Introduction

This book examines the aesthetic insurrections enacted by "funny things" in eighteenth-century literature and material culture. It dwells with these details and their cultural associations to model a way of reading that resists the epistemological urge toward *resolution*. I submit that eighteenth-century fiction furnishes us with these invitations to think and feel in ways not oriented toward "making sense" of what we've encountered, and that this reading practice is important to any intellectual or interpretive commitment to resisting and refusing colonialist patterns of epistemological enclosure and appropriation. By disrupting the aesthetic and narrative effects that allowed British readers to experience the material world as mental property, these irreducible details indicate the possibility of ideological malfunctions in the systems of knowledge that took hold in the early stages of British imperialism. The book mounts its argument in three parts – "The Anamorphic," "The Ludic," and "The Orificial" – each focused on a specific mode of distorting the forms and logics of emergent liberal norms in the context of empire, including realism, empiricism, ownership, individualism, and gendered heterosexuality. In each of these sections, I approach a detail from an eighteenth-century text – focusing primarily on works by Eliza Haywood, Horace Walpole, Richard Bentley, and Frances Burney – as a prompt to consider the intertwined ways that funniness operates as an aesthetic, a heuristic method, and a reading praxis. The distortions that render things "funny," I argue, generate a nascent politics that refuses the rigidity of given realities and their parameters of plausibility, and leans into the prospect – or, more accurately, the feeling – that the world as we know it could be otherwise.

I use the term "funny" to call attention to a yet-unexamined version of the kinds of epistemological disorientations that preoccupied both readers and writers in eighteenth-century Britain. Excellent scholarship has been published on the importance of wonder and curiosity, for example, as categories of mental stimulation that both enlivened and unsettled

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Enlightenment ways of thinking.[1] Yet both wonder and curiosity ultimately prove reconcilable to the logics of taste, reason, and knowledge systems premised on property both mental and material – curiosity through the practices of collecting, for instance, and wonder through theories of the sublime. The myriad genres of representation that knit these modes of perception back into epistemological order – including early modern geography, the curiosity collection, still life painting, antiquarianism, and the picturesque – all domesticate the effects of the exotic, the unexpected, and the unfathomable for a British audience, rendering the material effects of empire, in Sianne Ngai's words, "merely interesting."[2]

In contrast, what I identify as "the funny" remains unnamed and untheorized in any systematic way in eighteenth-century discourses, and is never claimed as a principle of British thought that lends itself to either Enlightenment practice or serious philosophical scrutiny.[3] When we say, in the course of witnessing, observing, listening, or reading, "That's funny," we name both a quality we perceive in something and a feeling that rises within us at the moment of perception. The "funny thing" and the "funny feeling" are both identifiable by their unidentifiableness – by the fact that they have made themselves present before we have the language to account for them. "Funny" therefore names not only a moment of epistemological suspense, but also a relation between subjects and objects that disturbs the distinction between them and unsettles the structures of knowing founded on this distinction. As I argued in my book *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism*,

[1] See, for example, Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Sean Silver, *The Mind Is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Cynthia Wall, *Grammars of Approach: Landscape, Narrative, and the Linguistic Picturesque* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Tita Chico, "From Fleece to Fleets; or, Wool and the Production of Wonder," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 32, no. 1 (2019): 101–21; and Crystal B. Lake, *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Objects* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

[2] Sianne Ngai, "Merely Interesting," chapter 2 of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 110–73.

[3] Like the three aesthetic categories Ngai discusses in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, the funny is arguably an aesthetic category that plays a crucial role "in our current repertoire" of interactive modes, despite its "marginality to aesthetic theory." But unlike Ngai's categories, which "are linked to major representational practices" and also "to specific genres and forms," the funny remains scattershot and disorganized as a cultural and literary phenomenon; it works in the ways I describe in this book because it has not been cultivated into a formal and affective system arranged around a particular kind of subject. Ngai, "Merely Interesting," 1, 3.

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eighteenth-century theories of taste sought to distinguish objects that could be "taken in" as part of a thinking subject's mental furniture;[4] in this book, I argue that eighteenth-century British culture also presents "funny things" that reverse the epistemological relation between subject and object by provoking the subject's capacity to "be taken" with, and by, the objects that seize their attention.

Funniness calls us not only to something that "happens" in eighteenth-century texts, but to new and unexpected ways of paying attention to texts – ways that, I argue, we can cultivate into urgently needed methods of reading that do not reproduce the postures of dominance, mastery, and ownership that we have inherited from Enlightenment ways of knowing. The funny thing operates much like what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*: "A detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration." "Paradoxically," Barthes writes, "while remaining a 'detail,' it fills the whole picture."[5] Each of the funny things I examine displays this capacity to hijack the process of interpretation: They are arresting trivialities whose "lightning-like" arrival and "power of expansion" to overwhelm the understanding steals attention away from what the text or tableau "means" to say.[6] Although, like the punctum, funniness seems to arrive "out of nowhere," I argue that it is an effect of what Raymond Williams called "practical consciousness," one version of the "tension" the subject experiences when what it knows in its bones as a creature immersed in networks of social relation does not conform or cannot be reduced to the "fixed forms" of ideology articulated as a system.[7] Our vulnerability to funniness, in other words, indicates the fullness of our connection to the structures of feeling in which we dwell; and the force with which we are struck, arrested, or bewildered by funny things testifies to the ways in which feeling outpaces rational thought as a way of knowing – a way of being in touch with one's material, social, and ideological surroundings. Learning not only to react to the funny but to be taken by it, to follow it, and to think with it is a method for learning to think in radically embodied and collective ways,

[4] Eugenia Zuroski, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Vintage, 2000), 49, 45.

[6] Ibid., 45.

[7] Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 129–30.

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with the full energy of our socially embedded being instead of the impoverished strains of individuated intelligence.

As the book's title indicates, I attach the concept of funniness to the phenomenon of the "undisciplined," a term I draw from Christina Sharpe's insistence that Black liberation projects require subjects in the wake of transatlantic colonial world-building to "become undisciplined."[8] I do this to frame the project's intellectual and political commitments within conversations among communities of Black, Indigenous, and racialized thinkers – with particular attention to bodies of Black queer and feminist scholarship – about the urgent need to reassess the models of *humanness* passed down from colonial-era Enlightenment movements and reproduced today in the academic forms and disciplines recognized as "the humanities." In a recent special issue of *Victorian Studies*, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong take up Sharpe's prompt within the context of nineteenth-century studies. "We understand Sharpe to be calling for a shift in methodology and politics, and we want to enact both," they write in the issue's introduction. "Our goal is to interrogate and challenge our field's marked resistance to centering racial logic. Together with our contributors, we want to illuminate how race and racial difference subtend our most cherished objects of study, our most familiar historical and theoretical frameworks, our most engrained scholarly protocols, and the very demographics of our field."[9] I aim to contribute to a similar reorientation of eighteenth-century literary studies, by showing how the funniness of eighteenth-century literature has the potential to resituate us in relation to the emergent hegemonies of liberal selfhood, and, in doing so, to give us critical purchase on the mythologies of whiteness, of heteronormativity, and of self-possession that we have inherited from the eighteenth century and continue to reproduce through our disciplinary habits and dispositions. Moving away from analyses of humor, satire, and comedy – literary categories that have received long-standing attention by scholars of eighteenth-century writing,[10] but that do not sufficiently account for the particular effects of the texts I examine – this study aims less to "nuance" specialist understandings of the eighteenth-century British

[8] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

[9] Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 370, https://doi.org/10.2979/victorianstudies.62.3.01.

[10] For an overview of recent work in this area, see Eugenia Zuroski, "British Laughter and Humour in the Long Eighteenth Century," *Literature Compass* 16, nos. 3–4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12521.

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canon or British humor than it does to demonstrate how eighteenth-century texts have always exceeded the purpose of reproducing forms of hegemonic power and authority, and may therefore lend themselves to the unmaking of the very traditions they have helped to make.

My focus on distortion, irreverence, and volatility allows me to think through the contradictions of the *culturally funny*, which is not limited to eighteenth-century culture by any means but abounds there. In each of the cases I elaborate, laughter and unease, pleasure and discomfort, hope and uncertainty emerge together as part of the same economy of experience. My reading practice heeds and honors "the visceral logics of decolonization" theorized by Neetu Khanna:

> The visceral traffics between the materiality and metaphor of bodily life. Any endeavor to think these dimensions of decolonization will necessitate an engagement not only with the discursive practices of empire, but also with how these habits of mind are secured by emotive ones. If our political and scholarly practices aim to dismantle colonial habits of thought and ideologies, we must be able to engage the multiple sites in which these enduring ideologies continue to operate. We must be able to attend to that fraught and unruly relationship between feelings and what we obscurely refer to as "consciousness."[11]

The object we call "consciousness" and take for granted as foundational both to our humanness and to our selfhood has been bequeathed to us by the colonizing cultures of the long eighteenth century. It therefore makes sense to put our viscera to work troubling the cultural materials in which "colonial habits of thought" are finding form through play, experimentation, plotting, and demarcation. Recognizing that the techniques of distinction, categorization, and containment that define Enlightenment epistemology have informed capitalist enclosures of land, labor, and wealth as well as the colonization of Indigenous lands, I attempt to delineate a method of reading that bursts open ideological enclosures with the energy of a sudden laugh, that ruins structures erected on the ruin of everything else. This way of reading will not be contained to the eighteenth century, even a long one – it is future-oriented and dedicated to opening eighteenth-century culture up to new flight-lines of thought. Nothing is concluded here. Rather, this book grapples its way through some of the more "fraught and unruly" literary terrain of the eighteenth century in search of an opening, a way out.

[11] Neetu Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

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It makes its way there in three parts, each longer than a traditional monograph chapter. Each part is divided into a number of titled sections, each shorter than a traditional chapter. The structure of the book is part of its experiment in "becoming undisciplined": It arose as a result of my abandoning the parameters and argumentative rhythms of the chapter-form in order to dwell exploratorily with particular details, phrases, or concepts a little "too long," or to allow the writing to drift with such details to unexpected moments of resonance or insight without plotting such movements as units of progress toward a promised outcome. This technique was not motivated by any personal hostility to the traditional forms of professional criticism (I promise!) nor as an insult to anyone who enjoys reading and writing them. The standard written forms of the discipline of literary criticism – primarily the article and the chaptered monograph, the shapes our research-based writing must take in order to secure us academic employment – are, at their best, powerful, sinuous creatures, designed to contain immense intellectual energy in a measured configuration that advances an argument steadily while remaining supple and surprising in its assertions. I practice my commitment to, and affection for, such writing every day as reader, as editor of a scholarly journal, and, occasionally, as author. My infelicity to disciplinary form in this project was inspired not by distaste for existing methods, but by curiosity about other ways of thinking with and writing about eighteenth-century texts. So inspired, I then found that certain eighteenth-century texts were themselves prompting me to think along such undisciplined trajectories, and at this point, I embraced the technique as part of the project's method.

Part 1, "The Anamorphic," introduces the first of these texts, Eliza Haywood's oriental romance *Eovaai*. This tale, I show, works and reworks the trope of being "carried away" as an undiscipined way of inhabiting a world organized around reproducing patriarchal power and masculine dignity. Identifying in *Eovaai* an early practical example of what contemporary queer theorists have called "silly theory," I honor the text's own flights of fancy by exercising my own – specifically, by pursuing the trajectories of meaning let fly by the tale's animation of phallic imagery. Haywood's contribution to the early modern fascination with the classical *fascinum*, or winged penis, refuses to allow the phallus to be sublimated into a phallogocentric episteme, instead confronting readers with a spectacle, by turns funny and horrifying, of the materiality of heteropatriarchal world-making. Tracing Haywood's fascinum back to earlier iterations from the medieval and early modern periods, as well as forward to psychoanalytic and phenomenological treatments, I consider the

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possibilities of "fascination" as, in Ackbar Abbas's words, "a *paracritical* mode of attention."[12] The anamorphic, in this context, describes a mode of representation that resists resolution into something straightforwardly comprehensible, thereby withholding the steadying ground of epistemological certainty from the viewing subject. Read as morphological experiment, *Eovaai* presents an irreverent celebration of bodies that choose flight over fixity, vulnerability over legibility, and transformative potential over ideological coherence. As such, it ushers readers into unexpected encounters with our own epistemological capacities as dynamically embodied creatures.

Part 2, "The Ludic," turns to the epistemology of play, giddiness, and the outrageously fanciful with regard to the emergent material landscapes generated by British imperial commerce. This part, the longest of the book's three, focuses on Horace Walpole, whose life's work included the gothic romance *The Castle of Otranto*; the building and furnishing of his Twickenham villa, Strawberry Hill; and the cultivation of a vast network of friendships and creative partnerships. I invoke the ludic to name the distinctive "funniness" of Walpole's style, which sits ambivalently between whimsical and uncanny, teasing and earnest. In distinction to satire, the ludic is a mode of play unconditioned by any preconceived judgment or intended outcome; it emerges in the eighteenth century, I argue, as a literary response to a world in rapid, aggressive transformation both materially and structurally – a world that demands spontaneous engagement before the rules or stakes of the game are entirely clear. I make my way to Walpole via a reading of the Scriblerians' attempt to elevate satire and other forms of literary play, desire, and attachment by "sinking" other styles from the echelons of cultural dignity. Coining terms like "bathos" to distinguish uses of language deemed anathema to neoclassical taste, the Scriblerians drew heavily on gendered forms of humiliation to police emergent discrepancies between ludicrous and serious literary productions – a distinction that does not separate the comic from the tragic, or the humorous from the staid, but rather the unrespectable from the respectable, the irredeemable from the worthwhile.

Walpole stands out to me as someone who, in the crucial early days of literary criticism, refused to write off the ludic as ludicrous. Though himself a wealthy tastemaker of the eighteenth century, arguably a curiosity in his own time but hardly marginalized within the predominant structures of power, Walpole is remarkable for his dedication to certain

[12] Ackbar Abbas, "Dialectic of Deception," *Social Text* 11, no. 2 (1999): 348.

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modes of storytelling, aesthetics, and personal and creative intimacy that skirt the edges of heteronormative tastefulness and liberal respectability. As bourgeois taste is increasingly tasked with dispelling the material conditions of risk, uncertainty, violence, and death that underwrite Britain's growing colonial wealth in this period, it becomes increasingly hostile to what I am calling funniness – any kind of oddity, proclivity, or quirk that disrupts an engineered sense of safety, stability, and predictability in the lived world. In his commitment to what he called the "singular" in a world of rapidly encroaching normie sameness, I see Walpole as an early practitioner of Jack Halberstam's "queer art of failure." Yet I am less intent on arguing for Walpole's inclusion in queer genealogies, as many others have persuasively done, than I am in arguing for the ludic as a queer mode of engagement that raises unresolvable questions about what it means to encounter and survive violence, in a world in which new forms of systemic violence are at once seemingly everywhere and nowhere. Borrowing from Brian Massumi's theorization of "ludic play" between dogs, I invoke eighteenth-century philosophy's interest in "animal spirits" as part of human physiognomy to show how Walpole coordinates his own ludic scenes, in which imagined "life and death" scenarios both are and are not actual matters of life and death. Ludic play, I offer, is a technique for strategically disorganizing the rituals and conceits of civility and good taste, retooling them from techniques of disavowing violence to a means of grappling with violence in its most diffuse and ever-present forms.

Part 3, "The Orificial," carries the ludic energy I hope to have gathered at that point into a reading of Frances Burney's courtship novel *Evelina*. In terms of genre, *Evelina* stands apart from *Eovaai* and *Otranto* in its novelistic commitment to portraying a realistic protagonist in a plausible, if often outrageous, world. My reading attempts to show that the novel exercises this commitment through a ritual conjuring of silly, embarrassing, ludicrous, and morally sunk possibilities – unauthorized yet imaginable ways of being and of relating to others – that its young heroine must studiously avoid in her progress toward social legibility and its attendant awards of political safety and material stability. Prompted by Daniel Cottom's reading of "the topology of the orifice" as mobilized in Chardin's painting *The Ray*, I read *Evelina* in a way it does not invite but which it does, like an overformulated question, beg: as a text vulnerable to its own kind of orificial distortions, in which the modes of intimacy, desire, friendship, and community that it tries to disavow from "real life" instead potentially flood the scene, threatening to sink the tepid rewards of marriage under the abundance of other interpersonal

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arrangements that haunt the novel's account of human life. An orifical reading of *Evelina* seeks to coax open what the marriage plot aims to shut down. In doing so, it makes the novel available to unpredictable genealogical connections. I trace one such line of descent to the ongoing ludic play of gendered selfhood in twentieth- and twenty-first-century drag culture through readings of Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* and a performance by Bob the Drag Queen from the reality show *We're Here*, which went viral for its mind-blowing "wig reveal" in 2021. As critical reprises of some of *Evelina*'s most pronounced fantasies about femininity, social safety, and embodied vulnerability, both *Paris Is Burning* and the episode of *We're Here* hold *Evelina* in a context that exposes the eighteenth-century marriage plot's promotion of whiteness – specifically, whiteness as a sign of the social and sexual self-discipline that promises, in advocation against collectivity and queer intimacy, to keep us "safe" from one another as we attend to individuated prospects of "well-being."

The book's organization into these three parts, divided into subsections, is largely the result of my writing process, in which I allowed myself to keep following threads and spinning out readings until it felt as if I had arrived *somewhere*. Yet if this makes it an "undisciplined" monograph, that does not mean it is unorganized or without form. Each of the main parts is about the length of a long-form essay or a short book like those featured in the Cambridge Elements series. Because these parts relate to one another iteratively rather than progressively, they may well be read as three sibling essays, in any order. The subsections of each part range in length from the equivalent of a flash essay to a short article; while they are arranged more progressively, I hope they also facilitate a meandering and curiosity-driven kind of reading, one that can pause for any amount of time without "losing the thread," one hospitable to skipping around and repeating readings of whatever beckons, teases, or bears revisitation.

My hope, in short, is that *A Funny Thing* offers itself to different reading styles, with long-form arcs for those who enjoy a short or long book-length read, as well as extractable pieces for teaching or for readers interested in any of the book's assembled details. Whatever brought you here, this book is for you.

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