, if I’d known this would be his reaction, I would have picked a theater with laughing-barrels!” (Ellison 1986, 186–87). “Laughing barrels,” Ellison explains, are the subject of an “old in-group joke” shared among black Southerners that “played upon the themes of racial conflict, social freedom, and the blackness of Negro laughter” (Ellison 1986, 187). According to the joke (I will explain why it is a joke in Section II), Southern towns placed barrels marked “FOR COLORED” in their central squares into which black subjects were required to stick their heads if they “felt a laugh coming on” (Ellison 1986, 187). The barrels were designed to “protect” the town from the disruptive sound of black laughter. With this reference to laughing barrels, Ellison begins an examination of how a racialized social order produces and sustains itself through a particular regime of laughter.

According to Ellison, white supremacy yields significant differences in how black and white subjects laugh. The sounds, styles, and tonalities of black and white laughter express and in turn reproduce distinct historical-political experiences. Ellison recalls a personal incident that

illustrates these dynamics. When attempting to participate in the “white” cultural scene of a New York City bookstore, Ellison accidentally employed a cliché common to Southern blacks in a conversation with a white college student (Ellison 1986, 160–61). The student responded to a clearly embarrassed Ellison with laughter and a racial slur. Ellison writes, “I didn’t like it, but there it was – I had been hit in mid-flight; and so, brought down to earth, I joined in his laughter. But while he laughed in bright major chords I responded darkly in minor-sevenths and flatted-fifths, and I doubted that he was attuned to the deeper source of our inharmonic harmony” (Ellison 1986, 161). Ellison and the white student do not make the same sounds when they laugh, and their respective laughs “do” different things. The “bright major chords” of the student’s laughter express and in turn reinforce his privileged status in the racial hierarchy, while Ellison’s “dark,” “minor” laughter reflects an uneasy acknowledgement of his inferior status.¹ A history marked by racial inequality and oppression manifests and reproduces itself in how black and white subjects laugh.²

Ellison argues that a white supremacist social order interprets the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter not as products of a history of oppression but rather as further evidence of the black subject’s intrinsic inferiority. While white laughter is considered to be “rational” (i.e., always directed at a “discernible target” – e.g., a black man like Ellison in the bookstore), black laughter is understood to be fundamentally irrational and without purpose

¹ By readily acknowledging his inferior racial status through laughter, Ellison participates in a long tradition of black subjects employing laughter to dissemble in (and thus survive) encounters with whites (Chasar 2008, 71). It also recalls the advice offered by the Invisible Man’s grandfather: “I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swollen you till they vomit or bust wide open” (Ellison 1995, 16).

² This connection between the sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter and a history of oppression recalls Du Bois’s description of slave “sorrow songs” as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (Du Bois 2003, 255). Ellison’s laughing barrel joke (examined in Section II) shows how black laughter, like the sorrow songs, resists reduction to its origins in oppression by also “longing toward a truer world.”

(Ellison 1986, 188, 193). Black laughter is not fully human laughter; its “primitive,” uncontrollable sound threatens civilized society. As Chasar remarks in his study of early twentieth century accounts of black laughter, “scholars and laughter ‘theorists’ took great pains to show either that black laughter was different from white laughter by virtue of its childishness and innocence or that laughter itself had behavioral or physiological roots in Africa and was thus a primitive, immature, or uncivilized element in the Western world” (Chasar 2008, 63; see also Parvulescu 2010, 61–66). Ellison writes that there exists an “*unnatural* and corrupting blackness of Negro laughter” that constitutes a “confounding, persistent, and embarrassing mystery” to white society (Ellison 1986, 190–91). The distinctive sounds of black laughter mark one *as black* – that is, as an inferior being who endangers American society. The construction of a racialized social order thus proceeds not only through practices of *seeing* black skin, but also through practices of *hearing* black bodies. For Ellison, laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein “race” as a naturalized relation of social and political inequality establishes and entrenches itself.

“Laughing barrels” constitute the mechanism by which the Jim Crow South defends itself from the mysterious force of black laughter. Ellison traces the perverse logic whereby the very conditions of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that produced the distinctive sounds of black laughter are offered as justifications for regulating it:

The barrels were considered a civic necessity and had been improvised as a means of protecting the sensibilities of whites from a peculiar form of insanity suffered exclusively by Negroes, who in light of their social status and past condition of servitude were regarded as having absolutely *nothing* in their daily experience which could possibly inspire *rational* laughter. (Ellison 1986, 188)

Crucially, laughing barrels do not *eliminate* the sounds of black laughter from public space.

Passers-by (white and black) know exactly why the black person’s head is buried in the barrel,

and they can hear muffled laughter through the barrel. Laughing barrels merely *segregate* black laughter; they localize and contain it such that it poses no significant threat to public space.

Laughing barrels provide an occasion for spectators of all colors to learn and re-learn that the sounds of black laughter belong to bodies not fit for full and equal participation in public life.

Black subjects in particular learn the cruel truth that while failure to segregate their laughter will result in violence, obeying the laughing barrel policy affirms their inferior social and political status just as effectively. Laughing barrels, in short, ensure that the supposedly disruptive sounds of black laughter instead function to secure white supremacy.

“Laughing barrels” are a common trope in African American folklore (Dundes 1973, xv–xvi; Bercaw and Amon 2016), and they serve as a metaphor for the various mechanisms employed by a white supremacist social order to segregate black laughter. Sterling Brown’s 1932 poem “Slim in Atlanta” provides an example of another “laughing barrel”: “Down in Atlanta, / De whitefolks got laws / For to keep all de niggers / From laughin’ outdoors. / Hope to Gawd I may die / If I ain’t speakin’ truth / Make de niggers do deir laughin’ / In a telefoam booth” (Brown 2000, 81). A twenty-first century “laughing barrel” might be Tyler Perry films, TV shows, and plays. Perry’s comedies about middle class black life provide black Americans with a space to laugh in virtual isolation from whites.³ Although this laughing barrel lacks the compulsory quality of the Jim Crow barrels or Brown’s “telefoam booth,” it nevertheless advances the goal of segregating black laughter such that it does not disrupt white society. Moreover, Perry’s trafficking in elements of minstrelsy (Kopano and Ball 2014) functions to

³ As the introduction to a recent academic anthology on Tyler Perry notes, “[Perry] has unapologetically made it clear that he is principally speaking to, for, and about African Americans” (Bell and Jackson II 2014, 6). Thanks to Sam Chambers for directing me to consider Tyler Perry.

bolster white conceptions of black laughter as childlike and unsuitable for public space. Ellison demonstrates that laughing barrels operate wherever and whenever black subjects segregate their laughter in such a way that preserves a conception of citizenship premised on white supremacy.

Laughing barrels constitute mechanisms of the broader white supremacist *regime of laughter*. This concept of a “regime of laughter” is a modification of Foucault’s influential notion of “regime of truth” that describes how the rules and procedures governing the production of knowledge rely on and sustain historically contingent subject positions and relations of power (Foucault 1984, 73–74). A regime of laughter is thus the set of rules and mechanisms governing laughter that emerges from and in turn reproduces a constellation of historically specific subject positions and power relations.⁴ The regime of laughter operative in Ellison’s essay (and, as the Wine Train incident suggests, remains operative today) presumes an essential difference in the origins, meanings, and effects of the laughter of white and black subjects and seeks to regulate the latter in order to secure white supremacy. Through mechanisms like laughing barrels, the white supremacist regime reproduces the “black” and “white” subject positions (i.e., the very categories of essential racial difference). Theorizing laughter in terms of *regimes* highlights how there exists no such thing as laughter “pure and simple” that can form the object of a study of the politics of laughter. Laughter is always produced, understood, and regulated within the context of historically specific political processes and structures (in this case, race), and an account of the politics of laughter requires an account of these processes and structures.

⁴ While Mary Beard makes passing reference to a “regime of laughter” in her study of ancient Roman laughter (Beard 2014, 142), she does not define this concept or articulate its significance for the broader study of laughter.

II. The Dialectics of Black Laughter

Ellison explains that while the laughing barrels are designed to help produce and defend white supremacy against the disruptive force of black laughter, they do not always achieve their objective. The barrels can fail – and this is the source of the “joke” – because they risk generating an even greater social and political disruption. After exploring the source and character of this disruption, the present section argues that black laughter is neither the irrational, primitive force imagined by white supremacy nor an inherently democratic force opposed to white supremacy. It is both at once, and this dialectical complexity accounts for black laughter’s capacity to democratize the racialized social order.

Ellison claims that the laughing barrels fail when white spectators find themselves laughing along with the black subjects whose heads are buried in the barrels. He describes how the uproar from laughing-barrels could become so loud and raucous that it not only disturbed the serenity of the entire square, but shook up the whites’ fierce faith in the stability of their most cherished traditions. For on such occasions the uproar from the laughing-barrels could become so contagious and irresistible that any whites who were so unfortunate as to be caught near the explosions of laughter would find themselves compelled to join in...It was an appalling state of affairs, for despite their sternest resistance, even such distinguished whites literally cracked up and roared! (Ellison 1986, 191)

The scene of laughter that originates with black subjects laughing in the barrels generates a scandal within the white supremacist regime of laughter. Black laughter – maligned as an irrational force that threatens civilized society – has gained control over the public behavior of the white citizenry. And it has done so precisely by way of the mechanisms designed to regulate it!

The whites assumed that in some mysterious fashion the Negro involved was not only laughing at *himself* laughing, but was also laughing at *them* laughing at his laughing

against their own most determined wills. And if such was the truth, it suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant *any* Negro) could become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable situation. (Ellison 1986, 191)

Obeying the laughing barrel policy unexpectedly allows even the lowliest of black Southerners to take charge of public (i.e., white) space. Rather than securing white supremacy against black laughter, the laughing barrels threaten to undermine the prevailing racial hierarchy.⁵

Why, exactly, does this scene of laughter precipitate such a grave political crisis? As the minstrel tradition illustrates (and Ellison's bookstore encounter confirms), black bodies are common objects of white laughter (Chasar 2008, 62; Fauset 1994), and the white laughter at the body in the barrel likely begins as a chuckle of superiority. However, it remains unclear why this laughter proliferates so wildly and persists for such an extended period. Ellison writes:

For since it was an undisputed fact that whites and blacks were of different species, it followed that they could by no means be expected to laugh at the same things. Therefore, when whites found themselves joining in with the coarse merriment issuing from the laughing-barrels, they suffered the double embarrassment of laughing against their own God-given nature while being unsure of exactly why, or at what, specifically, they were laughing. Which meant that somehow the Negro in the barrel had them *over* a barrel. (Ellison 1986, 192)

Recall that whereas the laughter of black subjects is considered to be irrational, uncontrollable, and without purpose, white laughter is thought to always have a rational motivation and discernible target (Ellison 1986, 193). By putting the white spectators "over a barrel" – that is, by prompting them to laugh uncontrollably for no apparent reason – the laughing barrel scene *dissolves the distinction between black and white laughter*. All laughter is now black: wild,

⁵ Such a hijacking of public (i.e., white) space is unlikely to materialize in the case of the Tyler Perry laughing barrel described above. Unlike the highly visible and audible segregation of black laughter enforced in the Southern town, Tyler Perry comedies move black laughter almost entirely out of the view and earshot of whites. Despite Perry being the highest paid male entertainer in the United States (Bell and Jackson II 2014, 1), many whites have never heard of Perry and most have never seen his shows. The segregation of the Tyler Perry laughing barrel *itself* means that the black laughter emanating from it cannot disrupt white space in the same way black laughter does in Ellison's story.

mysterious, and disruptive. The laughing barrels undermine the white supremacist regime's presumption of an essential difference between the laughter of black and white subjects.

A Negro laughing in a laughing-barrel simply turned the world upside down and inside out. And in doing so, he *in*-verted (and thus *sub*-verted) tradition and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder. Therefore, it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency, it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as un-political as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into the interiors of a batch of old whitewashed whiskey barrels. (Ellison 1986, 192)

Rather than functioning as a site wherein “race” as a naturalized relation of social and political inequality entrenches itself, laughter becomes an experience wherein black and white subjects share public space together on an equal footing. Through their laughter, black subjects make themselves count as members of the *polis*; their laughter precipitates a *democratization* of the Southern town. This is the source of the crisis generated by the laughing barrels.

The genius of the laughing barrel joke consists in how it provisionally accepts the white supremacist conception of black laughter as “irrational,” “primitive,” and “wild” in order to reveal the very same qualities in the laughter of whites. This revelation occurs at the precise moment when white supremacy aims to put the supposedly essential difference between black and white laughter on full display (i.e., when the black subject has his head in the barrel). The laughing barrel scene deconstructs the distinction between black and white laughter at the foundation of the white supremacist regime of laughter, and in doing so it reveals Ellison's intensely dialectical conception of the politics of black laughter. The sounds of black laughter are neither simply the echoes of an oppressive history nor democratizing forces opposed to white supremacy. Both political valences depend on – even as they undermine – one another. Black laughter's status as a product of racial oppression and sign of racial inferiority invokes attributes

like “irrationality,” “primitiveness,” and “wildness” that make possible a democratic transformation of the white supremacist social order. Conversely, the capacity of black laughter to undermine the racial order depends not on any revolutionary quality intrinsic to such laughter (Chasar 2008; Fauset 1994), but rather on how white supremacy defines the laughter of blacks in racist terms as “irrational,” “primitive,” etc.. Ellison shows that the politics of black laughter are constitutively complex and double-sided, and it is this unstable, dialectical quality that accounts for the enduring saliency of black laughter in political struggles over white supremacy today.⁶

Recall that it is Ellison’s uncontrollable laughter at *Tobacco Road* that reminds him of the laughing barrel joke in the first place, and we find a similar dynamic at work in the Broadway theater. Although there is no formal segregation of laughter in the theater (i.e., there are no laughing barrels⁷), the space remains governed by the white supremacist regime of laughter. Ellison describes how the theater’s rules and norms that (a) encourage polite laughter that emanates from the audience as a whole and lasts for a determinate period and (b) prohibit unruly laughter that originates from a single audience member and persists for an indeterminate period are racially coded in the terms provided by white supremacy:

Things were getting so out of control that Northern white folk in balcony and loge were now catching fire and beginning to howl and cheer the disgraceful loss of self-control being exhibited by a young Negro...a young man who was so gross as to demonstrate his social unacceptability by violating a whole *encyclopedia* of codes that regulated proper conduct no less in the theater than in society at large...Perhaps, in shock and dismay, they too were thinking of laughing-barrels. (Ellison 1986, 187–88)

⁶ To be clear, by describing the politics of black laughter as “dialectical,” I do not mean that it participates in a finalist historical teleology. Rather, I follow Adorno’s conception of dialectics as an attention to the otherness within all things, or what he calls “the consistent sense of nonidentity” (Adorno 1973, 5).

⁷ Here I disagree with Anca Parvulescu’s otherwise brilliant reading of “An Extravagance of Laughter.” Parvulescu notes that “there are rules as to when one laughs and how one laughs in the theater...All theaters have their laughing barrels” (Parvulescu 2010, 74). While the Broadway theater certainly regulates black laughter, it does not *segregate* it. The theater thus does not have laughing barrels.

Ellison's laughter marks him as a black man in the predominantly white space of the Broadway theater. Ellison suggests that he has developed a capacity to regulate his laughter in order to avoid trouble in such environments:

It was as though I had plunged into a nightmare in which my personality was split in twain, with the lucid side looking on in wonder while the manic side convulsed my body as though a drunken accordionist were using it...And while I wheezed and choked with laughter, my disgusted lucid self dramatized its cool detachment. (Ellison 1986, 187)

The absence of laughing barrels corresponds to the emergence of an *internal regulation* by black subjects of their laughter. The extravagance of laughter Ellison suffers in the theater is unique in that it eludes control by his "lucid" half that normally enforces obedience to the rules of laughter.

Just as the laughter of the black subject with his head in the barrel democratizes the Southern town, Ellison's extravagance of laughter democratizes the Broadway theater. Ellison recounts how his fit of laughter divides the overwhelmingly white audience. Some angrily insist on upholding the theater's rules of laughter, while others allow themselves to laugh along with Ellison.

But now as I continued to roar at the weird play-without-a-play in which part of me was involved, my sober self marked the fact that the entire audience was being torn in twain. Most of the audience was white, but now many who occupied seats down in the orchestra were beginning to protest the unscheduled disruption taking place above them. Leaping to their feet, they were shaking their fists at those in the balcony, and they in turn were shouting their disdain for those so lacking in an appreciation for the impromptu broadening of the expected comedy. (Ellison 1986, 189)

When the group of white audience members joins Ellison in laughing, the distinction between permissible (i.e., white) and impermissible (i.e., black) laughter crumbles. No longer an occasion for re-inscribing racial hierarchy, laughter instead becomes an experience that reveals and affirms the equality of black and white audience members. Through the scene generated by his laughter,

Ellison affirms his equality in the space of the theater: “[The novelist Erskine] Caldwell told me something important about who I was. And by easing the conflict that I was having with my Southern experience (yes, and with my South-Southwestern identity), he helped initiate me into becoming, if not a ‘New Yorker,’ at least a more tolerant American” (Ellison 1986, 197). As was the case in the Southern town, the democratizing power of Ellison’s laughter depends paradoxically on its status as a product of racial oppression and signifier of racial inferiority. It is only by means of the racist terms through which the white supremacist social order interprets black laughter that the latter succeeds in revealing and affirming the equality of black and white subjects. Grateful to Caldwell for creating an occasion where his laughter could yield “an interracial situation without the threat of physical violence,” Ellison concludes by praising the novelist as the “mighty destroyer of laughing-barrels” (Ellison 1986, 197).

III. The Democratic Politics of Black Laughter

Ellison’s celebration of Caldwell as the “mighty destroyer of laughing-barrels” makes clear his commitment to abolishing the white supremacist regime of laughter. However, a crucial passage in “An Extravagance of Laughter” complicates our understanding of Ellison’s attitude toward the regulation of black laughter. Speculating on the best course of action for a black subject who is about to laugh, Ellison writes: “Negroes who were wise – or at least fast on their feet – took off *posthaste* for a laughing-barrel. (Just as I, in my present predicament, would gladly have done.)” (Ellison 1986, 188–89). This view of laughing barrels as a resource that black subjects *actively seek out* accords with other accounts of laughing barrels. For example, folklorist Alan Dundes writes that “in slavery times and afterward...if a Negro wished to laugh out loud at his master, he might do so only at considerable risk. So he suppressed the desire to

laugh and went instead to the ‘laughing barrel,’ where he could laugh to his heart’s content without fear of being heard” (Dundes 1973, xv).⁸ On this interpretation, laughing barrels are not so much a mechanism deployed to entrench the inferior status of blacks as they are a technology employed by blacks to safely enjoy their laughter amidst white supremacy. While “laughing barrels” exist only in a white supremacist society, Ellison suggests that we look beyond their status as instruments of racial oppression and attend to their capacity to protect (and even empower) black subjects.

If the relationship between black subjects and the mechanisms of white supremacy is not strictly antagonistic, then under what conditions does black laughter democratize the social order? Two episodes from earlier in Ellison’s essay suggest a way to answer this question. The first concerns Ellison’s experience as a young Tuskegee student on New York City public buses in the 1930s. Ellison writes that after assuring himself that – unlike in the South – he could sit wherever he likes, he finds himself considering an unexpected question:

I asked myself whether a seat at the back of the bus wasn’t actually more desirable than one at the front. For not only did it provide more leg room, it offered a more inclusive perspective on both the interior and exterior scenes. I found the answer obvious and quite amusing...Now that I was no longer forced by law and compelled by custom to ride at the back...what was more desirable – the possibility of exercising what was routinely accepted in the North as an abstract, highly symbolic (even trivial) form of democratic freedom, or the creature comfort which was to be had by occupying a spot from which more of the passing scene could be observed? (Ellison 1986, 153)

For Ellison, Northern buses raise a “troublesome question” and a “certain unease” about the meaning of freedom in a country with a deep and enduring history of racial oppression (Ellison 1986, 156). Does freedom for black Americans consist in the enjoyment of previously denied

⁸ The various analogues of “laughing barrels” in African American folklore also confirm this view. For example, black worshippers supposedly turned to wash kettles, “prayer bells,” and “shouting barrels” for safe outlets to pray and sing in the antebellum and Jim Crow South (Dundes 1973, xv–xvi; Bercaw and Amon 2016).

rights? Or does freedom instead consist in the pursuit of one’s individual preferences, even when these preferences align – at least on the surface – with historical practices of oppression?

Digging deeper into this question, Ellison wonders whether he and others ignored possibilities for free action in the segregated South. He describes how his doubts about the buses

were raising the even more troublesome question of to what extent had I failed to grasp a certain degree of freedom that had always existed in my group’s state of unfreedom? Of what had I neglected to avail myself through fear or lack of interest while sitting silently behind jim-crow signs?...to what extent had I overlooked similar opportunities for self-discovery while accepting a definition of possibility laid down by those who would deny me freedom? (Ellison 1986, 156)

While in no way criticizing the civil rights movement (Warren 1965; Ellison 2003d, 433), Ellison worries that an exclusive focus on securing and enjoying the rights refused to black Americans confirms the total power of white supremacy against the black subject and denies to the latter any capacity for acting freely on his or her own terms. Freedom for Ellison involves a “play upon life’s possibilities” (Ellison 1986, 180) – that is, a critical *engagement with* (rather than mere *removal of*) mechanisms of racial oppression. Ellison, in other words, refuses to allow white supremacy to determine the meaning of black freedom. As Lucas Morel notes, Ellison held that “there was no need to get all of his instruction in liberty from a racist society” (Morel 2004, 58). Ellison believes that actions like voluntarily sitting at the back of the Northern bus affirm that his capacity to determine how to be free is equal to that exercised by whites.⁹

The second episode that explains Ellison’s apparent ambivalence towards mechanisms of the white supremacist regime of laughter concerns his memories of Alabama police harassing

⁹ This focus on the possibilities for freedom amidst unfreedom is a recurring theme in Ellison. For example, in “Blues People” he writes that slavery “was a most vicious system, and those who endured and survived it a tough people, but it was *not* (and this is important for Negroes to remember for the sake of their own sense of who and what their grandparents were) a state of absolute repression” (Ellison 2003a, 284).

Tuskegee students on the highway to the university. Ellison describes how students coped with this abuse by laughing together upon their return:

Back on campus we were compelled to buffer the pain and negate the humiliation by making grotesque comedy out of the extremes to which whites would go to keep us in what they considered to be our “place.” Once safe at Tuskegee, we’d become fairly hysterical as we recounted our adventures and laughed as much at ourselves as at the cops. We mocked their modes of speech and styles of intimidation, and teased one another as we parodied our various modes of feigning fear when telling them who we were and where we were headed. It was a wild, he-man schoolboy silliness but the only way we knew for dealing with the inescapable conjunction of laughter and pain. (Ellison 1986, 171–72)

Although Ellison appreciates the therapeutic effects of this laughter, he believes it fell short as a response to the police violence. He continues: “Thus was violence transcended with cruel but homeopathic laughter, and racial cruelty transformed by a traditional form of folk art. It did nothing to change the Phenix City police, and probably wouldn’t have even if they heard the recitation...My problem was that I couldn’t completely dismiss such experiences with laughter” (Ellison 1986, 171–72). Unlike the extravagances of laughter emanating from the laughing barrels or Broadway theater that subvert the racial order, the Tuskegee students’ “cruel” laughter merely reduces their by assuring them of their moral superiority to the racist police. It does nothing to challenge the terms of the prevailing racial hierarchy. While black laughter targeting mechanisms of white supremacy is valuable as a survival strategy, Ellison suggests that it ultimately fails as a democratic strategy.

These two episodes illuminate the conditions under which black laughter democratizes the white supremacist social order. Just as Ellison eschews a preoccupation with the rights denied to black subjects and rejects a strategy of laughing at racist whites, he does not believe that black laughter undermines the white supremacist regime of laughter when it *merely violates* or *targets*

that regime. In fact, the black Southerner from the laughing barrel joke actually *obeys* the laughing barrel policy (even as his laughter functions to undermine that policy). Meanwhile, Ellison's "lucid side" in the Broadway theater does not encourage or restrain his laughing "manic side"; it simply observes the scandalous laughter in "cool detachment" (Ellison 1986, 187). In both cases, the subject neither engages in a straightforward violation of the rules of laughter nor laughs *at* these rules or the mechanisms enforcing them. The subject merely allows his laughter to intensify and proliferate such that the racist regime of laughter undermines itself: "All [that whites] knew was that when such an incident occurred, instead of sobering up, as any white man in a similar situation would have done, a Negro might well take off and laugh all the harder (as I in my barrelless state was doing)" (Ellison 1986, 190). Allowing one's laughter to intensify prompts a critical mass of white onlookers to laugh along in such a way that, as we saw earlier, undermines the distinction between black and white laughter at the foundation of the white supremacist regime. For Ellison, black laughter democratizes the social order when it subverts – and does not simply disobey or protest – the mechanisms designed to regulate it.

It is important to note, however, that an extravagance of laughter does not constitute a deliberate strategy on the part of the black subject. Neither Ellison nor the Southerner in the barrel *decides* to laugh uncontrollably. Such laughter is an experience that the subject *suffers from*. Ellison writes that he "was reduced to...helpless laughter" by the play (Ellison 1986, 186) and that the black Southerner was "taken over by a form of schizophrenia" (Ellison 1986, 190). Unlike the laughter of the Tuskegee students that takes deliberate aim at the racist police from a distance, the extravagance of laughter emerges unexpectedly from *deep within* the white supremacist social order, i.e., from within a context where black laughter is highly regulated. It

likewise troubles not only the racial conceptions of white spectators but also those of the laughing black subject. In sharp contrast to the morally superior laugh he enjoyed with his fellow Tuskegee students, Ellison's laughter in the Broadway theater reveals to him that white subjects are not – in their essence at least – the monsters that white supremacy has made them into:

On one side of my mind I had thought of my life as being of a whole, segregated but in many ways superior to that of the Lesters [the white family in *Tobacco Road*]. On the other side, I thought of the Lester type as being, in the Negro folk phrase, 'a heap of whiteness gone to waste' and therefore a gross caricature of anything that was viable in the idea of white superiority. But now Caldwell had highlighted the warp and woof of my own ragtag American pattern...I laughed and I trembled, and gained thereby a certain wisdom. (Ellison 1986, 197)

The scene precipitated by Ellison's laughter affirms equality not just to the white audience, but to Ellison as well. Black laughter exerts democratizing effects when its subversion of the white supremacist regime of laughter puts the entire racialized social order – that is, white *and* black subjects (or more precisely, the very concept of "race" itself) – "over a barrel."

IV. Ellison, Black Laughter, and Democracy

What do Ellison's reflections on the democratic politics of black laughter reveal about his broader understanding of democracy within a racialized social order? Democracy is a recurring theme in Ellison (Ellison 1995, vii-xxiii; 2003c; 2003g; 2003k; 2003k) and political theorists have credited Ellison with illuminating key features of the relationship between democratic politics and white supremacy. For example, Danielle Allen contends that Ellison dramatizes the constitutive tensions of democracy as a *form of political life*. According to Allen, Ellison explores how democratic self-government paradoxically requires citizens to make painful (and in the case of white supremacy, non-reciprocal) sacrifices for one another: "The politics in [*Invisible Man*] lies, then, in the novel's account of what it is like, psychologically speaking, to

be an individual in a democratic world of strangers, where large scale events are supposed to arise somehow out of one's own consent and yet never really do" (Allen 2004a, 38; see also Allen 2004b, 25–49). Meanwhile, Jack Turner and Lucas Morel argue that Ellison sketches a type of *individuality* proper to democratic life. Situating Ellison within the Emersonian tradition that articulates a liberal democratic sensibility capable of challenging social and political reality, Turner claims that Ellison brings to this tradition a much-needed attention to white supremacy: "In *Invisible Man*, Ellison gives us a picture of democratic individuality in black, and in his essays, displays a democratic individualist sensibility that confronts rather than evades race" (Turner 2008, 657). Finally, Morel describes the Ellisonian democratic individual as one who resists white supremacy by pursuing opportunities for creative self-expression within the racialized social order. He writes: "For [Ellison] the politics of the American regime, despite the segregation he experienced, left sufficient room for aspiring Negro individuals to make their mark...Ellison wrote as an individual striving to contribute to a community of diverse individuals" (Morel 2004, 60, 62).¹⁰

In this section I argue that Ellison's reflections on black laughter suggest an alternative interpretation of his contributions to democratic theory. In "An Extravagance of Laughter" Ellison conceives of democracy as a distinct *mode of political life*. By "mode of political life," I am referring to the pattern or structure of everyday political interactions among subjects and between subjects and the social order. A "mode" of political life differs from what I identified above in Allen as a "form" of political life in that the latter focuses on how structure (e.g., a formally democratic system of government) conditions everyday political interactions, while the

¹⁰ In addition to these works, Timothy Parrish (1995) and Meili Steele (1996) also offer incisive analyses of Ellison's contributions to democratic theory.

former calls our attention to how structure *emerges from* those everyday political interactions themselves. Ellison’s account of black laughter reveals that in a democracy, the everyday political interactions among subjects and between subjects and the social order assume a pattern he elsewhere calls “antagonistic cooperation” (Ellison 2003b, 850; 2003c, 602; 2003k, 496).

Unpacking what Ellison means by this concept requires briefly turning to his essays on jazz.

Antagonistic Cooperation in Jazz

Before finding success as a writer, Ellison studied classical music and sought to become a symphony composer (Ellison 2003e; 2003h). Ellison’s interest in classical music was heavily influenced by his familiarity with the early twentieth-century American jazz scene, and he wrote extensively about the relationship between the two genres (Ellison 2002). Ellison understands jazz as a product of “antagonistic cooperation” (Ellison 2003c, 602) between black musicians and the classical music tradition. In jazz, black artists bring their distinctive historical experiences to bear on classical instruments, techniques, and styles. He explains:

There is a conflict between what the Negro American musician feels in the community around him and the given (or classical) techniques of his instrument. He feels a tension between his desire to master the classical style of playing and his compulsion to express those sounds which form a musical definition of Negro American experience... This desire to master the classical technique was linked with the struggle for recognition in the larger society... It was the tension between these two bodies of technique which led to many of the technical discoveries of jazz. (Ellison 2003i, 271; see also Ellison 2003h, 68–71)

By working with and against the classical music tradition from which they have historically been excluded, black jazz musicians affirm their status as artistic equals without sacrificing what is uniquely “black” about their productions. Ellison argues: “I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through

its musical tradition, and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision” (Ellison 2003e, 229). For Ellison, the political significance of jazz does not consist in any overt political message, but rather in how the process of antagonistic cooperation that black musicians enter into with classical music reveals and affirms their capacity to contribute to the musical tradition on their own terms as equals.¹¹

The internal dynamics of a jazz performance also feature their own form of “antagonistic cooperation.” Ellison describes a jazz jam session as a “contest” (Ellison 2003i, 267) or “ordeal” (Ellison 2003j, 247) wherein each musician seeks to prove his or her “power to express an individuality in tone” (Ellison 2003j, 246). The quality of the group performance depends on how successfully each individual musician articulates a distinctive talent, feeling, or voice:

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment...springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents...a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (Ellison 2003i, 267; see also 2003c, 602–3)

The individual jazz musician proves him or herself a worthy member of the group by developing and mastering a unique musical identity, yet the latter emerges only fleetingly in response to the others and is thus never truly one’s “own.” Ellison admires jazz for how it establishes and sustains a dialectical tension between individual and group that simultaneously advances and

¹¹ In “Going to the Territory,” Ellison describes the “vernacular” style characteristic of American artistic production in similar terms. He writes: “I see the vernacular as a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves...In it the styles and the techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized.” (Ellison 2003c, 612). While Ellison’s concept of the “vernacular” is functionally equivalent to “antagonistic cooperation,” I focus on the latter because its very name dramatizes the dynamic, dialectical tensions that such a process calls into play.

undermines the interests of both: “The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization” (Ellison 2003e, 229). In sum, Ellison conceives of jazz as a dynamic artistic process wherein black musicians enter into relations of antagonistic cooperation with the classical music tradition by entering into relations of antagonistic cooperation with one another (and vice versa). Jazz, in short, involves the establishment of an intensely dialectical relationship between individual, group, and broader musical tradition.

Grasping the richness of Ellison’s concept of antagonistic cooperation requires analyzing the relationship between jazz and classical music more closely. (We could perform a similar analysis on the internal dynamics of the jazz jam session, but for the sake of space I limit my focus here.) This relationship is one of “antagonistic cooperation” in at least eight distinct senses. First, jazz *cooperates* with the classical tradition (by employing its instruments, techniques, and styles) in such a way that *antagonizes* it (i.e., in such a way that resists its musical hegemony). Second, jazz *cooperates* with the classical tradition (by employing its instruments, techniques, and styles) in order to reveal the classical tradition’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., to reveal that classical music does not, as it claims, exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques, and styles). Third, jazz *antagonizes* the classical tradition (i.e., it resists its musical hegemony) by *cooperating* with it (i.e., by employing classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Fourth, jazz reveals the classical tradition’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., it shows that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles) by *cooperating* with that tradition (by employing classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Fifth, jazz *cooperates* with the classical tradition (i.e., it reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments,

techniques, and styles) by *antagonizing* it (i.e., by resisting that tradition’s musical hegemony). Sixth, jazz *cooperates* with the classical tradition (i.e., it reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments, techniques, and styles) by revealing that tradition’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., by showing that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles). Seventh by *antagonizing* the classical tradition (i.e., by resisting its hegemony), jazz *cooperates* with it (i.e., jazz reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Eight and finally, jazz reveals the classical tradition’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., it shows that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles) by *cooperating* with that tradition (by revealing new musical possibilities allowed by its instruments, techniques, and styles).

Despite the confusing and contradictory directions in which these permutations run, they are all implied by Ellison’s account. This is not a flaw in Ellison’s reasoning, but rather its decisive feature. Antagonism and cooperation are dialectically intertwined to such an extreme degree that it is impossible to tell for certain where one begins and the other ends. Antagonism is never *simply* antagonistic, and cooperation is never *simply* cooperative; there is an ineradicable duplicity to each. The opposite of “antagonistic cooperation” is consequently not some third term but rather “antagonism” and “cooperation” considered separately. An antagonism not keyed toward cooperation forsakes critical engagement with the whole it resists and risks slipping into idle protest, while cooperation lacking an antagonistic element forsakes critical energy and risks slipping into quiet replication of the existent. According to Ellison, the political significance of

jazz consists in how it establishes a dynamic, dialectically complex, Janus-faced relationship of antagonistic cooperation between black musicians and the classical music tradition.¹²

Black Laughter, Antagonistic Cooperation, and Democracy

Ellison's jazz essays provide the key for grasping the distinctive conception of democracy that emerges in "An Extravagance of Laughter." When Ellison suggests that the democratizing power of black laughter consists in how it subverts the mechanisms of the white supremacist regime of laughter, he describes the very same process of antagonistic cooperation found in jazz. Consider the case of the laughing barrels in the fictional Southern town. First, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it obeys the laughing barrel policy) in such a way that *antagonizes* that order (i.e., in a way that resists the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects). Second, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it obeys the laughing barrel policy) in such a way that reveals that order's *antagonism* with itself (i.e., it reveals the social order's failure to live up to its stated democratic ideals). Third, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it helps the latter achieve its stated democratic ideals) by *antagonizing* it (i.e., by resisting the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects). Fourth, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it helps the latter achieve its stated democratic ideals) by revealing that order's *antagonism* with itself (i.e., its failure to live up to these ideals). Each of these modes

¹² It may be possible to interpret Ellison's concept of "antagonistic cooperation" as an unintentional gloss on Chapter 13 of Marx's *Capital* (Volume 1). Here Marx argues that the cooperation among laborers that makes possible the emergence and accumulation of capital is at the same time the product and wellspring of labor's necessary antagonism with capital. He writes: "The co-operation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them...Hence the interconnection between their various labours confronts them...as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose" (Marx 1990, 449–50). Marx continues: "As the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and, necessarily, the pressure put on by capital to overcome this resistance" (Marx 1990, 449). For Marx, as for Ellison, cooperation and antagonism are intricately and inexorably bound up with one another, and the promise of an emancipatory politics resides in their dialectical relationship.

of cooperation can in turn be inverted into practices of antagonism along the lines described in the jazz example. For example, black laughter *antagonizes* the white supremacist social order (i.e., it resists the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects) by *cooperating* with that order (i.e., by obeying the laughing barrel policy).

As if this relationship between the laughing black subject and the white supremacist social order were not complex enough, it is actually only part of the story. The presence of many laughing barrels in the Southern town means that the individual black subject is not alone in laughing (Ellison 1986, 190–91). The sound of his laughter competes to be heard with – even as it resonates with and intensifies – the laughter emanating from other barrels. In addition to entering into a relationship of antagonistic cooperation with the racialized social order, the individual subject’s laughter enters into antagonistic cooperation with the laughter of the other black subjects, and this collective laughter in turn enters into antagonistic cooperation with the racialized social order as a whole. Ellison shows that the democratizing power of black laughter consists in how it antagonistically cooperates with – or cooperatively antagonizes – the laughter of other black subjects and the white supremacist social order.

There is, however, one important way in which the conception of antagonistic cooperation that emerges from Ellison’s account of black laughter departs from that articulated in his jazz essays. Whereas the jazz musician must possess special artistic training or talent in order to enter relationships of antagonistic cooperation with other musicians and the classical tradition, there exist no such qualifications when it comes to laughter. According to Ellison, the laughing barrel joke “suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant *any* Negro) could become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable

situation” (Ellison 1986, 191). The democratizing laughter emanating from a laughing barrel can thus belong to *any* black subject. When black laughter democratizes the white supremacist social order, it reveals the equality of even the *lowliest* black subject with his or her white counterparts.

Ellison’s account of black laughter illuminates his conception of democracy as a mode of political life where subjects enter relationships of antagonistic cooperation with one another and the social order as a whole. In the context of American white supremacy (the social order from which Ellison writes and which we continue to inhabit), democracy involves antagonistic cooperation by black subjects and their allies with the various subjects, mechanisms, and institutions of white supremacy. Antagonistic cooperation is neither quiet acquiescence to nor blind protest of racial oppression. It is instead critical – and in a certain sense, duplicitous – work against *and* on behalf of a social whole that oppresses black subjects. For Ellison, this whole is worth saving because there is nothing outside of it. Resisting the arguments of black nationalists who (like racist whites, he believes) conceive of American democracy as irreparably tied to racial oppression (Ellison 2003m, 583), Ellison insists that the futures of black Americans, white Americans, and American democracy in general are bound up with one another. “American life is of a whole,” Ellison writes (Ellison 1986, 185), and “the nation could not survive being deprived of [African Americans’] presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom” (Ellison 2003m, 588). Consequently, only by entering relationships of antagonistic cooperation with one another and the white supremacist social order do black subjects affirm their capacity to contribute to public life on their own terms as equals. And only through such actions does the social order overcome its white supremacist roots and realize its

democratic ideals. Democracy, particularly in the context of persistent racial hierarchy, is an *intensely dialectical* – that is, self-contradictory and Janus-faced – mode of political life that pursues cooperation through antagonism and antagonism through cooperation.

This account builds on but ultimately departs from the interpretations of Ellison’s political project offered by Allen, Turner, and Morel. In this way it models the process of antagonistic cooperation described by Ellison. For her part, Allen rightly highlights the importance of contradiction and paradox to Ellison’s conception of democracy. But whereas Allen understands democracy as the *source* of the contradictions that subjects must negotiate in a democracy, Ellison’s account of black laughter shows that he conceives of democracy *itself* as a contradictory mode of life by which subjects work with and against one another and the larger social order. Meanwhile, Turner’s identification of a liberal individualist sensibility in Ellison helpfully demonstrates how democracy involves critical confrontations with white supremacy. But liberalism’s core belief that the self-identical individual constitutes the fundamental unit of social and political life remains at odds with Ellison’s understanding of the “individual” as an ever-evolving product of democratic processes of antagonistic cooperation. Ellisonian democracy, in other words, is not a form of liberalism. Finally, while Morel correctly emphasizes Ellison’s refusal to allow white supremacy to dictate the terms of individual black freedom, he fails to account for what is ultimately central for Ellison: the dialectical interplay between individuals, collectivities, and the broader social order. This point is crucial because as we will see below Ellison has often been accused of fetishizing individual self-expression at the expense of racial solidarity or a realistic account of white supremacy. “An Extravagance of Laughter” shows that Ellison does not theorize democracy simply as a form of government or type of

individuality but rather as a distinct mode of political life involving relations of antagonistic cooperation among subjects, collectivities, and the social order.

Responding to Ellison's Critics

I will conclude by bringing my account of Ellisonian democracy into conversation with a series of less charitable interpretations of Ellison's political project. Most notably, Jerry Watts argues that Ellison advances a politics of "heroic individualism" that understands white supremacy not as an oppressive barrier to black equality but rather as "an inspiring landscape for transcendence" (Watts 1994, 22). Watts claims that Ellison's interest in the possibilities for black freedom amidst segregation betrays both a naive denial of the physical and psychological devastation wrought by white supremacy and an uncritical celebration of the black individual's capacity to heroically "rise above" such conditions. Ellison's work "gave rise to a notion of freedom void of historical contexts. This notion of freedom assumed that regardless of social conditions and circumstances, the individual would still have to make choices governing his or her life. In making these choices, the individual either successfully or unsuccessfully realized his or her freedom" (Watts 1994, 55–56). For Watts, Ellison overstates the power of the black individual and neglects the necessity of collective black political action for transforming the racialized social order.

Watts's objections originate in a peculiar interpretation of Ellison's concept of "antagonistic cooperation." According to Watts, antagonistic cooperation is the process by which a social antagonism (i.e., some racial barrier or oppression) "cooperates" with the black subject by creating an opportunity for that subject to heroically assert his or her individual freedom (Watts 1994, 56–57). While Watts rightly recoils at this conception of antagonistic cooperation as

symptomatic of an ahistorical, “bourgeois” conception of liberty (Watts 1994, 57), he is simply wrong to associate it with Ellison.¹³ Ellison’s laughing barrel joke and jazz writings show that rather than society cooperating with the black subject by posing an antagonism that invites a heroic overcoming, the subject cooperates with the white supremacist social order in order to generate an antagonism *within* and *against* that order. Although Turner (2008) and Morel (2004) demonstrate that Ellison is an “individualist” in a certain sense, Ellison does not glorify the black subject as capable of heroically “overcoming” his or her social conditions. Through antagonistic cooperation, the black subject transforms – but does not transcend – the racialized social order.

Watts’s critique (and its underlying misreading) of Ellison reflects a more widely-held set of objections to Ellison’s political project. For decades critics have accused Ellison of uncritically celebrating the power of the black individual and of retaining an untenable allergy to collective political action. For example, in interviews in the 1960s novelists Richard Stern and Robert Penn Warren challenged Ellison on whether his focus on black freedom amidst slavery and segregation amounted to a romanticization of racial oppression (Ellison 2003h, 76–80; Warren 1965, 346). More recently, Barbara Foley’s monumental study of Ellison’s pre-*Invisible Man* stories and essays traces his apparent abandonment of radical leftist (i.e., Communist Party) politics in favor of an allegedly more conventional democratic pluralism (Foley 2010). While Ellison certainly emphasizes the possibilities for individual freedom amidst white supremacy and harbors suspicions about collective political action, his writings – particularly his essay on black laughter – demonstrate that this does not amount to a glorification of the black individual

¹³ Revealingly, Watts turns not to Ellison’s own writings, but to those of Albert Murray, a twentieth century jazz critic and Ellison interlocutor, for this definition of “antagonistic cooperation” (Watts 1994, 56–57). Murray’s rendering of antagonistic cooperation is indeed problematic in the ways Watts describes, but this is an indictment of Murray, not Ellison.

(Watts), romanticization of oppression (Stern, Warren), or disavowal of radical politics (Foley). Rather, it reflects an effort to articulate a genuinely dialectical – and thus genuinely radical – account of democratic politics: one wherein individuals and collectivities work with and against one another and the larger social order in order to defeat white supremacy. Refusing to fetishize the power of individuals, collectivities, or the social order, Ellison favors an approach that brings these elements into complex and contradictory relationships of antagonistic cooperation with one another. This is the vision of democratic politics that emerges in Ellison’s account of black laughter, and it stands as his most important contribution to democratic theory.

V. Conclusion: Putting White Supremacy “Over a Barrel”

Black laughter constitutes a privileged site in which the American white supremacist social order is produced, reproduced, and resisted. In “An Extravagance of Laughter” Ellison shows that the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter are products of a history of racial oppression and discrimination. Despite policies that regulate (and in some cases, segregate) the supposedly “primitive” and “irrational” sounds of black laughter, the latter can democratize the American racial order by revealing the very same qualities in the laughter of whites. Through their laughter, black subjects can subvert the white supremacist social order and make themselves count as members of the *polis*. Ellison demonstrates that democracy amidst white supremacy does not consist merely in protesting mechanisms of racial oppression or seeking equal rights with whites, and it certainly does not entail rejecting the social order as irreparably racist. Democracy instead involves black subjects entering dynamic, dialectically complex, Janus-faced relations of antagonistic cooperation with one another and the white supremacist social order in order to affirm their capacity to participate in public life as equals. By

working with and against other subjects and the racialized social order, everyday black Americans – like the women on the Napa Valley Wine Train – who are forced to stifle or segregate their laughter can nevertheless succeed in putting white supremacy “over a barrel.” That is, at least, Ellison’s (and our) democratic hope.

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