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Leaving tragedy.
The comic self and possession[1]

Abstract
In this essay we sketch the conceptual personae of the comic self. Building on the research of Gilles Deleuze on comic and tragic repetition as well as others, including Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Étienne Balibar, we locate the coordinates of the comic self in a series of practices whose telos is dispossession of the self by the self. Our archaeology ranges across literary and philosophical texts to delineate the form's most salient features: a topology of anadiplosis; an affinity for rupturousness and rapturousness closely linked to attempts to dispossess; and finally, strategies of defamiliarization of the self. We argue that the comic self is not to be thought as an extension of comedy but rather as a counter to late capitalism's explosion of tragic selves, variously called entrepreneurs, influencers, and start-up managers. In our reading, the comic self counters possession and care in favour of something less solidly tragic and hence more ungovernable.

Keywords
Comedy, Tragedy, Dispossession

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[1] The following is an excerpt from their forthcoming volume, *The comic self*.

1. *Introduction*

"[T]here is nothing natural or necessary in the identification of self and own, thanks to which being oneself can no longer be separated from owning oneself. The identification is merely a postulate, not an injunction" (Balibar 2016: 91). The Comic Self? "Really?", a sceptical reader might wonder, reading the title of this essay. Is there really a need for another conceptual persona meant to uncover, once again, something previously ignored in contemporary reality, society, subjectivity? Another reader, less suspicious perhaps, has been mustering their patience, ready to challenge the idea of bringing the comic and self together at all, recalling other itineraries whose destination makes the comic self's already clear enough. "If this is going to be another translation of the practices of the self that Michel Foucault spoke about forty years ago, then say so in your title". A third reader peeks out from behind the other two, more sympathetic to the cause of the potentially comic self, hearing in it a shout-out to the beloved pages of another French philosopher. "Is that what this is going to be", they ask, "a rehearsal of Deleuze reading Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* about history repeating itself? "Wonderful", they might add, "but keep in mind what Deleuze himself knew, namely that there is nothing as tiresome as acting as if something were not self-evident, especially when the topic is knowing the self".

Which reader has it right? We're not going to answer, at least not yet, but we will say that yes, what follows is a reading of a conceptual persona called the comic self, which we argue responds philosophically to the contemporary moment of pandemic, racial tension, and incessant possession of goods, ideas, identities, and opinions in ways that merit attention. And yes, a relation to a Foucauldian practice of the self bubbles below the surface here, though it is decidedly not to be located in the realm of care. And yes, Deleuze's comic and tragic repetition ultimately lie at the fractured origin of our reading of a form that we call the comic self. It is all of these and yet is none since we are attempting to think a figure whose very (in)visibility allows us to ask questions about the political and subjective dramas of today; the most pressing of which concern how to unsettle our notions of being and having.

That we find ourselves signing off on comedy and the self speaks to the current upside-down moment when violence in the country from which we are writing is not just in the air but on the ground; when a pandemic has made clear just how many of our previous modes of thinking the relation of the individual to the self are not simply antiquated but harmful for demo-

cratic life. At the heart of our reading of the comic self sits the hard recognition of what we need most urgently: a thorough-going and radical break with the "I" that speaks from a position of supposed knowledge, one that is in full possession of the self as mine. This moment of illness and contagion requires new forms of expression that do not originate or lead to greater possession of goods, writing tools, and interpretive apparatuses that allow us to make what we say ours. We are instead interested in practices, humour, and jokes whose purpose is to unsettle the I's relation to mine. Merleau-Ponty may not have been the first to say it but his gloss on the relation of speaking and depersonalizing through dispossession remains the most succinct: "There can be speech (and in the end personality) only for an I which contains the germ of a depersonalization" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 19). How to create an I that contains the germ of depersonalization and how to maintain an environment in which this germ can lead to further dispossession remains one of the principal tasks of the comic self.

The recent history of the fortunes of comedy and the comic is instructive in this regard. Clearly, there has been a discernible inflation around the terms ever since a killer clown was elected president of the United States in 2016, though it is also true that interest in the comic appeared much earlier (for work on the comic, see Zupancic 2008, Critchley 2002, Berlant and Ngai 2017, Limon 2000, Gerolemou 2020: 175-82, Marsh 2020, Easterling 1999). When people consider comedy or the comic today, they likely have in mind the parrhesiasts known as stand-up comics and comedians on Tik-Tok or Netflix, gifted in the art of parody, satire, and necessary ridicule. When reality has become the stuff of comedy, the comic finds its niche in artists trained in mimicry and ventriloquy. As for the self, the story is longer, dicier, and even more up for grabs. Far be it for us to note that the self has been playing nasty tricks on philosophers nearly from the moment that philosophy itself was born. The silence of Socrates' self, his daemon, meant his death; for the Cynic, the charge to change the self's currency, meant keeping things realer than real; Kierkegaard's difficulty with his "undialectical self" kept him writing for years; the list goes on. Leaving aside definitions new, quaint, and ancient for now, the self began its re-emergence some fifty years ago in a restoration that continues today. We are speaking of course of the work of Michel Foucault, who in the final volumes of *The history of sexuality* and in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, reintroduced the self and its care as a mode for thinking and responding to subjectivation. The entrepreneurial self of neoliberalism, the self-care we are advised to practice as worlds crumble, the need to train ourselves in greater self-possession to better care for ourselves – this is a legacy owed to Foucault's final turn to the self. We will not have

much more to say about this turn here except to note that the comic self as we imagine it has little in common with this legacy. If it does, it is only as a kind of backboard against which we bounce the comic self. What matters is seeing how the comic and self brought together can provide us with a conceptual space for understanding why we might choose to take up comic arms against more robust selves.

Often appearing surreptitiously, the comic self names one way in which an individual relates to itself so that dispossession becomes available. Holding for a moment the question why anyone might choose dispossession over possession, let's note the domain in which the comic self is found: subjective tactics. The comic self weakens the relation of ownership between individual and self, but it often remains unnamed and unnoticed, lurking in a specific set of philosophical discourses, blunting them at moments when the fallacy of self-possession is most present. The tactic is clear enough – weaken the hold the I has over the self. The task we have given ourselves is to follow how the comic self undoes this grip, by indicating how much of the authority of these concepts rests on self-possession as "natural or necessary". Again, if there is a critique linked to the comic self, it will proceed in the direction of dispossession.

What does it mean to dispossess? In our definition, to dispossess means to disentangle the "I" from "mine" – or, "I" from "my own". The means for doing so remain relatively stable across centuries and thinkers, its chief mode involving the adopting of a particular attitude to knowing. A rhetoric and a typology follow, linked to the figures of anadiplosis and chiasmus, each founded on an affinity for repetition and recollection. When the comic self laughs, what it laughs at most, often loudly, is the fallacy of self-possession, as it remembers how often it fails to follow its own advice to dispossess. This begins the always failed ascent to dispossession and the inevitable descent to possession that marks the comic self's itinerary.

Of course, like any self, the comic self requires philosophical and attitudinal equipment. Some highlights follow.

2. *The comic self, the tragic self*

The comic self is not born. It does not exist in isolation but emerges in contradistinction to another figure, the tragic self. The difference between the two lies in the self's relation to knowledge and repetition: "In the theatre, the hero repeats precisely because he is separated from an essential, infinite knowledge […]. The difference between the comic and tragic pertains to two

elements: first, the nature of the repressed knowledge … second, as a result, the manner in which the character is excluded from this knowledge, the manner in which 'he does not know that he knows'" (Deleuze 1994: 15). Not just a foil for the comic self, the tragic self names the individual who has confused ownership with personal identity, who relates to the self as if the self were some thing, some commodity that belongs to it. Other names can be employed to describe the contemporary tragic self – indeed so much of how we speak of the self, especially when we care for it, is couched in terms of tragedy, names like entrepreneur, neoliberal subject, and influencer come to mind. What they share is a confusion around identity and ownership. The comic self laughs at these individual owners not because it sees what they cannot: possession kills. What is funny is believing that somehow possession might be disavowed once and for all.

True to its dialectical nature, the comic self sits at opposite ends from its tragic *Doppelgänger*, though it does from time to time recognize their similarities, especially in moments when the comic self comes up short in its attempts to dispossess. The constitutive difference between the two resides in their attitude toward possession. This is entirely of a piece with the argument that the comic self speaks to and against its tragic counterpart, when the difficulty that is dispossession, presents itself as most urgent.

Is there any moment more urgent than the current one when possession looms so large over politics, the environment, life itself? Is there anything, any life, any identity that cannot be owned? Here the comic self speaks for the tragic by overwhelming it with the facticity of possession and the command to dispossess. It understands the death drive that inheres in every move to possess and the sheer exhaustion that comes when possession is the only mode by which life is lived. "It's absurd to run towards death", writes Epicurus, "because you are tired of life, when it is your manner of life that has made you run towards death" (quoted in Diano 2020: 54). The power of the comic self resides in the mode by which it punctures the dream of ultimate ownership of everything as inhuman.

3. *The sovereign mine*

The comic self is constitutively antithetical to any attempt to represent itself as incorporated or neatly insulated. It is, to borrow a term dear to an earlier moment of Italian thought, impolitical as it evades representation at every turn (on the impolitical and Italian thought, see Cacciari 2009, Esposito 2015

and 2021). Given this genealogy, it is not surprising that the comic self resonates with one of the definitions Jacques Derrida attributes to the term "spur: The style-spur, the spurring style, is a long object, an oblong object, a word, which perforates even as it parries". In its relation to the tragic self, the comic "perforates" as much as it is "perforated"; it seeks to guard against "intrusion" by the tragic self, as much as the latter works to maintain its integrity, and so both undertake to "parry" or "spurn" the other. Vulnerability and openness to the other are mutual and yet both are indefatigably part of how each self encounters the other.

The reader will suspect on to what fields such an openness extends. The comic self is a singularity un-composed of synchronized elements, each complementing the other, somehow operating in harmony. Not an automaton of the sort that Carlo Diano locates in the Greek *tyche* that "confuses an event's existence as something that may or may not be for him or for her and not the form itself", the comic self rather makes difference immanent across a range of registers (Diano 2020: 91). One of those immanences, to return to Derrida and the spur, will return as "the woman's figure" in a discussion of "sexual difference".

The key relationship for the comic self lies at the intersection of I-mine, since it is here that the potential for conflict is clearest. We can name this conflict the struggle for primacy in the order of succession (say, "I always come before mine"; or, "there can be no I without mine"). It reveals itself again and again to be founded upon the refusal to live by the terms of the other's refusal. I will not withhold its claim that it precedes mine and that it refuses to cede its oneness with mine. We are not distant from another of Derrida's central notions, namely autoimmunity, which reveals the time of refusal as subject to its own undoing because it seeks, at once, to proclaim its singularity and its temporal primacy. The difficulty is that I and mine refuse to cede their primacy; out of this refusal to accept relegation to a secondary status emerges their "solid form". Neither "divinities" nor "Olympian gods", but robust entities, I and mine are intent on maintaining themselves as sovereign. The question arises: how do I and mine refuse their mutual subjugation?

Labour in our view is central to this subjective tactic of withholding consent and breaking with the self's sovereignty that depends upon possession. Refusing to participate in the economic life of the socius threatens the very life of the polis as Toni Negri and Mario Tronti are at pains to point out. This is because to withhold means exercising the right to keep apart; to hold separately, each in their own time and space. It is an ontological and conceptual space in which I and mine vie for power, each recognizing themselves in each

other and thereby mutually reinscribing and reinforcing the other. Not surprisingly, such a critique of I and mine through withholding rhymes powerfully with Derrida's woman as spur and in turn questions the universalism of liberal democracy as Tronti himself notes. "The determinate critique of democracy that I am advancing here has a father, *workerism*, and a mother, *the autonomy of the political*. And it is a female offspring because the thinking and practice of *difference* have anticipated this critique with the questioning of the universalism of the *demos* – which is the other face of the neutral character of the individual" (Tronti 2009: 69). The upending of "the neutral character of the individual" begins with the recognition that I is different from mine.

Like any "solid form", I and mine need reinforcement and as ontological irony would have it, nothing reinforces the I like mine, or mine like I. Indeed, each depends upon the other for their conceptual integrity. Isn't this just a perverse rendering of Wilde's notion of "punishment?"[2] Is refusal an explicit acknowledgement of the shared precariousness and love each bears the other, that would, were it not for the comic self, bind I to mine? Punishment follows refusal because refusal acts punitively against love. That "solid form" – exactly how "solid" is I and mine? Solid enough, we can say, to refuse the emergence of the individual. This is a solidity that is unable to provide prophylaxis against the promise of love, which the individual I is so capable to demonstrating in relation to that which it deems mine.

Where the contemporary self experiences the promise of the continual enmeshment of I and mine under cover of love and calls it individuation or not, the comic self accents a holding apart. It is faithful to the logic of the rupture that refuses any contraction of mine into I and its refusal pertains to how the comic self maintains itself ready for dispossession, dissenting from the expansion of I or the logic of possession into a selfhood that is able to draw the rupturous I or the rupturous mine into its orbit. As unsettling as this may be to contemporary life, the comic self disallows any expansion into singularity.

[2] The exchange between Gilbert and Ernest deserves the full treatment: "'Yes, I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world'. 'His punishment?'. 'And his reward. But see, it is dawn already. Draw back the curtains and open the windows wide. How cool the morning air is. Piccadilly lies at our feet like a long riband of silver. A faint purple mist hangs over the Park, and the shadows of the white houses are purple. It is too late to sleep. Let us go down to Covent Garden and look at the roses. Come! I am tired of thought'" (Wilde, *The critic as artist*, available online).

Admittedly, to militate against expansion is to recognize that an element of the disciplinary hangs about the comic self. And yet this is understandable given that discipline is required to maintain rupture when faced with the threat of contraction. The rupturous reveals the ways in which contraction and expansion both depend upon the act and the art, of drawing the other into something that is other than possession, but which maintains proximity.

Against such a propensity for possession stands the comic self, actively poised to refuse – if we take "refuse" here as a form of resistance – the work of acquisition that possession requires. Without this work, there can be no contraction – a reduction into a One that does not translate into a One that is necessarily smaller – or an expansion – making out of the One a larger One, maybe even a more capacious, accommodating One. Elision precedes contraction but contraction cannot erase the traces of elision. Neither contraction nor expansion can omit entirely the remainder effected by elision.

What are the effects of refusing to possess? The principal one is "passive" in Sorel's sense insofar as it, like the striking worker and his "ethic of the political sect" (Sorel 1915: 15), keeps itself absolutely apart from any and all outsiders. Refusal is the political work of keeping separate, of I-removal and mine-removal, by militating against contraction; or, rendered in a more obviously political register, the consolidation of forces[3]. Rupturous by nature, the comic self affirms alienation, Marx's concept that finds a stringent, unbending, separatist resonance in Sorel's hands. The comic self stands as the I that affirms its alienation from mine, a declaration met, word for word, intensity for intensity, in like refusal by mine. This is a mine that refuses the subject, which possesses, and an I that refuses the means of possession, a figure without head and without hands.

At its core the comic self names an unrepresentable composition of forces, is constituted by the conflict among them, and from this conflict is able to generate its enormous power of perforation.

4. *The grammar of dispossession*

To possess is unremarkable. As a grammatical structure, self-possession is the stuff of day-to-day life. We might pronounce it as, say, "I would like to get

[3] Following Sorel's interpretation, it is the refusal to make alliances that might be sanctioned, even by a figure such as Lenin, who did precisely this in the build-up to the 1917 Russian Revolution, or that might be deemed "strategic" and, as such, advantageous, even if only for a political moment.

that back, please. It's mine". This is a structure of possession that we could reformulate infinitely. We declare, "That is mine". Furthermore, we freely recalibrate the language of possession as much as we are inclined to, tailoring it to the idiom of our choice: "I want what's mine". We submit it to reconstruction after reconstruction. In an argument, when aspersion is cast upon us (we are presumed uncertain, hesitant, unsure of ourselves), it might emerge, defensively, as, "I know my own mind". It could as easily function as an assertion of self in a graduate seminar or in a family disagreement. "I know my own mind" is a phrase, like the others, that has many uses. It is adaptable to its context, flexible and creative in its deployment.

Toddlers, in feeling their way to language and taking their first philosophically fatal stabs toward self-possession, are sometimes known to say, when an adult intervenes or proposes another course of action, "I am the boss of me". Is this a primal form of self-possession ever unlearned? Or, does it simply assume more subtle and articulate forms? Is self-possession the champion of linguistic disguise? The über-dissembler? The refusal to be "separated from owning oneself" begins early after which it continues unabated, naturalized by the frequency of everyday usage, where naturalization is deemed indivisible from necessity. In "My Self, My Own" with which we opened, Étienne Balibar does not dwell on the run-of-the-mill articulation, but neither can he leave it unremarked, a sure sign of its importance. For Balibar self-possession is a "conflict that cannot be resolved in everyday life, only masked or avoided". "Self-possession" is indeed the very stuff of "everyday life". In "everyday life", as much as – or maybe more than – anywhere else, the self is presumed to, unquestionably, "own" itself.

What is recognized as the fallacy of self-possession in the toddler, a fallacy identifiable in language, is accepted as *de rigueur* in the language of everyone else. How unreflectively "I am the boss of me" mutates into "I am mine". At least the toddler, we can say, is honest about declaring its allegiance to self-possession. It would appear to already know that "being oneself can no longer be separated from owning oneself". Are we all just toddlers, seeking to boss ourselves into the fallacy of self-possession? To be the boss of ourselves, from our earliest possible articulations of self-ownership? The toddler and the adult leave us with the question of how self-possession can, if at all, in young and old, be ruptured.

5. *Rupturousness, rapturousness*

Interior intimo meo. The complete phrase from Augustine is "*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*" – "Yet all the time you were more inward to me than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest". For a range of scholars, the focus on Augustine's critique of self-knowing is interiority. Étienne Balibar, drawing on Augustine's insight that God has penetrated his "heart", dividing him from within himself, locates this experience as disrupting the "very intimacy of the self". For Augustine God is the source of the rupture that leads to rapture. In having God take up residence – uninvited – in the "most inward place of [his] heart", Augustine sets in motion a process that will see him liberated from his Manichean past, from the "shameless woman". Because Augustine has confessed his sins, God has orchestrated the rupture from within, setting him on a transcendent, "loftier than the highest", illuminating, God-ordained path, whose every step brings him closer to Him. There remains, as there always is in the case of a spiritual awakening, work to be done, but there also persists the promise of rapture emerging out of rupture.

The comic self too finds its way toward rapture but to do so it must repeatedly separate I from mine. Given the relation of rapturousness to intimacy, this work that is never complete. For Augustine rupture marks God's intercession, which produces out of internal division an unbreakable bond between God and self. For the comic self the toddler's self-possession rearticulates itself in the adolescent and/or the adult and requires a multi-layered vigilance in order to ward off lapsing into the fallacy of self-possession. For the comic self, rapture is not the experience of cohabitation with the divine; it does not amount to a logic that decrees. Instead the comic self shakes off intimacy as possession and so doing creates conditions for secular rapture, an abduction of the self from the self. We can state it differently: The comic self knows what it does not know. Achieving this, the entire relationship is adjusted to knowing-what-it-does-not-know. This produces an attitude in which the comic self knows itself not as the cause of itself. We can say this in a near tautology: It achieves a state of rapturousness through the rupture enacted by dispossession. Rapturousness emerges out of a rupturousness that acknowledges the repeated merging of both. Need we add that this confluence most intense carries within it the possibility of the ecstatic?

6. *The comic attitude*

Comedy deterritorializes genre into attitude and deterritorialized as attitude, it again deterritorializes around the self. The effect is that when everything is comedy or when everything comes with pleasure, you can then feel good about an outcome as extreme or apocalyptic as, say, the world ending. It becomes possible to delight or revel in the negativity of irony. On the one hand, this is the opposite of, say, that catchy refrain of R.E.M., the American masters of bleak irony and dark foreboding, often presented with a catchy beat or melancholy longing: "It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine". For its part, the comic self does not know irony because it has wrested the self from the comic/tragic distinction. Out of this extraction, the comic self has made of comedy an ontological figure and so we find ourselves returning to anadiplosis. The comic self is what follows after these deterritorializations have occurred.

This also means that the comic self can never be disarticulated from the comic. These acts of mutual possibility or inextricable entanglement suggest that when we think the comic or the comic self, we are always operating at a single remove from its other. One is not necessarily constitutive of the other, but their proximity demands an account that will not permit of exclusivity – or the sovereignty of the individual.

To phrase this in its most base form: if the comic traffics in the business of the funny that is, jokes, then what the comic self presents us with is an entirely different order of philosophical seriousness. A seriousness, Lacan would say, that is missing on the order of the "transference" that takes place between the comic self and comic. As he says at the very beginning of his lectures on transference, "transference involves much more than the simple notion of a dissymmetry between subjects" (Lacan 2015: 11). The comic self and the comic are linked through a "simple dissymmetry" – the lack of symmetry between (each other) that cannot undo or override the ways in which one recalls the other or the ways in which one resonates within the other.

Seriousness never denies itself the pleasure of a joke, except of course, to bring things full circle, on condition that we acknowledge that the joke occurs always only the beginning of the comic self's encounter with itself. The joke always begins again, and the end of the joke only names the beginning of the joke *l'avenir*. For the comic self, the joke marks the mode of *entrée*, which explains why the comic self rarely tarries very long with the joke, even as it attempts to render the joke unfamiliar to itself. The comic self makes the comic *Unheimlich*.

The philosophical violence that the comic self inflicts on the comic is such that it will leave the comic, to take certain liberties with Bruce Springsteen's poetry, "bruised and battered/unrecognizable to itself". (https://genius.com/Bruce-springsteen-streets-of-philadelphia-lyrics). The encounter between the comic and the comic self may be conducted in good conscience, but it is equally capable of revealing the full weight of philosophical inquiry. When they meet, it turns out to be no laughing matter for the comic. The joke never leaves the comic self but stays home.

In its dispossession and absent-mindedness, the comic self bears a striking similarity to the comic who embodies the joke. If philosophy is the with-inness of Being – the *Innerhalbheit*, to coin a neologism, of Being –the comic self is the with-inness of Being and becoming at work. It names the becoming of Being in a process that may or may not go round and round, but it always does within the smallest circumference: anadiplosis operates only within a delimited "schema". The comic self forges the greatest intensity of intimacy between becoming and Being, leaving only the sliver of a fissure between becoming and Being. Under these circumstances, it is possible to imagine the circle as more on the order of a short, direct line shared between becoming and Being. Being is always within becoming, as becoming is within Being.

The comic self in this schema names the extant connection, the connection within.

7. *"Preso per il culo"*

Not to put too fine a point on it, the comic era is the moment when we laugh at history in the face of the metamorphosis that did not take place. We play a joke on history: history has been scammed, left a metamorphosis short. In the vulgar rendering of "preso per il culo", history has been made to "take it up the ass", without as Mikhail Bakhtin would have it, the benefit of remove. It is all up close and personal.

As a distanced image, a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh must be close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into is centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.

Bakhtin is ready to match our "preso per il culo" with a suitably crude retort of his own; and, he is willing to do so through "crude contact". He offers the comical as the ever-present threat of giving the finger and giving it "familiarly", because everyone is "close at hand" and so presumably in on the joke.

Consider too that the joke is a ubiquitous threat, likely to come at you from "all sides". This is not just an in-you-face joke, literally, but a joke that is too close for comfort. Take that "preso per il culo", stick your finger where the sun don't shine – how's that for "familiarity" on all sides?" How do you laugh at that? You might very well have no choice because the laughter is right there, in your face, for all to see and hear.

However, Bakhtin's "comical" is also an object to be held up for scrutiny. Does laughter as an act of proximate violence not also incline us toward retreat, in horror, under the threat of being made the object of ridicule? How much "crude contact" can any self endure? How much crudeness does the self want to subject itself to? In "autopsying" Bakhtin's "laughter" – turning it this way and that, taking it apart, fingering it thoughtfully, wrenching away its protective outer layer, peering at it from every which way, playing further games with it (dragging just one more joke out of the resonant laughter) – there arises the possibility that what such a proximity reveals is in fact the source of the laughter. Forget determining, certainly not in advance, what the name of such a source might be. Langston Hughes, of course, warned us a long time ago about what laughter, but the especially garrulous, proximate, kind shared between (racial) intimates, might be keeping at bay, what sends you into fits of tears because its so damn funny. "We laugh to keep from crying".

Proximate, intimate laughter draws everyone in, making those subject to it collapse in fits of hysteria. This is the kind of familiar laughter that bears directly on the tragic, a subject on which Hughes was past master and which informs much of the Hughes oeuvre. At his most economical, he requires only a couple of lines, as in this poem "Young Sailor", to elucidate the tragedy that so often limns (African-American) laughter: "For laughter. And nothing hereafter" (Hughes 1974: 73).

Because of the concurrent threat of laughter and potential tragedy mixed in "nothing hereafter", it is not enough to say that history needs tragedy or to propose, as though there were some dissembling, history as tragedy. Instead, we must assert that history is tragedy and we must guard against the "[c]omic travesty [that] replaces tragic metamorphosis" (Deleuze 1994: 91). It is always better to live in times of "tragic metamorphosis" than not since it is only in such time(s) that we can be sure of the possibility of the "unique

and tremendous event", when we can know that our "time" is "adequate as a whole". In such a contraction we understand the "need [that] marks the limit of the variable present" (Deleuze 1994: 77). In other words, "tragic metamorphosis" alone offers the prospect – the promise – of an inhabitable "present". The reason, as Deleuze intimates, is that the event becomes an event for the tragic hero when his time is adequate to time as a whole.

The comic self misses the event because it suffers from bad memory – of the present; in fact, because of its bad memory, both "memory" and "event" strike it as ridiculous, a point Bakhtin is quick to remind us of: "In the comic world there is nothing for memory to do. One ridicules in order to forget". This "forgetting" by no means excludes self-forgetting, a particular violence against the self if we understand it as the first of all events. We inhabit this "present" because it is so "variable", and among the "variables" it can contain lies Deleuze's understanding of "destiny" – "actions at a distance, systems of replay, resonance and echoes, objective chances, signs, signals and roles which transcend spatial locations and temporal successions" (Deleuze 1994: 83). Reductively phrased, "destiny" is that Deleuzian present ripe for and ready to receive, within open arms, the mischief that seems innate to the comic era. Destiny "accords so badly with determinism but so well with freedom: freedom lies in choosing the levels" (Deleuze 1994: 83). The comic self's bad memory becomes the mode by which a different relation to destiny becomes thinkable.

7. *Dispossess!*

Where do all of these moments of toddler parenting, parries and perforations, rupture and rapture, and violent laughter lead? To a command - Dispossess! Dispossess what and the answer is clear enough: dispossess the self of the self. So, are we making the case for a crash course in Buddhism, an extended comedic koan on altering the programming of the self? Maybe. We know by now that the problem, humanity's problem, our problem is possession; it is what alienates us and so dispossessing ourselves of the self as property is the flip side of dispossessing ourselves of the idea (and attitude) that treats the relation as one of ownership. To dispossess is to choose happiness over property, to choose not-knowing over a form of knowing that involves mastery, possession, knowing what I know, being what I have.

Of course, dispossession never happens all at once: we fail again and again. Rather than merely saying dispossess, we need a figure who can square and extend dispossession. The comic self is that figure because it sees,

even in its moments of failure, that possession of failure is unavailable. Dispossess is the command to dispossess again and again.

More than interpretations on care, we need to represent the unrepresentable comic self; to muddy the waters around it, around identity, and the practices of the self whose precise weight will not be found in care but a different relation that may or may not have care of the self at its heart. To be blunt, care of the self reinforces identity and ownership, strengthening the relation between I and this identity that is mine. This raises a question, one of the most important for today and how we are to live individually and collectively with each other and ourselves: How can you care for something that is not yours? The comic self ranges across literature, philosophy, and contemporary comedy and in each appearance uncovers a space where dispossession of self and the dismantling of care is possible.

Naturally, our method is less interpretive than improvisational, which means it veers unexpectedly between polemic and poignant. We do not own these readings; the readings are ephemerally dogmatic or dogmatic in their ephemerality. Everyone is so intent on entangling I with mine and me, it makes sense that we would want to use this opportunity for disentangling. In an extended play of clouding what is mine, yours, and ours, we want to spur the reader and ourselves to think what has not been thought yet; what we have not lived yet because we continue to prefer our tragic selves to our comic self.

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