1998

Mills, Cairo, and the ridiculometer

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.9srw-d2bh>
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MILLS, CAIRO, AND THE RIDICULOMETER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Graduate Studies and Research

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Gary Singh

May 1998

UMI Number: 1389683

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ABSTRACT

MILLS, CAIRO, AND THE RIDICULOMETER

by Gary Singh

Mills al-Hajwiri, the quintessential tinkerer, nutty professor, and center of attention, manufactures a ridiculous machine. The only journalist gullible enough to respond to his invitation is Cairo Matsumoto, a Japanese-American woman who writes for the Athena Daily in San Jose. The rest of the yarn takes as much of an interdisciplinary approach as the author is able to take.

Exploring many themes, the author imagines a genius potential for cult status, public relations, and selling, but without being able to lock one's self in on what exactly to sell. Then the author imagines a newly revamped potential for that overexplained grey area between Attention Deficit Disorder and the wonder of the creative process. Eventually, the author takes those two potentials and throws them into a washing machine. The result, after exactly enough time in the spin cycle, is this creative product.

The prophetic rejection of specialization permits the writer ironically and parodically to employ discourses—scientific, technical, philosophical—over which he does not claim “mastery.” Similarly, it justifies the “translation” of one form of discourse into the language of another; such a practice often “breaks the rules” governing particular language games, while straining toward a ‘metalanguage’ which at once mediates and overcomes the need for mediation. The prophet longs for a form of “speaking in tongues,” but has to settle for the imperfect translation of “the real” into the comprehensible.

Rebecca Guglielmo,
The Prophetic Mode in Postmodern Fiction

This will be an age of people who can pursue many different activities at the same time. It will be a time of broad and flexible “Jekyll-and-Hyde” sensibility that can freely combine and juxtapose the sacred and the profane, the Paris mode with the farmer’s overalls, a creativity that can, through subtle combination, bring us novelty. It will, in other words, be the age when a schizophrenic, richly creative, split personality reigns supreme. Sincerity and insincerity will live side by side, the distinction between work and play will fade, formal and casual will lose their meaning and fashion—such will be the lifestyle of the age of symbiosis.

Kisho Kurokawa,
Intercultural Architecture

All our sympathy lies with the wanderers, the gypsies, and heretics, rather than with the totalitarian murderers who try to fix them in place, number them, control them, and finally exterminate them. We wander because no nation, no ideology, no culture, no religion, no philosophy holds our loyalty or pins us down in time and place. We are cut loose. We drift.

Peter Lamborn Wilson,
Sacred Drift

Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*.

Salman Rushdie,
In Good Faith

For what unites all these ‘lighter’ manifestations of the spirit is a lightheartedness and

playfulness which refuses to absolutise, or to take with an inflexible and unqualified seriousness, anything—especially one's self and one's situation. In its highest Zen form, it is the refusal, born of the freedom and perspective which in Buddhism is known as enlightenment, to be contained within and defined by the vicious circle of grasping and clinging, and that resists the temptation to enter the bondage of attachment to anything, however consequential or sacred. And at this point the 'other side' of the comic and the 'this side' of seriousness and sacrality become one in the freedom of him who has gone beyond holy and unholy, sense and nonsense, having and not-having, self and other.

Conrad Hyers,
Zen and the Comic Spirit

The trouble with the rat race is, that even if you win, you're still a rat.

Foghorn Leghorn

Tell the truth, but lead so improbable a life that the truth will never be believed.

Aleister Crowley

Anything that cannot or will not gain acceptance if presented seriously will ALWAYS gain acceptance if properly presented as a joke.

Anton La Vey

Creations are like mutant abstract lines that have detached themselves from the task of representing a world, precisely because they assemble a new type of reality that history can only recontain or relocate in punctual systems.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus

This is a film that constantly interrupts itself and does not come to an end.

Guy DeBord,
Critique of Separation

PRESS RELEASE

Mills al-Hajwiri, famed scientist, composer, theorist, intellectual, has done it again. Months of assiduous efforts have paid off and the time is now to go public. An apparatus that promises to revolutionize the practice of information mapping is in its final stages of construction and Mills al-Hajwiri is calling for a press conference. Although currently still in Alpha stage of development, the prototype for the RIDICULOMETER is in working order and can be demonstrated rather effectively.

Utilizing an innovative new technology called PDP, or the Parallel Derision Processor, the self-programming fully autonomous analysis engine of the RIDICULOMETER intakes information of various kinds and by various means. The apparatus incorporates human-like reasoning and decision-making processes to analyze how ridiculous the given information is. The RIDICULOMETER analyzes the data, draws conclusions, and advances our understanding not only of how ridiculous behavior can be specified, but also how a wide array of scientific evaluations can aid in the process.

For more information, contact Mills al-Hajwiri at (408) 293-0782 or email: ahajwiri@email5.vml.vax27.sjsu.edu

When Cairo Matsumoto first gleaned the essence of Mills al-Hajwiri's bizarre press release, she rolled her eyes and threw the piece of paper down on her desk. Of all the idiotic press releases Mills had farmed her way over the years, this one took the cake. She slumped back in her chair, looked around her generic office cubicle at the Athena Daily, and sighed.

Usually she'd be able to ignore Mills' letters, but this time around, her intuition told her different. Something about this particular note gave her the willies. Her demanding boss, Haage Stijn, thrived on such material and would undoubtedly want an immediate story.

Cairo fetched a box of Altoids out of her tiny black Espirit purse, popped one of them into her mouth, and pondered the situation over, guessing that Haage would soon be

sauntering up and asking her to 'do a story on the eccentric young crank, Mills al-Hajwiri.

The routine of Cairo's part-time journalist gig at the Athena Daily in San Jose, California was not unbearably boring, but once in a while it got to her. Since she was the new kid on the block, she would always get assigned the most generic stories. In fact, they were all generic.

Oddly, the newspaper seemed to desire its own stagnation and the Daily's content reflected the drabness of the city. Since it was located right down the street from San Jose State University, most of the part timers they had hired were students who couldn't write worth diddly.

Cairo, however, was not a member of that category. She didn't wear that jacket. She could actually write. For years she had wanted to be a professional journalist, but had never gotten a break, a chance at the top, or that one crazy story that would catapult her to stardom. Someday it would come along, she thought.

Mills had been sending her materials for quite some time now, and Cairo could only imagine what would happen should she finally decide to follow up on it. A story on Mills would definitely liven up the paper, but for some reason her female intuition had a few serious reservations. Was it a hoax? Surely. Obviously, Mills was craving for attention. He was pretending to be a scientist. He just wanted to bask in his own fabricated glory and have someone interview him. The man probably wanted to listen to himself and no one else. The public won't be interested.

On the other hand, all of the other 'announcements' that Mills had sent to the Athena Daily were completely ridiculous, which seemed to be the point. Maybe a story on this

'ridiculometer' was something that needed to be told. Maybe this was just the shot in the arm that San Jose and the Athena Daily needed. Cairo shook her head and pulled her chair towards her desk in order to go back to work.

Looking up at the French style clock hanging on the deep red wall of her cubicle, she noticed that it was nearly three-thirty. A Cirque de Soleil poster that Cairo had recently purchased hung on the wall next to the clock. The red hue of the wall surrounding the poster brought out the poster's vivid blue and gold imagery of male and female dancers. This poster was somewhat flashy, but Cairo had taken a liking to it anyway. Something about its twisted romantic look brought new life to her cubicle. Something about it oozed music and she began to hum her favorite song, *Un Amor* by the Gipsy Kings.

Within seconds, Haage Stijn appeared at her cubicle like an earthquake she knew was coming, but didn't have the means to prepare for. Cairo heard his presence but refused to turn around in her chair. She was deathly sick of his whiny voice and his loud hair. He boasted a head like a rhinoceros, a pot belly, a liver-spotted complexion, and she hated looking at him. Had he been a fish, she would have flushed him down the john years ago. She continued humming the love song.

"Hey Cairo." Haage casually looked around her cubicle. He eyed the exotic plants and the dozens of European postcards on the partition in front of her desk.

Cairo had written many haiku poems and she had a bunch of them taped to the wall. Haage drifted up and began reading the poems. Each one was on a separate three-by-five index card and was written stylistically with deep red ink that matched the color of the cubicle wall.

“Hi Haage.” She was still facing her desk.

“Did you get the latest press release from Mills?”

“Yes I did.”

“Well, what d’ya think?”

“Well...” She stretched out the word like she was contemplating the punch line of a bad joke.

“Come on! It’ll be a great story.”

She just then turned around in her chair to face Haage and crossed her legs. “I don’t know. I have my doubts.”

Haage, as always, looked Cairo over as she sat there. He had a rude of habit of ogling at her porcelain complexion and her thick black eyelashes. He found her lips to be ripe for the picking, and her nose, which perked up at the bottom and flattened at the top, had always been a favorite of Haage’s. Jet black hair circled her face and sat robustly on her shoulders.

“I know I’ve told you this before, but you don’t look like most Japanese women.”

Cairo’s look turned a little sour and, after calming herself in order to avoid blowing up, she answered, “You know I’m only half Japanese. Why are you saying this?”

Haage’s obsession with the femme fatales of the orient was more than well known and Cairo was fully aware of this, but she didn’t want to press it. Part of her job was to put up with Haage’s constant remarks about Asian women. She lowered her head slightly and curled her upper lip with contempt that only a woman can have.

Haage smiled, showing the yellow dinginess of his teeth. He abruptly changed the

subject back to Mills al-Hajwiri. “Cairo, I want a story on this guy. I don’t care who he is or what he’s all about, but I have a gut feeling that something’s there. Something that needs to be told. You know, he used to be a professor at State.”

“He still is, but I think he’s only part time now. A few months ago he sent me a press release about some idiotic invention and at that time he said he was still teaching.”

“What does he teach?”

“I don’t know. From what I remember, his letter said that he was in some strange interdisciplinary program that let him teach whatever he wanted. One semester he’ll teach Italian cooking, the next, Tantric Yoga, and the next, Baroque music or poetry. Actually, it’s pretty interesting.”

“Hmmm.” Haage tugged at the tiny salmon hairs on his chin.

“I think he’s a fake.”

“A fake? How do you know? You’ve never even met him.”

“Well, you probably wouldn’t get it.” She looked down while continuing. “I can tell. These press releases that he sends us are...well, just a lot of noise for nothing. It’s almost like he sits around all day and comes up with presses releases because he’s bored. He likes to talk about himself.”

Haage rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Oh, so you’ve got him figured out already?”

“No, I didn’t say that.” She sounded like a mother comforting a child. “It’s just womanly intuition. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Come on, you’ll do a great job.” Knowing how gullible Cairo was, Haage persisted.

“You’re good at figuring out what makes a man tick. Even if this guy is a complete nut, you’ll be able to drag almost anything out of him. I’ve seen you do it before. You’re good at sizing people up.”

“I don’t know...” Cairo looked down at the floor and smiled with bewitching shyness.

“Well, I’m assigning you to this story. I’ve got a hunch and I have to go with it. I’m serious. You’re the kind of woman who really wants to know how men think and this is a perfect chance for you. You’ve got some brilliant insight into male/female relations.” He then spoke like he was reading the potential headline out loud: “A crackpot reveals his true self to Cairo!”

Well, then why don’t YOU do the story? Cairo had worked for the Athena Daily for just three months and since day one she had wanted to stand up for herself and tell him off, but she just wasn’t that kind of girl. Rarely did she lose her temper with anyone. She realized that her tolerant personality, in Haage’s mind, was exactly the quality that made her right for this job.

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “O.K. I’ll interview him, but I can’t promise anything. I have a feeling that this guy loves to talk about himself and probably won’t function in a usual interview.”

“Damn, you’re always prejudging people! Anyway, that’s fine. We publish *usual* interviews all the time. That’s why nobody reads our paper. It’s too filled up with *usual* stories.”

“Yeah but I have a feeling that he’s going to ignore anything I bring up and just sit

there and talk for hours. I won't be able to get a word in."

"How can you say that? Hey—maybe that's exactly what you want. You should be more confident with yourself. Just begin by asking him how this ridicumeter, or whatever it's called, works. That's enough to start with. I have faith in you."

"Fine." Another exaggerated sigh. "I'll email him."

"Why not just call him?"

"I don't even know the guy. Haage, I just learned how to use email and this would be a perfect opportunity to get used to it."

Haage didn't answer, but he was definitely thinking out loud. His mouth turned downwards a little and a sullen look came over him. He wanted her to phone Mills and not resort to email.

As if she was reading his mind, Cairo answered: "O.K. I'll call him first and if he doesn't answer, I'll email him. How's that?"

"Sounds good." Haage turned and walked away, snickering to himself. He tucked in his grey shirt into his faded beige pants as he waddled away. His body odor went with him.

Cairo was disgusted with herself. She didn't want to do this story at all, but she just couldn't say no to Haage. He had talked her into it.

After writing a haiku poem and tacking it up with the rest, she got up and left work early. It was Friday afternoon so she didn't care about vacating the premises of the Athena Daily earlier than she was supposed to.

* * *

That night, Mills al-Hajwiri had to sift through an ocean of broken computer parts, pieces of PVC tubing, upturned boxes of potentiometers, transistor tubes, nuts, bolts, audio adapters, tools, empty pint bottles of Old Boccardo whiskey, schematics, hydraulic joints, bicycle chains, and scraps of sheet metal, plastic, fiberglass, and balsa wood—just to find the telephone. The cord between the receiver and the phone was about thirty feet long and parts of it were tangled up in knots. He clutched the cord like it was an arched fishing pole and he was grappling with a feisty barracuda. Gradually Mills followed the telephone cord, watching junk fall to the side as more of the cord materialized. Eleven rings had already sounded and by the time he located the phone, underneath a pile of rubber bands and circuit boards, the caller had hung up.

Mills threw the receiver towards a table in the corner of his shop where it crashed into a few shot glasses and fell to the floor. The motion of his arm hurling the phone was such that it threw him off balance and he clumsily stumbled forwards. An old motherboard that happened to be lying upside down the floor became the landing point for his bare foot. The pins on the board stuck into the bottom of his heel and he let out an oily scream. The pain set in. An unnatural numbness crept up his leg.

Sitting down on the floor, he pried the board off of his heel and watched the blood trickle out like a leaky faucet. The frustration of missing the phone call hurt more than the piercing pain of the few stray pins embedded in his foot. Luckily, a techie madcap tinkerer like Mills had a variety of tweezers with which to pull out the pins and he was done in a

few minutes.

The receiver was on the floor at the far end of the shop and Mills crawled over and sat down beside it, his arms hugging his knees. The shop was deathly quiet except for the Georgia accent emanating from the receiver: "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and dial again." He sat there and looked down the length of his four thousand square foot shop. The monotonous grey interior enveloped him. He felt like a child let loose in a toy shop, but one who couldn't get any of the toys to work. This puerile feeling was accompanied by the usual fear of having no one who would listen him.

Three more Georgian wailings of that phrase came out before Mills mustered up enough energy to put the phone back on the hook. About once every two months the phone would ring at Mills' shop/warehouse, which was located in the back yard behind his house. Hearing it ring was an explosion of light in an otherwise dark existence. The mere excitement of somebody actually calling gave him a shot in the arm. Could this call have been one of the newspapers? One of the talk shows? One of the ladies' home journals he had contacted?

Two days beforehand, Mills had sent out one hundred and seventy-three press releases regarding his new gizmo, the ridiculometer. Somebody had to respond. That no one had ever responded to any of his previous press releases did not phase him at all. He sat there on the floor hoping that whoever had just called would call again shortly.

One large spotlight was tied with bailing wire to a tarnished hook on the ceiling of Mills' shop and it was the sole source of illumination in the entire place. The light was moderately powerful, engulfing almost all of the rectangular warehouse. Only one small

space in the corner, behind a decrepit old metal rack, escaped the omnidirectional light source. Alone in this dim corner, right next to the telephone, sat Mills al-Hajwiri. The walls looked like hell. The junkpiles looked like hell. The phone looked like hell. He waited about three hours for the person to call back and then gave up. A cloud of defeat closed in on him as he buried his face in his hands.

Mills only had one clock and it was all the way on the other side of the warehouse on the counter next to the sink. In order to see what time it was, he had to get up, walk through the piles of junk, and head over towards the counter next to the sink. Upon making it there, he shoved a moldy loaf of bread aside and looked at the clock. It was midnight and he got scared.

As soon as midnight rolled around at Mills' warehouse, ridiculous things started happening. The brain of the ridiculometer was its self-organizing, autonomous analysis engine and if it didn't think enough ridiculous events were taking place in the room at a given time, it would start creating more ridiculous events. Fish made out of translucent orange concrete would leap out of his aquarium and fly around the warehouse. Audio cables would rise up off the floor and twist around like cobras being snake-charmed. Of the many slices of old pizza lying majestically on the counter, a few might start expanding and contracting like a heavy breathing pot belly. Often, sunflowers would start growing out of the walls at a right angle. Female mannequins with Tourette's Syndrome frequently danced on top of the refrigerator with their heads on fire while singing *Fly Me to the Moon*.

Fortunately for Mills, he was able to turn the clock back a few minutes, make a mad

dash across the warehouse, and dive on the ridiculometer before it kicked in. He lucked out as the front mantelpiece of the machine hadn't started vibrating yet.

* * *

Since he hadn't answered the phone, Cairo decided to email Mills the next day. She really hadn't wanted to talk with him on the phone anyway, so this worked out perfectly. Computers weren't her area of expertise and she had only used email a few times, so she didn't know quite how to phase the query. Since she only had access to the internet through her job, it would be a suitable way to waste time while on the clock. And Haage wouldn't care because he really wanted this story anyway.

These were Cairo's thoughts as she hit the 'send' button in her email software. The window on the computer screen vanished and she stared at her Macintosh monitor. After a minute, her Gipsy Kings screen saver kicked in and she turned in her chair to pick up a Judith Krantz novel that she had been in the middle of. Her feet began to tap rhythmically on the floor.

A few more minutes went by before she heard the game-show bell sound, signaling that she had received an email message. She opened up the inbox in her email software. Mills had replied within five minutes of her sending the message! He must live on his computer! Looking at the message, she noticed that he was already giving her directions to his house for the interview. *His house? I don't want to do it at his house!*

While twisting her mouth in a way that said, 'well...I don't know...', she changed her

mind. The man obviously wanted to be interviewed in his own environment and he had some spooky need to be heard, so maybe his dwelling place would be a good spot after all.

His email was not unlike his press releases:

Date: Fri, 17 Oct 97 13:40:24 -0700
 From: "Mills al-Hajwiri" <ahajwiri@email5.vml.vax27.sjsu.edu>
 To: Cairo Matsumoto <cairo@athenadaily.com>
 Subject: RE: Interview

On Fri, 17 Oct 97 13:34:13 You Said:
 >We received your press release and we are interested in a possible
 interview for the
 >pages of the Athena Daily... [text deleted]

You have made the right decision, my friend. The spoken word is a powerful thing and the interview is the most enlightening manifestation of the spoken word. The water will be poured, loves will be lost, and at last my RIDICULOMETER will be unveiled for the public at large. My anticipation of your arrival here at 222 South 8th Street is but one of a tangle of emotions that you will experience. I look forward to this meeting with the utmost alacrity. Directions to my dwelling place are thus:

Congee your efforts down highway 180 towards Downtown San Jose. Upon harnessing your skills towards the 7th street exit, veer to the right. Saunter past three stop signs and turn left on Gail Fullerton Parkway. The first right will be 8th Street. Oblige. At 222 8th Street you will feel the darkness of a large, two story grey Victorian house. With pure Athena Daily parlance, rap on the front door. I will answer and lead you to my warehouse out in the back.

--Mills

Upon reading his reply, Cairo smiled with bewilderment and printed out the message. Mills had not specified any particular day for the interview, so Cairo was forced to reply to his reply and set up a time.

* * *

The following Saturday she found herself walking down 8th street in downtown San

Jose, notebook in hand, towards Mills' house. Second thoughts materialized. Realizing that she was not altogether prepared for this interview, Cairo bit her lip and slowed her pace. She had no idea what she was going to ask him. Maybe he would just show off the machine and she wouldn't have to come up with anything intelligent to say. Maybe he had the whole interlude already planned out. Mills seemed like a character who definitely should be part of a story, so, just for the fun of it, Cairo began to picture her article. Of course, she hadn't even met him yet, but it was always good to picture someone and plan the whole thing before the initial meeting. She would open the article with something like this:

Maintaining an interest in anything for more than one minute has always been Mills' problem. As a matter of fact, if he goes thirty seconds he's on a roll. This is not to say that countless numbers haven't tried to permeate his aura: Reporters approach him like seagulls on a beach of bread crumbs; the younger brethren stand in attention to his advice; and his humor, when it spills forth, is unequalled. He's got the scent on him. All metaphors aside, if Mills really wanted something, he could probably get it. Instead, he has devoted his current life to being some ridiculous and un-focused combination of a court jester, an anthropology teacher, a pseudo-Eastern mystic, a Perry Mason fanatic, an overgrown slacker, a wanna-be James Bond phenomenon, a black belt in karate, a musician, a writer, a philanthropist, and a schizophrenic art teacher. His part-time faculty position has always been on the rocks due to his public displays of debauchery, his affairs with his students, and his unorthodox way of teaching. He was known for ritualistically ridiculing everything and everybody. If anybody puts the dick back in

ridiculous, it's Mills al-Hajwiri.

Yeah! That would be a great intro. If only it was true.

As she continued down the sidewalk, Cairo came to the conclusion that maybe Mills was not the type of guy she could easily prejudge. Would she be able to shatter the brick-wall facade of his press releases and figure out what makes him tick? Did there exist a context that she place him in? His ideas? His inventions? Delving into his past like an obnoxious talk-show host would be a grave error. Judging from the tone of his press releases, Mills was probably not susceptible to what the Athena Daily usually referred to as 'an interview.' Maybe just sitting there with a flirtatious stare, listening to him, would be a sufficient *modus operandi*.

She continued down the sidewalk and only then did Cairo completely notice her surroundings: the ghetto that Mills lives in. Downtown San Jose is close to the university, so there are speckles of decent housing here and there, but mostly it is a place where one must weave and bob her way through teenage psuedo-gangs, bums, transvestites, and halfway-house panhandlers. Well, let's not forget the college students. The neighborhood is less a 'community' than a dumpster filled with all shapes and sizes of human garbage.

Cairo found out that actually making it to Mills' sanctuary is a travelogue far beyond any Lonely Planet guide: no backpacks, no Youth Hostel Card, nothing. Forget about finding the nearest two-star restaurant with English menus; just run for cover.

This essence of downtown San Jose made her feel extremely uncomfortable. It was every stereotypical dump of a neighborhood she had imagined: broken-down houses not kept up since the twenties, garbage on the streets, junkies drinking malt-liquor on the

sidewalk at all hours of the morning, and the shattering omnipresent collage of sirens, car alarms, bottles breaking, ice-cream trucks, and babies crying. For some reason there was always distorted Mexican music blasting from some unidentifiable place.

She was completely disgusted by the entire neighborhood and she felt foolish being in such a dirty place. It wasn't the dirt per se, just the overall lowlife element. Everybody in the neighborhood was staring at her, the homeless, the junkies, the male prostitutes all turning their heads simultaneously. They were wondering what a beautiful and sophisticated woman like her was doing in this neck of the woods. She was beginning to wonder herself.

As she drew closer, Cairo noticed that most of the houses in the area were Victorians, some of them restored and beautiful, others decrepit and halfway condemned. Just when Cairo was ready to surrender, she came across one of the few that was actually restored: no weeds, no graffiti, no perpetual yard sales. What a relief it was to step off the urine-soaked sidewalk and into the only front yard in the area without a broken television set. The house was a two-story grey Victorian with black trim. Cairo found it unusual that the most kept up house in the neighborhood was also the most grim looking.

This was the address Mills had given her and, now that she thought about it, the address may not even be correct. *He can't possibly live in this good of a house!* Maybe he had deliberately given her the wrong address. Pulling such a prank would be right up his alley. He probably engaged in such behavior all the time.

Despite her feelings of apprehension, Cairo's only option was to try and find out. She walked up the yard towards the porch. Hopefully Mills would remember that they were

supposed to do this whole thing. Maybe she should never have requested the interview in the first place. Maybe she should forget it. Alas, since she had come this far, she ventured forth and did her best to remain positive.

This positive feeling was only temporary and as the closer she got to the porch the more her self-confidence began to deteriorate. The sun was setting and its orange hue blasted across the horizon. Cairo could smell the smog of downtown San Jose. She looked up and saw a flock of pigeons suddenly leave their spot on the roof of the house.

A sudden uneasiness came over her. The butterflies that she already had in her stomach started to get uppity. It was almost as if the house itself was trying to suck all the optimism completely out of her. She was stuck in some Poe novel or something. Gothic meets fear meets intimidation meets the boogie man. She again began to wonder whether this interview was really a decent thing to do or a just a lost cause. Discovering what made Mills tick and purveying it to the rest of the world seemed like a good idea at first, but now she didn't think so. Was it all in vain? Was she buying a pig in a poke? She tightened the strap on her trenchcoat because it was starting to get cold, and then looked back up at the house.

She immediately thought of a Danielle Steele book she had just read. In it, a house exactly the opposite of this was described in detail. The place was a grand mansion in the upper east side of Manhattan, one known for its stunning beauty and architecture—a picture postcard sight. *Why can't all houses be like that?*

Immediately her thoughts returned to Mills' place and she was now at the top of the porch, right in front of the door. While ringing the bell, she tried to look through the

window on the door. Inside, everything was buried in darkness. From what little she could see, it looked like a stairway began from the ground floor, right to the left of the doorway, and spiraled up towards the second story.

Her mind again wandered, but was soon interrupted by the sound of the deadbolt turning. The door opened with a creak that even H. P. Lovecraft couldn't describe. Out of the darkness, like a cliché horror movie scene, Mills appeared at the threshold. His shoulder-length black hair was somewhat curly and obviously uncombed. From what Cairo could see through the dirty lenses on his glasses, his eyes were obscenely bloodshot. His jungle locks left only enough room at the bottom of his face to illuminate his severely chapped lips and his unkept goatee. He looked like a truck had hit him, but in some strange way there was something that intrigued her. Without even knowing what that something was, she immediately wanted to know more.

Ignoring his maroon Hawaiian shirt, his dingy white Banana Republic jacket, and his black Levis, Cairo focused on his physical build, which she found to be quite odd. He had narrow shoulders, wide hips and his bizarre, cartoonish form seemed almost artificial to her. If he had been a rooster, he would have borne a striking resemblance to Foghorn Leghorn.

The only greeting she could muster was, "Hello. I'm Cairo—you know, the girl who emailed you last week about doing a possible interview. How are you doing?"

"Great until now. What do you want—was this the day we decided on?" The curl of his upper lip turned the contours of his mouth into an evil sculpture that barely verged on a smile.

“Um, yeah.” She slowly moved her head up to look in the vicinity of his eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“No no no, of course not. Sorry if I sounded pissed off.” Now it was all smile. “So how’s life?”

Cairo was caught off guard by his flip-flopping emotions, but was more than prepared to take such comments in stride, so she took a deep breath and went for broke. Standing up straight, she held her right arm straight down and clutched her black purse. The other hand tightly held the notebook.

Cairo reminded him that he had previously agreed to do this interview at this particular time, and that she was there to see the machine and find out what made him tick while providing some intellectual stimulation at the same time. Assertion was key in her approach and she made it clear that she was not the usual dunce who attempted to shatter the brick wall of his unapproachable personality with hoards of talk-show-like questions. She had *ideas* to talk about and would not subject him to inquisitive probing. She was unlike the rest of them.

Mills developed a mental analysis of Cairo that was not off track: a woman who’s laid-back, but direct attitude was standard operating procedure. She was known for being up front, aggressive, in your face, and hard. All of her female friends were probably exactly the opposite, Mills thought. Of them she was most likely the outcast: traditional and sedentary, but on the other hand, not afraid to let loose if the situation called for it.

To Cairo, Mills seemed indifferent to everything. *Why? He was the one who sent the press releases—the one who wanted to be interviewed—the one who wanted things*

dragged out of him. Why was he now so bloody unresponsive? Nevertheless, his arrogantly sarcastic aura soothed a little bit and he turned around, shrugged his shoulders, and beckoned her in.

Drawing influence from what little she had heard through the grapevine about Mills, as well as her own apprehensiveness, Cairo, in her head, assessed the scenario. There existed stories of Mills philosophizing about how he is chronically fed up with civilization and how he refuses to focus on anything. He would insult what little friends he had, piss on the cat, masturbate in public, or deliberately ruin anything for anybody, just to get a reaction. Because he craved variety. This was completely visible in his demeanor. He was already put out by this whole encounter and Cairo was feeling seriously confused. *He wanted me to come here and interview him. What's with the weird behavior?*

Mills carried himself with such irreverence and indifference that she felt like she had to justify *her* entire existence in this world just to get his attention. Despite her attempts to be assertive and speak her mind, she was still incredibly intimidated. Upon visiting Mills this evening, he acted like he was being forced at gunpoint to simply acknowledge her presence. Cairo didn't know what to do. She wanted badly to understand this man--not to sensationalize his unruly character--but to simply understand him with the hope that it would help her understand the world and also make a good story. *Why do I always get stuck with the loonies?*

At first, Cairo wondered if Mills was drunk—he repeated himself, his hands shook, and his attention wandered—but it all flowed in such an elegant manner to suggest that this was nothing out of the ordinary. He was illogical and contradictory, yet astoundingly

articulate at the same time. He had a remarkable talent for driving home a point that made absolutely no sense. Off the cuff, he was able to quote everyone from Salman Rushdie to Jack Daniels. Cairo had never witnessed such a menagerie of penchants than she did this particular evening with Mills al-Hajwiri.

“Do you mind if we do the interview in my room?”

“Your room? Ah....”

“No harm intended. I swear.” He held up his right hand and made the three fingered Boy Scout sign.

“I was planning on seeing the machine and maybe doing the interview out there, like you said.”

“Yeah, but the drinks are in my room. It’ll be fun, I promise. Come on.”

Without knowing why, Cairo followed him up the stairs. She noticed that his Hawaiian shirt hung down about six inches below the bottom of his jacket.

The trek up the unlit staircase to his room gave Cairo a devastating case of goose bumps. The wooden stairs creaked and cracked like each one was about to bust. Being transplanted into a Stephen King trilogy was not what she had intended, but since Cairo had made it this far, there was no use in turning back. There was definitely a story here somewhere.

After getting to the top of the stairs, they entered his room and Cairo’s mood dive-bombed even further. She was now surrounded by posters, artifacts, trinkets, and smells that would turn the nicest woman into a killer. In one corner was the cliché bachelor pile of smelly clothes. A poster from the Torture Museum in Amsterdam graced the opposite

wall. On his floor sat back issues of an obscure magazine about British Colonialism in India. What looked like blood stains were sprayed about the ceiling. At the far side of the room: books from floor to ceiling, an old brown computer desk with a dismantled PC on top of it, and a box fan jammed into the open window. The room exuded a rank but arresting combination of odors: sandalwood incense, old underwear, stale alcohol, and insect spray.

Of the qualities that defined the bizarre aura of his room, what stupefied her the most were the fish. Several strange pink fish were painted on the floor of Mills' room and they seemed to be looking directly at Cairo's breasts. They were almost cartoon-like and they looked evil. One of them in particular had a fiendish grin on his face and appeared not to be merely looking, but leering right at her breasts. Although she felt uncomfortable about the whole scenario, she persisted and tried to ignore the fish.

There's a scene in the movie, *Barfly*, where Tully, the fashionable, sophisticated rich lady-archetype, walks into Mickey Rourke's alcohol-stained den of iniquity. She's in search of Henry the writer, whom she thinks lives a lifestyle similar to her, but as she enters the dump he lives in, she is struck with awe at how such a creative talent like him can choose to live like a bum. She is shocked and grossed and words cannot describe her confusion and bewilderment. This is exactly how Cairo felt when she crossed the threshold into Mills' room. A twisted Mother-Theresa complex manifested itself within her and she deeply wanted to show this man the weirdness of his ways and bring him into her world, the real world. *This is going to be one hell of a story.*

* * *

“Alright.” Mills remained motionless in the center of the room. “What do you want to ask me?”

“You wanted to demonstrate that machine, what’s it called?”

“What? Oh—the ridiculometer. That’s out back in the warehouse.”

“Have you always had a warehouse in the back yard?”

“It’s a huge back yard. Many people have gotten lost back there over the years.”

“Excuse me?” She looked around the room apprehensively. The floor fish were still looking at her breasts. Immediately she noticed that he had Foghorn Leghorn bedsheets. They were dingy as hell.

“Nothing, never mind.” Thirty seconds of silence obliterated the room like a wrecking ball. “What the hell kind of a name is Cairo Matsumoto anyway?”

“I’m half Japanese and half American. Cairo is just a nickname. I’ve had it since I was a baby.”

“What’s your real first name?”

“I don’t go by my real name, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“Aw, come on! Tell me.” He sat down on the bed.

“No. I don’t like it and I’ve never gone by it. So don’t worry.”

“If you say so.”

“So tell me, why did you invent the ridiculometer?”

Mills pointed to a lime green bean bag on the other side of the room and said, “Sit

down.”

After taking her raincoat off, Cairo looked at the bean bag, then back at Mills. Keeping her purse hanging on her shoulder, she slowly sauntered over, sat down in the bean bag, and put both her raincoat and her notebook down on the floor. Her body sunk into the bag like it was a bottomless pit. A few of the beans spilled out of a hole in the bottom of it.

Sitting down in the bag enabled Cairo’s black miniskirt to slide up a few inches, revealing her flower-stalk legs. Mills tried not to be obvious while giving her the once-over.

After tugging at his goatee for a few seconds, Mills continued. “You asked why I invented this machine?”

“That was the question, yeah.”

“Well, I’ve always had a thriving passion for the absurd. I enjoy things that I think are completely ridiculous. So I built a machine that figures out how ridiculous something is. Eventually it will evolve to the stage where it can sense and analyze human behavior, but as for now, it accepts only text input. You give it a text and it decides how ridiculous the text is. Once in a while it malfunctions, but I’m ironing out the bugs right now.”

“Malfunctions? How so?”

“Sometimes it thinks that there aren’t enough ridiculous things in the room and it starts to make ridiculous things happen.”

What the hell is he talking about? “What sort of ridiculous things? What do you mean? How can a machine make ridiculous things happen?”

“Well, after we have a few drinks I’ll show you the machine and you can see for yourself.” It only took Mills seventy-five seconds to fetch a fifth of Old Boccardo whiskey from underneath his bed and thirty-two seconds to uproot a six-pack of Kassing’s Ale from a trap door in the floor. He placed both of them on the bed beside him.

Mills then promptly got up again, went to the closet and pulled out a beer-stained fold-up card table and chairs, the kind of set on which you play Scrabble with your relatives on Thanksgiving. Within thirty-six seconds, he had set up the table and chairs, sat down, pulled out some rocks glasses from somewhere in the closet, poured two glasses of whiskey, and opened two beers. Cairo was amazed. The man clearly had a knack for delivery. Evidently, this was a recreation of a scene in *Barfly*. She was Tully, the rich sophisticated woman, and Mills was Henry, the drinker. He was about to embark on his journey of self-indulgence and he was going to drag her into the gutter with the rest of them. In some strange, twisted way she was happy to go along for the ride. He sat down on one of the rickety chairs and beckoned Cairo to do the same.

“You just asked me to sit in this bean bag, now I have to sit over there?”

Mills didn’t seem like he even heard the question. Cairo, after a few seconds, got up from the bean bag and then sat down in the chair.

She explained to Mills that she was a drinker as well, but more on a friendly basis. To her, drinking was a social activity done with friends while gossiping at an Italian restaurant. She rarely touched hard liquor. This was one of those rare times.

Throughout twelve hundred and eighty-three seconds of drinking, Mills ranted about everything from French Post-Structuralist philosophy to sex magick, from symbolic

artificial intelligence to the psychology of creativity, from Sufi dervishes in southern Turkey to Sikh temples in the Evergreen district of San Jose. His usual topics of conversation were over Cairo's head, but she still remained attentive. Something about him just fired her curiosity.

"Is this your favorite whiskey?" Cairo held the glass in front of her eyes and shook it lightly. The whiskey sloshed back and forth. Her smile was ravishing and upon hearing her ask about his favorite whiskey, Mills stared directly at her breasts.

"Oh, it's alright. It's really smooth. That's what I like about it." His pupils honed in her white blouse, through which he tried to search for the outline of her bra.

They both finished their glasses simultaneously and Cairo, looking at the bottle intensely, asked, "Who is Old Boccardo?"

"Oh I don't know. I think he was a lawyer or something like that."

"It's good whiskey. You're right—really smooth. Usually I don't go for the hard stuff, but this is so smooth that even I can handle it." She giggled.

"Yup!" In a melodramatic maneuver, he grabbed the bottle and refilled both of their glasses. "It's REALLY smooth. You can almost feel the smoothness gradually spreading through your entire body."

"Yeah! That's exactly how it feels. It slowly spreads through your entire body."

After taking a swig of beer, Mills slumped a little in his chair. "Yeah. It's the smoothness. Almost like getting a Thai massage or something." A pretentious smile came across his face.

"What?" The look on Cairo's face immediately turned sour. She slammed her drink

down on the card table, stood up, put her hands on her hips, and looked right at him. Her gaze was piercing and her eyes glistened like a thousand razor blades in the bright sunlight.

Mills looked dumbfounded. He didn't seem like he understood why she was offended.

Cairo's voice was crackling with anger: "A Thai massage? What is that supposed to mean? You're not one of those guys who loves 'oriental' women are you? You're not one of *those* guys, are you?"

Mills was so struck with awe that he could barely get any words out. Somehow he managed to speak. "What guys, what are you talking about?" His palms were in the air, facing up and his mouth was wide open in confusion.

"What's this fetish guys have with Asian women all about?" She raised her voice and the rant began. "There's this stupid and racist stereotype that Asian women are submissive, quiet, sweet, and will do anything just to please their mate. And that's why these guys want them. Guys who only like Asian women seriously think this is true. They think that we *Oriental*s are passive, submissive, and keep our feelings to ourselves. Usually, guys who think like this are pathetically uncomfortable with themselves and have no self-confidence, no self image, and no self-esteem. They hate themselves. They're like pedophiles because they have some stupid desire to be a father figure and need to dominate a relationship. They see women as nothing but objects. And since we *Oriental*s supposedly hide our feelings, we make perfect mates for these misogynist losers, who are usually ignorant, narrow-minded jerks who have some exaggerated perception of the

Asian female stereotype and think they have to make fun of western women as often as possible. Guys like that make me sick. I'm really interested in why guys think like that. . . Do you want to fill me in? Is that how you look at women? So they can be an objects for your entertainment viewing pleasure? So they'll give you a massage every day when you get home from work? Is that what you want?"

"I never even *said* the word, 'oriental.' Calm down." He said, after laughing slightly. This caught Mills completely off guard. He seemed almost impressed at Cairo's concise little tirade.

"I realize that. But I know you know what I'm talking about."

He pushed his bottom lip forward and nodded. She remained standing and her eyes were still pinned on his.

Mills had made that comment about Thai women solely just to offend her and she knew it, but she still felt the need to say a few words about it. She had a strong desire to hear Mills speak his mind on this issue. If she got nothing out of him the rest of the night—if she never got a chance to see the ridiculometer—she at least hoped he would at say *something* about this. She was sick of Haage's comments about Asian women and she had completely had it with men who think in such a manner. Mills had hit a nerve.

As far as Cairo was concerned, the interview hadn't even begun yet. They hadn't even been out to the warehouse in the back to see the ridiculometer, which was the initial reason for doing this in the first place. It began to occur to Cairo that all plans for doing a traditional interview needed to be thrown out the door. She started to guess that with Mills the love of conversation is what it's all about. That's it. He'll make any comment

he desires, from racist to sexist, to offensive and downright repulsive, just to stimulate her and keep the conversation going. He was one of *those* guys. He was kind of like the extreme devil's advocate.

After hearing her tirade, he was completely silent and the look he gave her spoke volumes. A twisted, malicious grin came over his face, and his eyes pinned on her figure like a hawk scoping out his prey. He sat there, pulling at the hairs on his goatee. Cairo was uncomfortable, but strangely intrigued at the same time.

After fifty-three and one half seconds of silence, he answered. "This Asian women thing really means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

Cairo was mildly steamed, but in control. "Think about it. The word Asian is an awful stereotype, even more so than oriental. What if someone referred to you as an 'occidental' guy? Wouldn't that make you feel stereotyped?"

"I never even *said* the word 'oriental'. Jesus Christ!"

"Look, If I had a dime for every Asiaphile businessman who's propositioned me, I'd be a millionaire. I could retire at thirty."

"Why is that my fault?" Before she could answer, he went on. "Look, I have a theory. Listen for a second."

She rolled her eyes.

"Come on." He pointed to the chair. "Sit down."

After a brief sigh, she obeyed.

"Look," Mills went on, "The whole thing is about ridicule."

"What?"

“Ridicule.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember how I said I’m interested in anything that is ridiculous?”

She sighed again. “Sure.”

“Well, to begin with, you hit the nail on the head about guys who are into oriental women. I won’t talk any more about that. You seem like you’re on top of it.”

“Well, thank you for such praise.” Her sarcasm was painful.

“I’m working on a theory that every race should mix with every other race as often as possible. Many people really think that any intermingling with another culture will in the long run weaken and ruin their own. Or they think that everything should be separated and cordoned off from everything else. Whites should be entirely separate from Asians, art should be separate from music, or that philosophy should be separate from chaos. My opinion is exactly the opposite. I favor the hybrid mongrelization of everything. Not just races—but cultures, politics, cooking, the arts, philosophy, game theory, genealogy, home improvement—everything. It’s just a mild satire of purity, or a mild ridicule of purity, however you want to look at it. Or a ridicule of having to specialize in one area. Or a ridicule of the idea that there can possibly be a pure anything. Since I’m half Arabic and half American, it’s in the cards that I would come up with this whole idea. It’s just a satire of purity.”

He ignored her comment and continued. “Now, of course, people have been arguing about purity and impurity since the beginning of time, but I just think it needs to be revamped a little. If you think about it, the only way to be truly creative is to throw it all

into the hat and have everything leak into everything else without focusing on one particular aspect at all. If you think about it, that's exactly how psychologists define creativity: the connecting up of previously separated realms of thought."

Cairo thought this was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard. She looked down at the moving fishes on the floor. Their eyes were pinned on her breasts. She looked back up and asked, "So your idea of race mixing is solely just to ridicule the idea of there being a pure race?"

"What? Well, almost. It's just one more manifestation of the practice of ridicule. Someone writing for the school paper recently said that art is action, not reflection. He was an idiot, but anyway, that kinda sums it up. Well, on second thought, it only partly sums it up. It's just about the mongrelization of everything. That's it. Now, I stole that phrase from Salman Rushdie, but that's not important right now."

This was getting a little over Cairo's head, but she refrained from more outbursts. She at least wanted to hear him out. This mongrel stuff was great, but Mills's opinions on Asian women were what intrigued her. No matter how ridiculous they were, she still wanted him to continue. And after staring off in the distance for a few seconds, boy did he.

"You see, in India many people worship a Goddess named Kali. She's the ruler of all creation and destruction and she's usually pictured as some sort of black, repulsive creature who wears a necklace of human skulls."

"Yeah, I know who she is."

"Well, a lot of Westerners have to see the world as one of binary opposition, you

know, good versus evil. Something has to be good or evil. Either or, instead of and. We think Kali looks hideous. But she's been the sacred symbol for millions of Hindus for nearly two thousand years. You see, here in the West we have this thing called the 'dark side' and we think it's something that we're not supposed to talk about. These people that worship Kali believe that there's some of the dark side in all of us."

Cairo was secretively rolling her eyes at all of this. *What the hell is this guy talking about? How am I going to get him to shut up and talk about something else? He's talking like he's reading from some research paper in the sky and not the way one normally talks.*

Shifting his weight a little bit, Mills continued: "Kali worshippers transgress the opposition between good and evil. The people who worship her realize that there exists good and bad in all of us. They love her. They buy her gifts. Their goal in life is to *become* her. That's exactly where I'm coming from. According to Hinduism we live in a time where Kali has come back to destroy the demonic male forces that are oppressing the world. I want to see Kali in a new context: as a ridicule of a male-dominated society. That's it. It's all about ridicule."

"That's the most ridiculous and uninformed thing I've ever heard."

"Exactly."

"You're taking artifacts of a culture and using them completely outside of cultural context. It makes no sense. It's insulting to the culture."

"You mean it's ridiculous? Look. I'm half Arabic and half American.

Transculturalism has always been my world, my culture. So I need to find a new culture

that is a mixture of everything else.”

“Listen,” Cairo snapped back, “Now it’s my turn.”

“Oh is it?” He was a beacon of sarcasm and it only added fuel to her fire.

Before she answered him, she looked at his fingernails. The dirt underneath them was a shade of greenish black. “You know,” she said, “I just love it when Westerners try and explain Eastern thought to an original Easterner like myself. Even though I was born here, I can say that I have an Eastern sensibility. I feel pretty knowledgeable in things ‘Eastern.’”

“Oh you do, huh? I was born here too.”

“You’re on the right track with the whole concept of Western binary opposition and all that—but the way you say it sounds like you’re just deliberately looking for something Eastern to ‘leak’ into whatever you happen to be talking about.”

“Yeah, I can see how you would come up with that criticism. You have to admit, it is an interesting concept though. The worship of the mother goddess.”

“Yeah it is.”

“Well I’m glad you think it’s interesting.” His sarcasm cut through the air like a fistfight at a church social.

“Look,” Cairo’s tone was pontificating, “You’re right about Hinduism. This cycle of time is Kali-yuga, the age of Kali. The divine feminine spirit and all that stuff.”

Mills’ speech was gradually getting more and more formulated and he asked Cairo how she got interested in Kali.

“Well, at first I got interested in all this because Kali has been adopted by Indian

women's movements as a liberating symbol to convey their messages. But I don't believe for a second that this has anything to do with any theory of race mixing with Asian women, or as you say, you ridiculing a male dominated society."

"Well, it's still in the idea stage, at this point. I'm still in the process of refining the art."

"Well, in my opinion, if there's anything that *should* be ridiculed, it's how Westerners don't even understand what they're trying so hard to exoticize."

"What's that? What'd you say? Oh—exoticize? Is that a word?" An elitist chuckle followed. "Yeah, you're probably right." Mills realized immediately that Cairo wasn't the type of girl that would even come close to understanding his ideas. He didn't want to go on with the interview. This was a waste of time. If she was going to sit there and argue with him, what was the point? This was supposed to be an interview and not a debate. She was here to listen to him, not the other way around. *Why can't she just ask me some regular questions? What's all this other crap?*

Cairo obviously wasn't falling for his routine and she didn't want to let him ramble on any longer. *Ramble On* by Led Zeppelin rang through her head like a bad valve rattle.

"I don't want to talk about the Asian women thing anymore." With delicate precision, she grabbed her beer and drank what was left of it.

Just as he was about to answer, she added, "Forget it. Let's go out back and see this machine you were talking about. That's why I came here in the first place. Forget the Asian woman thing."

"Fine."

"I'm in a very emotional mood right now and I don't want to talk about stuff like that."

"Fine."

Cairo did indeed want to hear him rant some more, but it was a snowball's chance in hell that she would admit it out loud. He was starting to get under her skin like a fungus. The whole encounter this evening made no sense at all, but it was certainly a relief from interviewing some humorless, complacent, specialized moron like she was used to doing.

She sat there on the chair, frozen but barely shaking, and looked at him. The shadow of his profile covered the opposite wall and it reminded her of the Hunchback of Notre Dame. To Cairo, Mills was a specimen pinned to the board, but someone who could teach her something: kind of like Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*, except in some surreal way he was almost normal. She hated to be even thinking this, but he had some strange effect on her that she would never be able to put to words. His fungus under her skin began to spread like food coloring poured into a swimming pool.

The fish on the floor were looking at her again. The floor of Mills' room reminded Cairo of a field trip to the Monterey Aquarium when she had been five years old. *What is the deal with the fish? Is he obsessed with fish? Why do they keep staring at my breasts?*

Suddenly, a distant sound of rattling bottles came from outside the house; a large amount of glass containers obviously clinking against each other. "What is that?" Cairo asked after following Mills' gaze towards the window.

"That's just a bum going through the bottles in the recycle bin. They do it all the

time.”

“Well, um, can we go see, go see the machine now?” The hesitation and apprehension in her voice elicited a gluttonous grin from Mills’ face.

“Not yet. First you have to read an essay of mine.”

“What? What do you mean ‘read an essay of yours’? I’m supposed to be interviewing you, not reading your essays.”

“The ridiculometer works by having information put into it. Eventually it will evolve to a state where it can sense physical and mental activity in the room, but as for now, it’s limited to text input. After a text is sent through it, the machine analyzes the text and does something to display or show how ridiculous it thinks the text is. It doesn’t actually have a human voice or anything like that. It just takes the text and then performs an act to show how ridiculous it thinks the text is. It creates a happening of sorts. Are you following me? I mean, are you following me?”

She sighed. “Yes, I’m following you, but the first obvious question would be, what criteria does it use to determine how ridiculous a text is? Or, how does it actually make these things happen?”

“That’s a secret. I can’t blow the whistle on it just yet.”

“You can’t blow the whistle? Why did you send us the press release if you don’t want to tell anything? Let’s see if this ridiculometer is everything that’s it’s cracked up to be.” Now it was the irritation and disappointment in her voice that made Mills beam with excitement.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know how it comes up with its decision. I don’t

know.” He was slowly running his left thumb in-between, through, and around his fingers. “I think the algorithms I designed got screwed up or something. The funny thing is how it displays its analysis. It has this way of making ridiculous things happen at will. I’m completely baffled myself. At this stage of the game, I have no idea why it works its wonders. Sometimes if it doesn’t think that a text is ridiculous enough, then it decides to voice its analysis by creating an event that’s even more ridiculous. It’s kind of like chaos magic.”

“What do you mean ‘event’? I don’t understand.”

“You see those fish on the floor that keep staring at your breasts?”

“Of course. I’ve been noticing them out of the corner of my eye ever since I walked in here. You thought I wouldn’t notice them?”

“That’s what I mean. One day, I gave an essay of mine to the ridiculometer in order to see what would happen. It created those fish right there. It created them.”

“What?” Cairo’s expression had the confusion of a five year old who had just witnessed a mass murder.

“The ridiculometer didn’t think this particular text was ridiculous enough, so it created some fish who are painted on my floor and who ogle at Asian females whenever they come in my room.”

Cairo looked down at the floor with disturbed confusion and was about ready to cry, not from sadness, but from open-mouthed wonder. She ran her hands through her shiny black hair and shook her head. Understanding this man was going to be impossible. Doing a story on him: even more impossible. All interviews must fail. Failure was

swimming between her teeth and it tasted bitter on her tongue.

Mills opened two more beers.

“You mean the machine created those fish on the floor?”

“Correct. It seems to like fish for some reason. It also created a talking fish named Nairobi who sleeps on the couch in my warehouse. You’ll see her when we go out there.”

“A fish named Nairobi.”

“Yeah. A fish named Nairobi.”

Cairo had no idea how to follow that one up. She scratched her cheek for a few seconds and then asked, “Why Nairobi?”

With extreme exaggeration, Mills shrugged his shoulders and put his hands up in the air. “I’m baffled.”

They were then interrupted by the sound of an ice-cream truck outside. It was playing a loud, distorted *Pop Goes the Weasel*.

“So how does it create these things? I’m missing something here.” She shifted her weight a little, began drumming her fingers on the table and continued: “These events just happen? How?”

“Beats me. Next time I came up here to my room, the fish were right there on the floor.” He pointed down towards them.

Cairo looked back down at the fish. There were maybe a dozen of them and each one had its eyes fixed on her torso. They seemed to be looking through the armhole on her blouse to see if they could cop a peek at her bra.

Looking back up, she made eye contact with Mills and asked, “But how did the

ridiculometer create a talking fish? That's crazy."

"I have an aquarium in the warehouse and one of the fish flew out of it and grew to a hundred times its size. And it started talking."

The more Cairo heard about the ridiculometer, the more idiotic she thought this whole thing was. Would anybody believe this? Is it worth losing her job over? Her boss, Haage, would laugh the entire story out the window. Again, visions of failure haunted her, but she still carried on.

"Let me get this straight." Her tone was inhabiting a terrain somewhere between disbelief and enchantment. "You give a text to the ridiculometer and it analyzes the text. Then, it creates some events in the room to tell you how ridiculous it thinks the text is."

"That's right."

"And, if it doesn't think the text is ridiculous enough, then it creates or makes something even more ridiculous. And it made a talking fish?"

"Right again. You see, it has a way of just instigating ridiculous things even without anyone feeding it any text to analyze."

"What?" The terrain was now more towards disbelief.

"The machine has a way of just randomly making ridiculous things happen for no reason. I haven't yet figured out why it does that. It's a bug or something. Let me change the subject for a second. Do you know anything about magic?"

"You mean, like card tricks and things like that?"

"No, no, no. That's the other kind of magic. I mean magic as a way of achieving the effects you intend to achieve by using your will to provoke change in your circumstances."

“Oh my god, you mean like black magic, white magic, all that stuff?” She began to shake her head.

“Sure, those are definitely two forms of it, but those terms are completely ridiculous. Anyway, what I think is happening is that the ridiculometer has evolved to a state where it has entered a ridiculous magical reality. This reality...I think...has a way of...how do I say this...ah., letting itself be intruded upon by weird, irrational, and ridiculous things.”

“Oh my god.” Cairo continued to shake her head in disbelief.

“And this ridiculous magical environment has engulfed my entire existence in this house.”

Cairo closed her eyes for a few seconds, theatrically sighed, and became silent. She felt like a high school principal who couldn’t get through to a naughty child.

“So this machine sits in your warehouse and it just makes ridiculous things happen all by itself?”

“Exactly”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Exactly.”

Cairo had no idea how to continue this thread. Before she even had a chance to, Mills chimed in again.

“Anyway, back to the essay. You see, what I intend to do is demonstrate the ridiculometer by feeding another essay to it and then seeing what ensues. But you have to read the essay first in order to fully understand what we’ll be dealing with. I mean, you have to know how ridiculous the text is before you can see how ridiculous the machine

thinks it is.”

Cairo shook her head, threw her hands up in the air with frustration, and sighed.

“Alright, I’ll read it. What’s it about?”

“It’s about ridicule.”

“I could have guessed that much.” She finished the last of her beer and daintily placed the bottle back down on the table.

“The article began as an exploration of the practice of ridicule as a tactic of subversion, but from sort of a Dionysian perspective. But it’s written in a nomadic research type of format. I just followed a particular trajectory as it came. Or, at least that’s what I attempted to do.”

“Fine. I’ll read it, I guess. I’m a speed reader, so it won’t take me that long.”

Mills went right to a dresser across the room and opened the top drawer. After flipping through a pile of papers, floppy disks, small electric motors, and other unidentifiable junk, he whipped out what was obviously the essay.

“Yes!” Mills held his arms up straight up in the air with his left hand holding the essay. Here he went again. Cairo was Tully, Mills was Henry, and they were remaking the movie *Barfly* in his room. Cairo began to think that something else was on his mind. He was spending an enormous amount of energy trying to get her interested in his world. *Why?*

Mills then lost his balance for a minute and stumbled back a foot. The essay dropped out of his hand and floated to the floor, right on top of a fish who had been looking at Cairo’s breasts. The fish had a sly grin on his face. Something about him looked

different, but Cairo couldn't figure out what that something was. It's features seemed to gradually change right before her eyes, as if the fish was autonomously evolving. Mills bent over and looked around the room.

"Are you looking for this?" Cairo picked up the essay.

"Yeah." He theatrically swiped it out of her hands. "This is the article that we'll be feeding to the ridiculometer."

He handed it right back to her. It wouldn't have been the same if she had just picked it up off the floor and read it. Mills had to physically give it to her. It was part of the shtick. His modus operandi was theatrical in nature and his life seemed to be a performance. There was no 'him.' It was all part of some crazy act. Amazingly, Cairo wanted to be in the act. She wanted to be in the next scene. She wanted to be in all of the scenes.

He got up and continued: "I have to go downstairs to get some more booze. Do you want anything?"

"Whatever you're drinking is fine with me." She began to look at the article. "I still want to see the machine afterwards. It sounds really interesting. I want to see more."

"Alright. I'll be back. Hold on."

He threw open the door, nearly ripping it off the hinges and Cairo listened as he stomped down the stairs. The same creaking sound emanated as before.

Cairo looked at the article and did the initial flip-through before reading it. The essay was a bizarre, wandering discussion of many different subjects, all of which somehow tended to be connected through a discussion on the practice of ridicule. It was a bizarre

combo of a discursive essay and a purposely digressing personal plight. Was the article itself a ridicule of something? Was he trying to prove a specific point? She didn't know.

She had a gut feeling that Mills would take his time getting the booze. He would drag out the process; he would make sure that Cairo had enough time to read the article while he was gone. With the utmost of elegance, she turned over the blank first page, creased it at the stapled corner, and read.

Ridicule at the Edge of Disciplines

by

Mills al-Hajwiri

In comparison together, Raillery appears like wine of a thin body, and delicate, poignant flavour; Ridicule, like a wine which is fuller, more rich, and luscious.

— Corbyn Morris, 1744

To ridicule philosophy is in fact to philosophize.

— Blaise Pascal

Studies of Medieval poetry and music tend to downplay the role of the Goliard Poets, those vagrant, wandering scholars of the twelfth century who, for one reason or another, gave up their training and their priesthood in favor of a nomadic lifestyle. They roamed from university to university, gathering their acolytes and singing praises of the flesh and of the drink. Constantly deprecated by the church, they were relegated to social outcasts and rambunctious pests.

The Goliards were a diverse bunch at first, ranging from ambitious youths with a tincture for learning to stout-hearted men with unsophisticated, but crusading hymns. However, as time wore on, an increasing faction of these wandering scholars found the practice of parody more invigorating than mere song. By stealing the Latin staves of the vernacular and changing the words

to create songs that celebrated drunkenness, gambling, and gluttony, their tactics offended the pious in unprecedented degrees.

This increased almost exponentially. What began as harmless parody quickly blossomed into vile, blasphemous, tactical ruses, designed to bastardize anything ecclesiastic and completely ridicule the authors of all such material. "God Be With You" became "Fraud Be With You." Original texts from sacred masses became springboards for ritualized celebrations of drinking, whores, or anything that mocked the liturgical ceremony. These nomadic scholars appropriated the material that was imposed on them and utilized it in a profoundly unnerving fashion. They gradually became the singing advocates for all that irritated and disrupted the pious.

The Goliard Poets eventually ceased operations and disappeared sometime during the thirteenth century, gradually being written off as "petty trifles" and "foul mouthed babblers" [1]. Most music history books devote about a paragraph to them at the most and they are usually left to antiquarian interest, however, their laudable tactics of ridiculing their ultimate adversary of "righteousness" have continuously resurfaced in one form or another, especially in the modern realm of late capital.

The most curious thing about the Goliards was their attempt to subvert the institutional framework of ecclesiastical power through parody and ridicule. Was this approach intended to facilitate long term change or to just reiterate temporary disruptions of the system as strategies for creative practice? The latter is more believable and as we shall see, is much more applicable to modern day power scenarios.

One does not have to look very hard to find examples of ridicule simultaneously being a source of creative activity and disruption. Even a casual history of twentieth century art reveals many star-studded celebrity-roasts of "the system," possibly the most heroic of which being the

tactics of the Situationist International. There is a complex, historical web of discourse on power structures, those who subvert them, and/or if subversion is even possible, but always lacking is the inclusion of pure Goliardian ridicule in the process of resistance to this power. I will wander and digress through a small part of that historical web, centering on ridicule, the creative disruption of power, and the possibilities for a spiritual celebrity-roast of the entire scenario. This will unveil a complex, self-organizing system of ideas, all sharing common threads, from which emerges a global practice of ridicule.

*

The philosophy and politics of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have infiltrated many areas, from experimental psychiatry to techno music to tirades against tourism. This is understandable, since their ideas are very important for all brands of radical thought, and unlike most of their contemporaries, they never changed paths and recanted.

Crudely simplified, Deleuze and Guattari championed a “politics of desire.” They refused the Freudian reduction of all mental states to the Oedipal family unit, and they vehemently attacked all forms of representational and regulatory thinking which colonize and repress desire and define it as lack [2].

State philosophy, or “state thought” is their particular term for all representational forms of philosophy - those which posit the thinking subject as the fundamental building block for all—those hierarchical structures where everything is reducible to identifiable, discrete units, each part reflecting the goodness of the whole. This theme has been at the core of Western thought since Plato and has been the integral part of every bureaucratic organization and every concept or structure that is based on reason, truth, justice, values, and established order. State thought categorizes, codifies, confines and standardizes desire, mapping it out in territories on a grid of

“striated space.”

Deleuze and Guattari counter this with a deluxe industrialization of the unconscious by means of an anarchistic web of desiring-machines, each of which is a synthesis of libidinal energies that simultaneously reproduce and dismantle themselves. A characteristic of this web is 'nomadic thought' which removes itself from the striated grid of state thought, creatively circumventing the mapped out territories. Its “smooth space” is entirely different than that of state thought. It has a disregard for all boundaries, and functions by 'reterritorializing' the territories, by moving in and out of state space as it sees fit. Nomad thought is to state thought like air against the earth—it is a 'take to the street' machine as opposed to the state's “hold the fort” machine [3]. That is by no means the entire concept, but if we allude to their metaphors, drawn from the military [4], a common thread can be sewn to everyday life.

Many of the battles of early military history have been described in terms of nomadic tribes versus sedentary “hold the fort” units. The nomads are sometimes written off as being primitive and archaic, but Deleuze and Guattari deemed them as innovators who constantly developed weapons and technologies to thwart the State Machine, the sedentary army. The nomads were conniving and deceptive in their approach, always capitalizing on the moment. Their tactics were based on a combination of psychological shock and physical speed. They were also the first to integrate the swift and sudden movements of loose cavalry formations with the deadly effects of intense missile power. The nomads combined the skills of highly mobile archers and horseman with a flexible tactical doctrine that utilized every feature of the battleground for ambush and surprise [5].

The tactics of the nomads were as successful as tactics can be; they capitalized on the moment, seizing opportunities as they came. However, the sedentary armies would always, and inevitably so, appropriate the nomads' innovations, reverse their nature and function, and integrate them into their own machine. That is precisely the downside of any tactical approach—the

regulative, codifying apparatus of authority finds no difficulty in burying the events and incorporating them into its own toolbox for future use. The sedentary unit “which began by structuring the battlefield in a form directly opposed to the nomad paradigm was later forced to adopt the methods of its rival under the pressure of colonial and machine warfare” [6]. It is for this reason that history usually undermines the effectiveness of the nomad traces. One can either see this as an eternalization of the sedentary army's prowess and the stability of administrative codes, or on the other hand, an emphasis on the creative potential of the nomads and the sedentary army's dependence on them.

The sedentary unit, the state machine, establishes an order; it orchestrates boundaries [7]; it assigns intrinsic, specific properties to everything. It describes and perpetuates an “interior” reality. Nomadic tribes found themselves in an institutionalized, regulated chess game, where every piece has its codified movements: a pawn is a pawn is a pawn [8].

Deleuze and Guattari called for a break from this 'interior' of codes, administrative machines, and representational philosophy to an 'exterior' of nomadic thought that uproots the tree-like structure of the state machine and arbitrarily frees itself from the state's gravitational force. Deleuze originally embroidered this thread through an interpretation of Nietzsche, whose “discourse is above all nomadic; its statements can be perceived as the products of a mobile war machine and not the utterances of a rational, administrative machinery, whose philosophers are the bureaucrats of pure reason” [9].

Jean François Lyotard also swam in these waters, albeit only temporarily, and advocated a drifting form of thought that stepped outside the entire scenario of critique and discourse [9.5]. He sought to “exploit and accelerate the movements of generalized disruption in a fundamentally affirmative manner, seeking to ‘conduct’ new and unheard-of intensities” [10]. While Deleuze and

Guattari concentrated mainly on the non-fascist implementation of desire, Lyotard championed all forms of it, blurred the positives and negatives, and heralded the disruptive nature of desire found in creative practice. We'll come back to that later...

For Deleuze and Guattari and Lyotard, their ultimate goal, rooted in Nietzsche, was to transmit a type of thought that cannot and will not allow itself to be regulated, administered, and codified. As Best and Kellner point out in their, *Postmodern Theory*, "Nomad life is an experiment in creativity and becoming, and is anti-traditional and anti-conformist in character...[it] attempts to free itself of all roots, bonds, and identities, and thereby resists the state and all normalizing powers [11].

Deleuze reaffirmed and extended Nietzsche's hatred of the 'interior', and the most interesting aspect of his analysis (and the most immediately relative to my own suggestions) lies in the elements of humor and irony. Gilles Deleuze:

Those who read Nietzsche without...laughing hilariously--have in a sense, not read Nietzsche at all. This is not only true for Nietzsche, but for all other authors who belong to the same horizon of our counterculture....the audience went wild when Kafka read the Trial...it is hard to read Beckett without laughing. Laughter—and not meaning. Schizophrenic laughter or revolutionary joy, that is what emerged from the great books; not the anguish of petty narcissism, the dread of guilt. We could call it a superhuman comedy, a divine jest. An indescribable delight always springs forth from the great books, even when they present things that are ugly, desperate, or terrifying. As it is, all great books bring about a transmutation; they give tomorrow's health. One cannot help but laugh when the codes are confounded [12].

The humor and irony of it all became readily apparent: when one finds an aspect of the grim "interior" particularly nauseating, she laughs at it, intensifies it, and makes it even more nauseating. This is vital not only in Deleuze's extension of Nietzsche, but in all factions of everyday counterculture: one is naturally inclined to reappropriate, circumvent, disrupt and blatantly ridicule the boundaries placed on him/her by the State Machine. One can go far as to suggest that we need even *more* humorously pleasurable methods of confusing the codes of society.

Reflecting on this for a moment, one is reminded of Michel de Certeau's application of these tactics to the cultural battlefield that is everyday life. In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau concentrates on the dynamic and creative aspects of how consumers reroute the socio-economic structure of production that is imposed on them:

The relationship of procedures to the fields of force in which they act must...lead to a polemological analysis of culture. Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices [13].

Thus, the activities of life are aggressive and defensive, but can be creative and ingenious as well. According to de Certeau, consumers utilize a *clandestine* approach—a crafty practice of using and twisting the rules and norms placed on them by the dominating structure. A freedom for creative expression is thus given to the consumer/subject, who slips through the cracks of productive society. These methods of appropriating and short-circuiting the procedures of the system and using them in their own devices are what characterize de Certeau's portrayal of consumers in everyday life. His term for it, *la perruque*, or the “wig,” is a direct cousin of Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, a technique of making do with the junk surrounding one's self. *La perruque* constitutes an encompassing exploitation of and resistance to the domination of structure.

These activities do not celebrate violence or attempt any permanent sabotage, rather, like all tactical approaches, they grasp the moment, seizing an opportunity as it comes. At the most, political and economic systems are mildly vulnerable and are *usually* not open to significant, long-term challenge. However, this is not to say that they are invulnerable to opportunistic disruption. Again de Certeau:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is

confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called "consumption" and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it [14].

Unable to function within standard frameworks, this method of production carves what de Certeau, as well as Deleuze and Guattari called *lignes d'erre*, or 'lines of flight'—unpredictable trajectories that do not cohere within the established structure. De Certeau calls that structure "the prefabricated space of organizing systems." Deleuze and Guattari called it "the interior." These tactical techniques of consumption inhabit their own space 'within and without' the system, using the material and syntax of the system, but for their own interests and desires. De Certeau attempts to clarify the nature of these operations through an exhaustive articulation of tactics.

Basing his theory of tactics on Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's study of *mêtis*, a form of cunning intelligence in ancient Greek myths [15], de Certeau equates tactics with "clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, 'hunter's cunning,'... joyful discoveries, poetic, as well as warlike" [16]. He even goes far as to say more than once that a tactic is "a guileful ruse," suggesting that practical jokes, and perhaps even flagrant and ritualistic ridicule can be a tactical way of contaminating the circumstances imposed on oneself.

*

Now that we are in a technologically dominated society, some new light needs to be shed on these ideas. Or does it? Throughout history, the previously mentioned nomadic-versus-sedentary model has been articulated: The Goliards wandered throughout the land and ridiculed the established order; Deleuze and Guattari used it as a metaphor for a smooth space of thought versus a striated space of thought; de Certeau elaborated on the individual tactics of circumventing the encompassing structure. There was always a state machine, a sedentary unit, a "hold the fort," mentality that delineated power and control in a centralized fashion. Territories were forged,

reality was cemented, and regulations perpetuated. This was always countered with a wandering, nomadic, disruptive, creative, 'take to the street' approach.

With the advent of cyberspace, computer mediated communication, surveillance, and virtual worlds, the sedentary unit, i.e., the locus of power, has now slipped into ambiguity. In cyberspace, the powerful elite can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Power is now omnipresent and invisible simultaneously—it has retreated from physical space into cyberspace—from a sedentary unit into a nomadic presence. Just as the sedentary armies throughout history were forced to adapt the methods of their rivals, the nomads, we see the powerful elite now doing the same—retreating into cyberspace and going nomadic. What was once archaic and ineffective as a force of power is now being used to combat itself. The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), a collective exploring the relations between art, politics, and technology, suggest that since we have shifted from a sedentary-versus-nomadic scenario to a nomadic-versus-nomadic one, this has drastic implications for resistant activity [17]. Power is now nearly impossible to resist because it can no longer be found. The radical left no longer has the tools it once had, and time is running out. They have almost nothing left with which to bargain. De Certeau described the tactics of the weak in everyday life as being poetic, deceptive, creative, and war-like in nature, and the time is now to bring them up to date. But just how is this to be accomplished?

CAE suggest methods of data hijacking, temporary inertia, and electronic blockage as tactics for straitjacketing the power elite and sitting them down at the bargaining table. Prolonged inertia is exactly what collapses nomadic power, and this can be done quite feasibly in the electronic realm. They also interestingly leave the door wide open for even more extreme approaches, expanding on the ideas of Georges Bataille, one of the most legendary and unclassifiable writers on the dark side of French bourgeoisie. I suggest that ridicule can be the driving force that not only

opens that door, but rips it off the hinges.

Crudely simplified, Bataille perpetuated a philosophical irrationalism that lashed out against specific principles of reason and reality in Western culture. His approach was similar to this: harness the forces of sexual perversity and intoxicated experience as means for releasing excess energy and circumventing all that is based on normalcy, rationale, and reason. I suggest that now in the virtual age, this particular approach to power disruption has yet to be fully explored and this is exactly where pure, unadulterated, ritualistic ridicule, in the spirit of the Goliard Poets, can be a step in the left direction.

Bataille centered on the relationships between taboo and transgression. Using the inner forces of eroticism to transgress taboos and violate prohibitions, one can attain a spirituality similar to the experience of sexual ecstasy or alcoholic intoxication. The intent is not to destroy or deny or obtain freedom from the taboo; far from it—but to acknowledge the taboo and transgress it while keeping the taboo intact. The prohibition is not invalidated by the transgression, but actually reinforced by it. The causation of transgression and taboo are simultaneous and mutual, and the taboo is incomprehensible without that which transgresses it. The tired cliché, "rules are made to be broken," is still intact.

The taboo is there in order to be violated. This proposition is not the wager it looks like at first, but an accurate statement of an inevitable connection between conflicting emotions. When a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant we violate it. Such a violation will not deny or suppress the contrary emotion, but justify it and arouse it. We should not be frightened of violence in the same way if we did not know or at least obscurely sense that it could lead us to worse things [18].

Even in extreme cases, a transgression perpetuates the structure that it repudiates. It is, however, a way of opening the doors to what is beyond the limits usually observed [19]. The limits are still there, of course. Transgressions just exceed the limits without destroying them.

The concept of transgression as the process of losing control of one's will has also been

articulated—by everyone from Nietzsche to New Age Yuppies to Zen and Taoist monks to Crowley-inspired magickians to techno-pagans. The interrelations between the letting go of the will and the ecstatic forces of sexuality and intoxication have been integral parts of various philosophies and religions. There is no attempt to destroy the structure of normalcy, just to temporarily transgress it. I suggest that ridicule can be a logical extension to the unification of eroticism, intoxication, and the losing control of one's will—a way of transgressing power structures while keeping them intact. (The quote that opened this essay, coincidentally, used wine as a metaphor for ridicule). One does not need to overthrow the system, only to find the most humorous and self-satisfying way of temporarily circumventing it.

What we usually see as a result of power exertion is actually more related to the state of one's will. If one experiences a constraint by society, it is not due to the fact that society has placed that particular constraint on him, rather, it is the operation of his own will that has placed the constraint on him. If one wants to dance naked in his own excrement, pour vodka in the punch bowl, or masturbate on the cat, he refrains from doing so, not because society says that he can't, but because his will isn't allowing him to do so. This is an area that has yet to be fully explored. What is needed is a humbling of one's will, a “letting go,” the resulting condition of which is similar to alcoholic inebriation or sexual ecstasy. For some people, the act of ridiculing something can be this “letting go.” For Nietzsche, one of the dimensions of artistic power is this particular “letting go”—a compulsion to an orgiastic state. Art as an organic function is a sexual frenzy, an alteration of the sensations of time and space [20]. Sexual intoxication as an art is a transformational, creative, metaphorizing power [21]. Ridicule can function in nearly the same fashion.

To let go of one's will or to have one's will humbled, to engage in unabashed ridicule of

something, is to allow one to experience the 'exterior' world; to experience himself as if he had no control over himself. This can and has been a propaedeutic to mystical experience—allowing the self, in a sense, to virtually self-destruct—to simultaneously seduce and be seduced by the external world, the “real.” We must transgress and allow ourselves to be transgressed. Values have been placed on us, and all this does is negate reality. Values tell us how things are supposed to be, thereby telling us that what exists is inadequate. To transgress one's own values is to say yes to letting go—to become in contact with the external world, and become the same as every external object. Transgression then becomes sacrament and is connected to religious sensibility

Many of these motives can be found in the practices of the Tantras, the Indian 'cult of ecstasy' that obtains higher spiritual consciousness through sexual activity. Their practices represent a formalized transgression, a profound ritual, a pursuit of religious experience by doing all that is forbidden—sex as transgression as sacrament—a harnessing of all the creative processes and psychosomatic forces in the universe by enormously prolonged sexual activity [22]. Many of their rituals and meditations also include excessive intoxication. A main object of their worship is Kali, the Indian female archetype of destruction and creation. Creativity and chaos are ridden like tigers, sexually embraced, and their life-juice is fully absorbed. The Tantrik path includes ecstasy, wine, and creative nihilism for a transgression of values via an affirmation of desire and the body—a 100% about-face to all that is held in high regard by culture. Their deliberate combination of religious icons, words, practices, and rituals with the act of sex is a formula for a systematic violation of all that is cherished in society's heart. Tantric practice is still in existence all over the world and the unification of sex with religion continues to gain popularity.

Cairo stopped for a few seconds to ponder over what she had read so far. Here he

went with the Eastern junk again. Taking artifacts out of cultural context was a practice that irked Cairo. Regardless of Mills' "transculturalism," she felt it was an insult to the traditions of the culture he was borrowing from. This whole Kali junk was exactly that: taking ideas from a culture and using them in a way that has nothing to do with the original context.

The essay was so self-indulgent it was starting to get ridiculous. He kept wandering from subject to subject and constantly digressed all over the place. In spite of this, she found the essay enjoyable and she read on:

Practitioners of modern day sex magick "have orgasms with a particular image of God in mind—screaming the names of these Gods at the top of their lungs during orgasm. They combine the fluids into a mixture, a sacrifice to this God, and drink the contents in a frenzied state of exaltation and excitement" [23]. I suggest that similar results can be obtained through the use of ridicule, not unlike the tactics of Aleister Crowley.

Crowley, the most infamous magickian of the twentieth century, the 'most wicked man in the world,' built a career on whole-heartedly rejecting all moral values of the current day. He perfected the magickal forces of sex used for spiritual means, but accomplished this in such a manner as to completely raise all bloody hell (metaphorically) in the process. Crowley had a very bizarre sense of humor and was the grand old master of disrupting all facets of "normal" society. His talent for shock value was unequalled and by using it in his writings he was assured that there would be a lasting impression, good or bad, on the reader. He succeeded beautifully. His modus operandi was straightforward: "If only a handful of individuals will understand it, write it in such a way that it will never go out of print" [24].

In his writings, Crowley divulges previously kept important secrets of magickal practices, but deliberately writes so that it will be unintelligible to the layman. He uses images of bloody human sacrifice, cannibalism, and ritual murder as *metaphors* for the magickal powers of sex. The sophisticated reader, the “worthy initiate,” understands that the passages are mere metaphors, but the general public, the naive reader, the uninitiated folks, fail to understand; they take it literally and thus become shocked, offended and outraged at the grossness of it all. Crowley was thrown out of England and France and barbarous accusations were hurled at him constantly. To this day, half a century after his death, Crowley is still being wrongly accused of every atrocity humanly imaginable and his “lasting impression,” again, succeeds beautifully. Crowley: “There is a traditional saying that when an Adept seems to have made a straightforward, comprehensible statement, then it is most certain that He means something entirely different. The Truth is nevertheless clearly set forth in His Words: it is His simplicity that baffles the unworthy” [25]. Thus, Crowley unites magick and sex for a passport to spiritual transgression and simultaneously ridicules, torments, and confuses all those who are too incompetent to understand anyway.

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Philosopher and poet Hakim Bey appropriates the symbolic framework of higher consciousness via sex magick and grafts it with a radical aristocracy of the self that 'poetically terrorizes' the established social order under the banner of “ontological anarchy” [26]. Among many other sordid tidbits, the attar of his propaganda includes paganism, chaos theory, masturbation, aesthetic shock, art sabotage, psychic nomadism, poetic terrorism, pornography, false advertising, public defecation, adolescent male sweat, nomads, hunters, gatherers, wild tribes, and theaters of cruelty—all to create temporary autonomous zones that circumvent the nauseating boredom of civilization. He chaotically combines Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, Nietzsche, and

Islamic heresy to gush forth a suggestion that true mysticism creates a self at peace, a self with power. The highest task of mysticism, Bey elaborates, is in a sense to self-destruct, metaphysical and physical, transcendent and immanent, as one. I suggest an extension to this: a process of transcending the social order by making a mockery of the social order, a method which is thematized in Native American religion by the theatric mannerisms of “sacred clowns.”

Barbara Tedlock points to many examples throughout history of how the crazy, disruptive, and creative powers of the ceremonial “clowns” have been an integral part of Native American religious rites [27]. These costumed dancers engage in all sorts of rituals designed to provoke raucous laughter from every participant by irritating and ridiculing all religious authority.

With the advent of satellites, men on the moon, and space exploration, Tedlock writes, the Zuni tribes of New Mexico began to fear that the objects of their worship, the moon, the stars, the realm of space, etc., had been invaded by the white man. This represented an insult and a complete embarrassment to their worship. The *neweekwe* clowns of this particular tribe performed sophisticated skits of “space burlesque” that ridiculed what they saw as a profound attack on their religious beliefs. Clowns would dress up like astronauts, nurses and doctors, performing hilarious parodies of the entire mission of space exploration. The audience would usually be hysterical with laughter [28].

Tedlock also mentions the *neweekwe* medicine men of the same Zuni tribe, the gluttons-turned-medicine-men who joyfully consumed everything from dirt and refuse to wood and ashes to human and animal excrement and urine. Clowns from many different tribes would perform explicitly perverse sexual acts of any imaginable nature. They would stop at nothing to startle the audience and elicit profuse laughter from every on-looker. The implementation of shock tactics and ridicule to set the mind free of all attachments and worries is the crux of these episodes. Due

to their success in accomplishing exactly that, the clowns were always feared, but always looked up to—the audience oscillating somewhere between paralysis and fascination. The philosophy of liberating the mind from all worries and cosmic fears is a critical element in Native American thought.

Sacred clown performances/rituals come in many shapes, sizes, and intensities, but all of them utilize the practice of ridicule as a powerful form of spiritual transgression. The clown is not merely a provider of comic relief, Tedlock concludes, rather, he is a spiritual leader at the very heart of Native American religion, a religion that highly values the importance of ridicule.

Ridicule is a prime element in Zen Buddhism as well. Not seen as negative or cynical in any way, it represents a timeless expansion of one's inner being. Nancy Wilson Ross notes that "in the Zen view, anything as natural, as organic, one might say, as death, falls properly within the realm of humor, the one universal solvent. In general, Zen humor reflects the quiet pleasure to be found in pulling out the rug from under any pomposity" [29].

We can easily manifest a similar ritualized and creative transgression via ridicule. It's part of our everyday life. Artists are continuously ridiculing our leaders and institutions, engaging in public displays of extreme debauchery and irritating those who have dedicated their lives to rational seriousness. This performs a religious function for us by keeping our lives open to what they really are. The act of ridicule is always transgressive; it opens oneself. A lack of humor is always suspicious: solemnity and sobriety, in this case, become blasphemy. To always take the world seriously is to run away from its contingency and its absurdity; it is to slip away in the throes of principle and formality.

Ridicule can perhaps be the ultimate sacramental transgression - by doing so, it humbles the will and lets us forget ourselves; it allows us to play in and with the world and releases us from the

tyranny of our own judgments. More than just a style sheet for life, ridicule disrupts a codifying structure while keeping that structure intact; it transcends and completes the apparatus of power. The taboo is violated but not invalidated—the limits are exceeded but not destroyed. Society is kicked in the direction of an economy based not on money, but on “constant poetic renewal” [30].

*

In the literal sense, ridicule far transgresses the simple jest, the locker-room towel-slapping, or the everyday creative process of undermining someone's effectiveness. It is a boisterous, *tactical*, creative calculation that appears from nowhere and strikes out against an object of power, dissecting its tissue, and exposing the object at face value. The surrounding community is taken by surprise, oscillating somewhere between paralysis and fascination. The object is transformed into a subject of derision and contempt, and its reputation dive bombs.

Despite arguments to the contrary, a long term effect can be envisioned. The subject of ridicule develops a ghastly fear, not unlike that exhibited by the victims of a terrorist attack. The fear is a "fear of nothing at all, of something devoid of form, that yet eats into the very boundaries of one's thought" [31].

The apparatus of establishment utilizes two particular tactics up front: the description and perpetuation of *its* reality, and the process of cementing that reality into the daily routines of its inhabitants. Especially in a technological world, as Richard Stivers suggests, reality cannot satisfy our desires, instead, our desires are forced to accommodate reality [32]. The act of ridicule is the primary evasion, contamination, and transgression of that reality—it is the crashing wave that flows through cracks in the rocks. It is a weed. It is the drum of nuclear waste poured into the lap of environmental protection—the masturbating monster who shoots buckets of sperm at a Christian old folks home. It calls into question the very definitions of reason and rationale. Ridicule should

“explode the patterning which narrows down and shrinks our imaginative potential. What distinguishes a painting from wallpaper, or literature from stock market reports, is the tearing and ripping apart of old forms and structures to create new perceptions which refresh life itself. All art attempts to rid life of banality; to expunge the habituation effect whose cause is ‘daily living’” [33].

Ideally, a chain reaction would be initiated, one which would incite not a riot per se, but just a virus of ridicule that spreads with relentless velocity, turning the tables of power against those who exert it unnecessarily. An alter-ego would be this: a self-organizing web of nomadic, derisive machines temporarily kicking the ladder out from underneath a structure of power. Also ideally, a point would be reached where the invisibility of power is no longer a factor and no wall is high enough to stop the flow of the derisive machine. Ridicule could thus be a shot in the arm for the oppressed, an anchor with which to form more links in the chain of transgression.

Nevertheless, ridicule, by its very nature, treads in shark-infested waters. Its vulnerability outweighs its creative potential, and its risky behavior is the kind that involves many unwilling participants in the process. Simply put, it is exactly this risk that makes ridicule intriguing as a phenomena. James Der Derian, in his *Antidiplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed and War*, discusses the intertextual relationships among the “factive” practices of modern day espionage, the “fictive” literature of spy novels, and the eventual effect on the public. He suggests that what intrigues us about spies is their guile and daring behavior in the face of death:

We are repelled and attracted by the liberty, if not the license, of the spy to kill and quite likely be killed. How much daring is invested in each death, not the body count, is what makes a spy novel appealing. The willingness and manner of facing death is what simultaneously separates the spy from the reader and makes an imaginative identification with the spy all the more desirable...How one becomes dominant (“recognized”) and the other subordinate (“recognizing”) is determined by the individual's willingness to risk death in the struggle for recognition, thereby achieving autonomy from others [34].

Intrigue is a powerful emotion, and its manipulation is a passport to the disruption of and resistance to a dominating structure of power. Like espionage, ridicule is effective because of its intrigue—it simultaneously alienates and fascinates. If we substitute the willingness of the ridiculer instead of the spy in the above quote, it all becomes readily apparent:

We are repelled and attracted by the liberty, if not the license, of the ridiculer to ridicule and quite likely be ridiculed. How much daring is invested in each act of ridicule, not the body count, is what makes the plight of the ridiculer appealing. The willingness and manner of facing death is what simultaneously separates the ridiculer from the observer and makes an imaginative identification with the ridiculer all the more desirable...How one becomes dominant ("recognized") and the other subordinate ("recognizing") is determined by the individual's willingness to risk death in the struggle for recognition, thereby achieving *autonomy* from others.

To remain effective and fresh, however, ridicule must not degenerate into meaningless attacks and cliché humiliation, like the tactics of the State. To avoid being swallowed by the omnipresence of power, it must constantly recycle itself anew and manifest itself in a creative, stimulating, poetic fashion—for what attempts to assassinate can easily be caught in a frame for suicide.

The new invisibility of power is not as invincible as one might assume. Just as taboos are transgressed and reinforced simultaneously, ridicule can be a strategy for creatively disrupting and circumventing power without vainly advocating for its complete overthrow. The process of ridicule and sacramental transgression via sexual and intoxicated experience can be coordinated. Ridicule is a gamble, yet this is exactly what makes it attractive and intriguing as a transgression.

However, unlike those transgressions previously mentioned, a unified goal is nowhere on the horizon—ridicule just unlocks the toolbox. When questioned regarding his methods for dealing with similar predicaments, Michel Foucault replied: "I would like to produce some effects of truth which might be used for a possible battle, to be waged by those who wish to wage it, in forms yet to be found and in organizations yet to be defined" [35].

So what do we have here, besides a myriad of ideas that somehow share a common thread or two? Ideally, if the situation is maximized for optimum performance, then the result might resemble Christopher Langton's description of emergent behavior in non-linear, dynamic systems [36]:

Fig. 1

Cairo started laughing when she saw this. This was the only part of the entire article that she found to be genuinely humorous. She just wanted to throw the essay at him and say, “Yeah, you wish!!” Maybe this was the part that was supposed to be ridiculous. Maybe that *was* the whole point. Mills just came up with a twisted, ridiculous amalgam of ideas and that was the purpose. There was obviously no beginning or end, it was all middle. There was an assemblance of an introduction, but it hadn’t seemed like a

traditional introduction. Shaking her head and smiling, she forced herself through the final pages of the essay:

The smaller circles at the 'bottom' represent all the ideas and theories previously discussed here, i.e., nomadic thought, the tactics of everyday life, espionage, unification of sex and religion, baffling the unworthy, etc. From the interaction and relationship of these individual component ideas emerges a global entity of ridicule that could not have been anticipated from what is known about each of the individual ideas. The emergent entity, in turn, feeds back to influence the individual parts that produced it (The practice of ridicule feeds back to further enhance the power of the nomad, etc.). These are primary characteristics of all complex, self-organizing systems: the emergent whole is greater than the sum of its parts and cannot be predicted from what is known about the individual components. The process is bottom-up and synthetic, as opposed to one that is top-down and hierarchical. Ridicule is the emergent property that arises from the chaotic interaction between the common threads of the individual ideas. The murky area where this property begins to appear has come to be known as 'the edge of chaos' [37], and similar processes, for the last decade, have all been lumped together and hurled at us under the banner of 'chaos theory.'

It is precisely this 'connectionist' approach that has been blurring the orthodox distinctions between several previously separated disciplines. As a theory, connectionism originated from Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an alternate approach to the usual top-down form of AI where intelligence is 'taught' and delineated in a hierarchical form. Connectionism takes the opposite approach, positing intelligence as a bottom-up process, learning and adapting as it goes:

Intelligence cannot be taught: it is instead something that has to be learned...It feels its way forward, making its own way, rather than tracing an existing route. What is now described as an

'order-emerging-out-of-massive-connections' approach defines intelligence as an exploratory process, which learns and learns to learn for itself...[Intelligence] evolves as an emergent process, engineering itself from the bottom-up [38].

Thus, all distinctions between teaching and learning, between knowledge and intelligence, are eradicated.

This essay takes its cues from exactly such a connectionist approach: in this instance, a complex web of theories and concepts interact and overlap in a self-organizing system that collapses the boundary between the description and contextualization of ridicule and the actual practice of ridicule itself. Theory and action and ridicule are blurred, all being enveloped in a bottom-up, self-organizing complex system with ridicule as the emergent global entity greater than the sum of the smaller theories, ideas, concepts, and parts. The process of emergence, the process of ridicule and the process of the coming together of the essay that describes them are perhaps one and the same. This chapter, the research, the theory, the disruption of power structures, the spiritual transgression, and the ridicule are one entity, emerging from several smaller, mutually interacting and previously separated components. In sum, this research has been a self-organizing system, with ridicule as the emergent order from the chaos of collapsing disciplinary boundaries. Since emergent behavior in complex systems such as these exhibit characteristics that cannot be predicted by looking at any of the initial, individual parts, just looking at one particular idea at the onset, whether it be nomad thought, sex magick, or espionage, would have told us nothing about ridicule as the emergent property.

In *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines*, Kevin Kelly says of connectionism: "That anything at all emerges from a field of lowly connections is startling...What kind of magic happens when you connect everything to everything? One minute you have a mob of simple individuals, the next, after connection, you have useful, emergent order" [39]. Kelly calls it startling. I call it

ridiculous.

There the article ended. Although Cairo was impressed by the sudden trap door of the last sentence, she was confused more than ever and her thoughts were racing. Was she supposed to be baffled and thus unworthy like the one particular passage mentioned? Did the article actually say anything at all? There was so much information crammed into thing that it was hard to tell. Obviously, Mills had done all the research and the citations were accurate, but what was he trying to say? She enjoyed the article immensely, but she thought that it tried to do too much, resulting in a very confused presentation.

Mills had just come back into the room with some more beers and immediately scoped out Cairo to see if she had finished reading it. She turned around instantly and their eyes met with savage grace. He had a mesmerizing stare that left her in a momentary trance.

“Well?” Mills paused for a few seconds and Cairo’s eyes were locked on his. “Did you finish reading it? What did you think?”

“Think about what?” she replied, as if still in the trance.

“The article. Did you have time to read it?”

“Oh yeah,” she moved her eyes away and avoided his. “Well, most of it is completely over my head. I can’t tell what you’re trying to say.”

“It’s good for you.” He developed a diabolical grin and laughed unlike any laugh Cairo had ever heard. Something about him completely fired her curiosity.

“Well,” she stuttered, “Um, what journal did this get published in?”

“A stupid magazine called *Hyperbole*.”

“Hyperbole? I’ve never heard of it. Is it a literary magazine?”

“I guess you could call it a literary magazine. They ended up rewriting most of it anyway.”

“So it’s not really a research paper.”

“Well, you could call it a research paper if you want to, but it doesn’t really set out to prove any one particular thing. I mean, it doesn’t prove any particular point, it doesn’t stick to one specialization. It meanders all over the place. Think of it as a short story written in the format of a research paper.”

“A short story in the format of a research paper?” A look of confusion covered her face. “Well, that’s fine, I guess, but those qualities don’t make a good short story either. The only criticism I would have, well let’s see, how do I say this...” After pausing for a few seconds, her tone was much more deliberate and it seemed like she was reciting from memory: “There’s too much recitative digression into quasi-authoritative theory.”

Mills’ response was to repeat exactly the same words as a way of sarcastically expressing disbelief and perplexity at what was said: “There’s too much recitative digression into quasi-authoritative theory.” He looked irritated and amused at the same time. “That’s a good one. Where did that one come from?”

“I submitted an article of mine to *Leonardo* a few years back and that was one of the criticisms they sent back.”

Mills found that to be hysterical. While laughing, he took off his glasses, wiped them with his shirt, rubbed his eyes, and put the glasses back on. “See! There’s nothing wrong

with digression. It's good for you. It's the most self-satisfying way to do anything." He continued to laugh.

"Yeah, but you have to think about the reader. I like the essay—don't get me wrong—the selection of ideas is pretty cool. But, if your writing wanders all over the place, the reader will have a hard time understanding it."

"Sure, but if there are enough connections between everything, then you can make it work. Think of it as a free-flowing, stream of consciousness type of thing. A totally different concept of time and space."

At that, Cairo rolled her eyes as sarcastically as she knew how to do. "You're just making all this up. Time and space. Yeah, right."

"Forget I said that. Anyway, like I said before, the whole thing is about ridiculing the concept of specialization. Look at it like a jack-of-all-trades, expert-in-none type of philosophy."

"That's exactly what it is. But that's not good, though." Cairo finished her beer and Mills downed another shot. He systematically placed the glass back down on the table. His beer was halfway done.

"What do you mean that's not good?" Mills sounded a little bent of out shape and he began to fiddle with one of the rings on his left hand, repeatedly taking it off and putting it back on again.

"Well, think about it. If you want your work to be marketable, then people have to understand it. I mean, people have to experience it and at least feel that they get it. You can't do that by talking about everything at the same time. That's what your essay does.

It tries to do everything simultaneously and results in nothing but confusion. You should make it more focused.”

Mills curled his lip like a child trying not to listen to someone scolding him.

“Focused, huh? Well, that’s exactly what I’m not trying to do.”

“There’s a lot of great stuff in there. You just have to focus it. The whole part about transgressive ridicule in cyberspace, for example. Now, *that* could be an interesting article. Maybe you should focus in on just that aspect instead of digressing into Zen Buddhist humor or Zuni Indian clowns, or whatever. Imagine if I, a journalist, interviewed someone and we just rambled on randomly. You wouldn’t be able to make it through half of the article before giving up. Something has to be done to keep the reader’s attention.

“And another thing. It’s really, really self-indulgent. You make a big deal about these digressions, but it’s obvious that the digressions are just done for your own interest and you’re not thinking about how the reader is going to perceive it. Nothing personal, these are just basic criticisms.”

Mills remained silent—attentive, but silent.

“The only other criticism I would have is that all through the article, there are times when you change syntax in the middle of the sentence.”

“Look, if I wanted to listen to an English teacher, I would go back to campus and hang out in the English Department.”

“You asked me for my opinion.” She knew that Mills knew she was right.

Mills looked really irritated. He wasn’t used to dealing with such blatant fault-

finding. He poured another shot for himself and slammed what was left of his beer. Caps came off of the next two beers and Cairo actually started proving herself. She was keeping up with Mills. How, she didn't know.

"Cairo," Mills plodded, "you've missed the boat. Think of it as a ridicule of research. You know, not sticking with one topic and meandering through all sorts of stuff."

"Sure. I don't know what you intended with this one particular paper, but you can't do *everything*. In fact, if you think about it, that's the way research always goes. Something different always happens in the end. No one ends up doing what they started out trying to do. I mean, research *is* a wandering thing. Scientists go through the same exact process. You haven't done anything out of the ordinary whatsoever. You haven't challenged any paradigm at all."

"I'm not *trying* to challenge any paradigms!" Mills looked really upset and he started shifting in his chair. His hands were flat on the table. "The deal is just to highlight the vulnerability of any absolutist or purist idea. By the way, what ordinary research life are *you* talking about? What do you know about paradigms?" He was starting to slur his words.

"I mean that researchers always end up on a different path from what they started out on. Usually they come across a particular reference that has nothing to do with what they're working on, but ends up changing the entire course of their work. It happens all the time."

"Oh I know *that*. I'm not trying to do everything, I'm just fighting for the right to be a mutt. I can't specialize in one area. I refuse to do it." He folded his arms tightly against

his chest.

While glancing down at the floor, Cairo again noticed the painted pink fish. One of them in particular was still staring right at her breasts and devilishly smiling, as if he could see through her blouse. He looked like a pubescent teenage boy who had just discovered girls for the first time.

Shaking off the uncomfortable feelings regarding the fish, Cairo looked back up at Mills and resumed her plight of criticism. Instead of going after him, she decided to butter him up instead. “Well, all things aside, you actually have done a great job with the essay. I mean, it seems like you’ve got a pretty good grasp on art theory and critical theory and how they overlap. It’s hard for me to say any more than that. I don’t really know anything about any of that stuff. The stuff about those guys, what were their names, ah—yeah, Deleuze and Guattari—that’s pretty interesting.”

Interesting was a word that you used when you have absolutely no opinion, Mills told her.

“I’m sorry. Look, you asked me to read it, so I read it. Fine. The stuff about those two philosophers. I’m into it. I’m not lying.”

Mills could only reply by sarcastically raising his voice, “Well! I’m glad you like *that!*”

“Listen, I’m just trying to give you a complement here.”

“Thanks. I could use more complements. I don’t get those from anybody anymore.”

“However...” As soon as Cairo belted out that word, Mills’ smile flip-flopped.

“However, Mills, if you want to publish it, you’ve got to tailor it for whoever you’re

sending it to. If you don't, you'll end up getting nowhere. Trust me. When I was a freelance journalist before I got a job at the Athena Daily, I would get rejected all the time. It nearly made me give up. I would sit around and cry over every rejection letter."

"Yeah, you're probably right. My students have told me almost the exact same thing. They say if I just stick with the same subject for more than one semester, then I'd be dangerous."

"See? I can tell that you've got some soul behind that rebel exterior." Strangely, Mills seemed comforted by this last exchange. His muscles began to relax a little. Cairo said, "There's nothing wrong with being a rebel. You should just take that energy and channel it towards something else." She leaned back in the chair a little. Since she was seated far enough away from the edge of the table, Mills was able to glance at her miniskirt. He watched it creep higher ever so slightly as she crossed her legs.

Cairo remembered her boss telling her that she was good at dragging information out of men. This must have been what he meant. Now, she sensed that Mills was comforted by her remarks. He felt more at ease and Cairo was beginning to finally see what was behind the brick-wall façade he portrayed to the public. Unfortunately, the comfort was only short-lived at best, as Mills would leap frog in and out of what Cairo referred to as his 'rebel exterior.'

Her voice had that soothing, psychoanalysis tone to it. "Mills, you sent us a press release. In fact, you've sent us dozens. I came here to see this machine called the ridiculometer. I read your essay, now let's go see the machine." She inched the chair closer to the table and folded her hands down on top of it.

His elbows were on the table as well, enabling him to rest his chin on the palms of his hands. Mills began to fantasize about Cairo on the beach at San Gregorio, 45 miles west of San Jose. She was sitting on a wooden picnic table by the rusty barbecues, wearing a black Calvin Klein tank top, a turquoise bikini bottom, and her hair was blowing in the wind.

“O.K. I read the essay, now let’s go see the machine.”

Mills threw his hands up in the air sarcastically and irrationally. “Alright. Fine. Let’s go.” He stood up, theatrically grabbed the article off the table, rolled it up, and shoved it in the back pocket of his jeans. Before moving towards the door, he took a final swig from the whiskey bottle. Both of them heard the siren of a police car streaking down 8th Street outside.

Cairo got up and grabbed her raincoat. Before following Mills out the door, she took one last look at the painted fish on the floor. They were no longer looking at her chest. In fact, each one had his eyes closed and looked sad. Each one looked like he was about to cry. Their morose features made Cairo stop and think. *Now that’s strange. As soon as Mills gets upset, the fish stop looking at me. What is going on here?*

They left Mills’ room in the opposite direction from which they entered. He was leading the way and Cairo followed him down the dark hallway. An aroma of moldy, rotting wood dominated the corridor. They turned the corner and came to a door which apparently led outside onto a landing. Mills fumbled with the doorknob and eventually convinced it to turn. The opening of the door produced another creak like something from a horror movie. It was as if the door hadn’t been opened in years. They went

outside onto the brown, wooden landing.

The landing led to yet another wooden staircase that followed the outside of the house and ended down on the ground at the edge of the backyard. These stairs creaked and cracked just like their counterparts on the inside of the house.

When they reached the ground, Cairo gave the backyard the once-over. Through the four-foot tall weeds, the broken washing machines, and the piles of rusty car parts, she managed to spot the doorway to what was obviously a very large warehouse. The building had a wooden exterior that hadn't been painted in probably a decade. Ivy covered most of the front of it, and from what Cairo could see, the entire building was covered with moss, gunk, and who knows what else. A few stray cats looked back at her from the rooftop. In the far corner of the yard, two tall palm trees reached up to the sky and they gradually moved in the breeze. Evidently, hordes of pigeons made their homes in the palm trees, as a layer of droppings covered the ground directly underneath.

"This is a huge backyard."

"Yeah," Mills answered, "I lucked out on this place. It's huge and the amount of storage space is unlimited. It's just...unlimited"

"You know, you really don't need to have all of this junk. What are you going to do with it all?"

Mills ignored the question and headed for the warehouse. Cairo followed him as they tromped through the junk that was strewn about the yard. He had one of those motion lights on the back of the house and luckily it kicked on in the nick of time, enabling them to actually see where they were going. They stepped over things, around things, and

between things.

Mills reached back and tried to grab her hand in order to help himself lead the way, but Cairo avoided the attempt. He moved his hand in the air a few times, and after realizing her evasion, he stopped. They approached the door of the warehouse ever so clumsily.

* * *

Nairobi the fish just couldn't take it anymore. The grimy beige couch in Mills' warehouse was unbearably difficult to sleep on. She would constantly toss and turn, over and back, and side to side. Why would an orange-red fish like Nairobi even deal with the harsh uncertainties involved with crashing on Mills' lice infested sofa? Easy. Her personality had no longer allowed her to exist freely within the constrained aquatic milieu that she had grown up in. Mills' fish tank was as rotten and sedentary of a place as a place could get. Fish had to be fish. Guppies had to be guppies. Water had to be water.

Always antagonistic towards the fish tank environment, Nairobi made her daily routine one of rebellion. Mills never cleaned the filter out, so every single day she would have to swim through the same filthy old water and she hated this. Plus, the heater Mills had bought for the tank kept the water much too hot and a great deal of the oxygen had escaped, making it difficult for Nairobi to breathe.

In addition to this, every day she would have to look at the same boring old coral fixtures in the tank and this irritated her. She felt hemmed in, trapped, hindered. She had

nowhere to go. Every day she would have to look down at the same greyish-brown gravel on the bottom of the tank and this bugged her as well. Since the rest of the fish in the tank were dead, Nairobi spent each and every day alone.

The plants loved the fact that bodies of decomposing fish were in the water, but to Nairobi, it was a miserable environment to live in. She felt like she needed to escape and she was fed up. It was only a matter of time before Nairobi was allowed to be something else, thus releasing her from such destructive and non-creative circumstances.

Originally, she had grown up as a species of armored catfish, the *Corydoras aeneus*, in the Rio Negro area of Brazil. There, she was caught and placed in a huge plastic receptacle that had some gadget attached to it. This gadget was designed to constantly circulate the water in the container so the fish can live properly during transport. Nairobi couldn't decide which she hated more: being in that container, on that covered boat, travelling down that river in Brazil, or being transferred to that plastic bag and being flown on an airplane to San Francisco. Now, after all that travelling and winding up in Mills' aquarium, Nairobi had come to the conclusion that for her entire life, she had been housed in containers. For her entire life, she had been hemmed in, unable to do what she wanted to do. Her desires had been stifled from day one.

Now, due to circumstances beyond her knowledge, she had been blessed with the cosmetic attributes of a strange fish found off the coast of Thailand, one called a Sillago Trumpeter Sillago. That being bizarre enough, she was also given the strengths to fly around Mills' warehouse at will. She loved it. She could fly through the air of Mills' warehouse and oversee any of the goings-on. Better still, she could talk. She could explain her views on

any subject, any discipline, any science, any culture, any philosophy, any art, any craft, any cuisine, any sports team, any political situation, or any religion.

Even though Mills' couch was a pain to sleep on, it was better than having to float there immersed in a foul, nasty fish tank all night. So there lay Nairobi, drowned in deep sleep and dreaming about everything: real fish erotica, real conversations with humans, and above all, a chance to prove herself as smart as the rest of 'em. She knew she could do it.

The sound of the door opening and the sound of Mills and Cairo bursting into the warehouse temporarily interrupted Nairobi's rest. She opened her eyes and rubbed them with her pectoral fins. Slowly turning her head, Nairobi watched Mills and Cairo. Mills seemed a little drunk and Cairo was looking around the warehouse as if she couldn't believe her eyes. Nairobi closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

* * *

"Wow, you've certainly got a collection of unusual things here." Cairo looked at the swamp of junk covering the floor. Through the junk, a small path had been formed—a trail just wide enough for one person to tromp along.

"Yeah," Mills answered her, "and I'm proud of it."

Cairo was still looking around the shop, trying to sink it all in. To the left, just at the inside of the door, she noticed the meager kitchen setup. There was a small beige cupboard, a tiny stainless sink, and about two feet of faded white counter space. On this

counter space sat a few old pieces of pizza, a bunch of tools, nuts, bolts, dirty coffee cups, and a rolled up magazine. The bottom hinge of the cupboard door was broken, allowing the door to hang freely from the top hinge. Inside the cupboard, a few up-turned pint glasses sat on one of the shelves. An inch layer of dust covered the scene.

One particular coffee cup caught her eye: a purple one that said *Trader Joe's French Roast*. Above the letters, the cup was graced by a picture of a french café, probably circa 1920. She picked it up and looked at it. "This is cool," she said, as if she hadn't expected to think anything in the shop was cool. Mills didn't answer.

Placing the cup back down, she then focused her attention on the opposite side of the shop. There, a large brown workbench was bolted to the wall. It was covered with junk: scrap electronics and computer parts, screws and nuts, tools, old pieces of burritos, small trays, and lots of spider webs.

The only window in the place was right above the workbench. Cairo looked at the dirty glass and noticed the splotches of paint on the outside of it. Obviously, whoever had last painted the outside of the warehouse hadn't blocked off the window, and some of the paint had scattered across it. The inside of the window was covered with more spider webs and looked like it hadn't been opened in years.

Next to the workbench, a beat-up mahogany dresser gracefully stood, about six inches from the wall. Its three drawers were broken and patches of duct tape covered all of them. The top drawer was halfway open, revealing piles of paperwork and some small rusty motors that were inside.

Looking past the dresser, Cairo laid her eyes on the mangy beige couch. Nairobi was

stretched out across the cushions and seemed to be sleeping soundly. Her skin was an unusual color: the brightest and most obnoxious hue of deep orange. Every few seconds the sleeping denizen of the deep would toss and turn violently, as if she was having a nightmare. This activity was knocking the couch into the wall and the clunking sound echoed throughout the warehouse.

“That’s the talking fish you were talking about?”

“That’s her. Wake her up if you want.”

“Oh, I don’t want to do that. Come on.”

“Go ahead. Wake her up.”

“I’m not that kind of person. I don’t just go and wake people up.”

“She’s not people. She’s a fish.” He started chuckling to himself.

“Maybe later. Where’s the machine?”

“What?”

“The machine.”

“Oh yeah. Over here.” He led her through the piles of junk on the floor. They came to a large metal rack that bisected the entire warehouse. Its shelves were stocked with a variety of broken car parts, computer accessories, and loads of other things that Cairo couldn’t identify. Right in front of the rack sat a card table and two chairs, similar to the set Mills had in his room. “It’s behind, over here.” He continued around the table and the rack. Cairo followed. There on the floor, propped up on several broken pallets, sat what only could have been the ridiculometer.

The machine, or whatever Mills was calling it, was the most unusual and ridiculous

metal ramshackle conglomeration of balderdash that Cairo had ever laid eyes upon.

The frame of the apparatus resembled an empty shell of a blue VW Bug with all the rounded edges squared off into corners. The material looked like fabricated steel and pieces were obviously riveted to each other in a shoddy fashion, as the whole thing seemed to be on the verge of popping apart. Cairo walked a little closer to it and stood on her toes to see a jungle gym of tubes, wires, rollers, and plastic housings that burst forth from where the equivalent of the car hood would usually be. Through the jungle gym, a large square metal duct, about two feet across, projected out from the front of the whole thing. This greenish-grey duct ran at about a thirty-five degree angle to the floor, and it looked like an air conditioning vent that James Bond would crawl through in order to escape a flaming building.

The opening at the end of the duct was covered by another strange plastic housing that looked like a gigantic laser printer. This part was bolted to the bottom of the ridiculometer by four long skinny pink tubes that ran from the plastic housing to the base of the machine.

An object resembling a gigantic orange ash-tray, nearly ten feet in diameter, sat on top of the apparatus. The ashtray's circumference consisted of a round circle of orange tubes, the bottoms of which originated at the top of the blue metal presence of the ridiculometer. These four inch wide tubes curved outward from their bases, juttied out a bit, and then curved back inwards to form the outline of the ashtray-looking device. Even more wires, cables and what looked like sprinkler tubing popped up from the middle of the ashtray.

A large pink fiberglass tube ran from somewhere in the middle of the whole mess to the outside of the machine and then down to the floor, where it curled back underneath. She imagined that someone, in order to fabricate this tube, had taken insulation and rolled it into a cylinder.

Cairo sauntered around the back of the machine, which was about a foot from the wall of the warehouse. At the rear, Cairo noticed a mass of tangled wires, some skinny, some nearly two inches in diameter, that came from inside the machine and ran around the other side. She couldn't see where they led.

In the middle of the back of the machine, she gazed at what looked like a nineteen twenties clothing ringer. Two long rollers, on top of each other and supported by metal beams, were attached to the conglomeration of bars that comprised the back of the machine.

Mills was motionless and smiling. "You seem intrigued," he said.

"Well, it's definitely a ridiculometer." Cairo stepped over the mass of wires and followed them around to the other side of the machine. There, she laid her eyes upon what looked like an old computer monitor. It was grey, dirty, and parts of it were covered with duct tape. The monitor sat gracefully on an old kindergarten classroom desk, the kind of which has a seat attached to it. The back of the beige seat was cracked and falling apart. A computer keyboard sat on the desk in front of the monitor. Four or five of its keys were missing.

One cable led from the monitor to a small blue box on the floor. The material for the box must have come from the same metal scrapyards as that of the ridiculometer. Like the

monitor, the box was nearly covered with duct tape. The mass of wires and cabling ran from the box to the back of the machine.

Cairo circled back around to the front of the monitor, and after looking at the monochrome display, she sauntered back over to where Mills was standing. She looked up at him with a frustrated expression. Mills started laughing hysterically.

“What. What’s so funny?” she asked.

“You know those little circles of paper that are created whenever you use a hole-puncher?”

“What?” The abrupt change of subject caught her off guard.

“You know. Those little paper circle remnants that fall out of the hole-puncher whenever you use it?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Why are you asking me this?”

“Well, when I was in grade school I used to collect those little circles of paper. I had a huge box of them in my desk and it used to infuriate my teacher. One day, I spilled all of them all over the floor and made a huge mess. When you just walked back over here and gave me that look, it was the same exact look my teacher gave me when she saw the mess.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know. You just reminded me of her when you gave me that look just now. That’s it.”

Cairo shook her head as she looked down at the floor. She grabbed the top of her hair with her hands and then looked up. “Forget that. I want to know how this machine

works. That's why you sent us the press release, isn't it?"

"Sure. But I can't really tell you the logistics of the whole thing. I mean, the computer runs most of it, but parts of it run by themselves." He looked off in the distance behind her.

"So you won't even tell me how it works?"

"What's that? Oh, well, it's hard to explain. I think it's grown completely out of my control at this point. I began by ripping off a few electronic encyclopedias and transferring the information in."

"What do you mean? I don't get it." Cairo's moved her hands to her hips and then turned to look at the orange ashtray-looking contraption on the top of the ridiculometer.

"It began as a simple text-to-speech gadget that was broken. Throw in a bunch of malfunctioning robotic sensor machinery and there you have it. There's an actual robot built into the thing, but it's evolved in ways that even I don't understand. I'm totally baffled. Now, instead of just making its ridiculous analysis, it actually transforms preexisting things into ridiculous things."

"Meaning what? I still don't get it." She was shaking her head and her hands were now curled, facing up in the air. "How does it *create* a fish that can talk?"

"It didn't create a new fish per se, it just transformed a fish that was already in the aquarium. Actually, Naïboi is probably much better off now that she's out of the fish tank. I never take care of the tank anyway."

Cairo said nothing and walked closer to the machine. Mills looked at her rear-end. Slowly, she circled around to the back of the ridiculometer and then returned to the front.

Lodged in the blue metal housing at the front of the unit was a transparent beige and grey plastic feed tray that looked exactly like the lift-up top of a Xerox machine. Cairo immediately likened it to the broken copy machine in the offices of the Athena Daily.

When she turned back around and asked him about the feed tray, Mills answered, “That’s where you insert the text. It slides in, page by page, and then it gets sent to part of the machine that performs the text-to-speech conversion. Those controls are all in the software and it doesn’t get displayed anywhere, so you can’t really see it. After that, anything can happen. It can spit the text back out. Changed or unchanged. Or it can make noises. Or it can make flowers grow out of the walls. Anything you can imagine. Sometimes the result is crazy, sometimes it’s not interesting at all. It’s completely out of control.”

“Out of control? You mean you don’t know what it’s going to do?”

“Well, I have ideas. Like I said, it started out as being a simple analytical thing. But I designed it in such a way that it learns from its previous endeavors. Every time that I put it to use, it gets crazier and crazier. It’s almost as if it gets more ridiculous each time.” His head suddenly twitched, as if a light bulb had magically appeared above him. “Yeah—that’s it. It’s artificially ridiculous. I’m trying to create a machine that can be just as ridiculous as human beings are.”

“Oh Jesus.” Cairo didn’t know what to say next. This was unlike anything she had ever seen.

“Any more questions?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe I’ll save the questions for after we actually see it work.”

She smiled at him.

“Oh yeah.” Mills fumbled for a second and then grabbed the rolled up article from his back pocket. After walking up to the front of the machine, he made an attempt to straighten out the papers a little bit. They had been rolled up and jammed in his pocket for a few minutes now and would be difficult to send through the feed tray.

Mills found the closest horizontal flat surface—the top of the plastic feed tray—and sat the edges of the papers down on it. He straightened them out and slid them into the tray.

“O.K.,” he said, as if he was on stage. “Here we go.”

He then immediately strode over to the kindergarten desk and sat down. His hands began typing furiously on the computer keyboard. He hunched over it like a mad scientist.

Cairo moved closer, but still couldn’t read what was on the small monitor. From what little she could see from over his shoulder, it looked like computer programming.

“What are you typing?” She was right behind him, so close that his erratic breathing was loud enough to keep her attention.

“This is the main controls of the machine. I have to write a different shell script every time I use it. It’s a long story. It’s what Salman Rushdie would call the P2R2E.”

“The P2R2E.”

“Yeah.” He turned around to look up at her. “The Process Too Ridiculous To Explain.”

“So you ask me to come over here and now you’re not even going to tell me how it works?”

“Take a long hard look at the whole thing. The machine, I mean.”

She did. It looked ridiculous. “Well, I feel a little disappointed here. If you...”

Mills interrupted her, “Hey. I’m completely baffled at the whole thing myself. I have absolutely no idea how it works. Seriously. I’m completely baffled.” He turned back around and started typing again.

Cairo looked over his shoulder at the monitor. She wanted to ask him about the indents, the asterisks, and all the arithmetical expressions that she saw on the screen, but she chickened out and remained silent.

Mills sat up straight and said, “Done.” He theatrically lifted his right hand up and then brought it crashing down on the enter key. Spinning around in the chair so he was facing the ridiculometer with his arm on the desk by the keyboard, he beamed with more excitement than ever.

After a few seconds, the ridiculometer roared to life with a clamor that lurked somewhere between a pack of lions and a bulldozer. Mills got up and moved right next to Cairo. They both stood at attention and focused their eyes on the machine as it vibrated, rocked, and shuddered. The papers gradually slid, one by one, into the tray and disappeared.

The lighting in the room began to dim slightly and the fiberglass tube on the outside of the ridiculometer began to smoke a little. Nairobi woke up and started shifting on the couch. Cairo began to get uncomfortable. A rank smell gradually began to exude from the machine; an odor similar to moldy clothing that had been sitting in a moist closet for three years.

Nearly three minutes went by before the racket from the machine died down a little, enabling Mills and Cairo to hear a clankety-clank sound from the sink. They both walked away from the ridiculometer, around the metal rack, and over towards the kitchen counter. Several of the plates in the sink were rattling and moving all by themselves. It was like Poltergeist.

Mills and Cairo turned to look at Nairobi, who had managed to sit up. The fish looked like she was irritated. The clamor of the machine came back and the lights dimmed even more, as if the electrical power from the machine was draining them out.

“Damn,” Mills said, “That’s what I get for putting everything on the same circuit.”

“What do you mean?”

Mills didn’t answer her. Instead, he grabbed her hand, led her through the mess that was his warehouse, and back to the machine. Amazingly, she didn’t let go of his hand.

The fiberglass-covered tube was smoking even more, and the smoke was starting to fill the air up by the ceiling. Cairo hated smoke and she was starting to get worried. She said, “Can’t you open the window?” She let go of his hand.

Mills ignored her. He stood there, like a child in wonderment, gazing at the ridiculometer.

Even though the smoke wasn’t that bad, Cairo covered her mouth and nose with her hand. She tapped him on the shoulder with her other hand. When Mills turned towards her, Cairo took her hand off her mouth and asked him again, “Can you please open the window or turn it off or something?”

Mills had to raise his voice, since the clamor of the ridiculometer prevented the

normal volume of conversation. “What did you say?”

Cairo didn’t like raising her voice, but the scenario provided no other alternative. She replied, “This is a very expensive blouse I’m wearing. The smoke will ruin it. Can’t you open the window?”

Mills told her that he’d be glad to open the window and he walked back to the workbench. The clamor of the ridiculometer continued and its audio collage sounded like scraping metal, gears, and rolling pins. Cairo fetched a tissue out of her purse and wiped the sweat off her brow.

Upon arriving at the workbench, Mills reached above it and turned the crank that opened the window. Dust, dirt, and cobwebs fell to the ground outside as the window opened. A chilly breeze swirled in and within seconds, the place began to ventilate.

While Mills was engaged in this process, Cairo migrated to the kindergarten desk and bent over to look at the small monitor. The chair was filthy and she didn’t want to sit in it, so she leaned over it and gazed at the monochrome display. The same lines of text constantly scrolled down the screen, over and over again:

```
Line 14053  Illegal string error:
if [ ${ input % 50 } -eq 0 ] && \
  ([ $source = "ridiculous" ] || [ $source = "preposterous" ])
then
  newsource=${ newsource -1 }
  -----^
```

Mills came back from the workbench just as the machine began to settle down a little. Cairo was still bending over and looking at the monitor. Mills couldn’t help but stare at her rear-end. The sonic foundry of the ridiculometer began to cease and he blurted to her,

“Those errors are supposed to be there.”

Cairo, caught off guard by Mills, abruptly turned around like a male child caught looking in the girls’ bathroom. She nearly slipped and had to grab the top of the kindergarten chair to maintain balance. Her purse slipped off her shoulder and fell to the floor. She blushed and looked embarrassed. “Whoa, you scared me.” She breathed heavily and placed her hand on her chest.

“Sorry.”

The amplitude of the machine’s clamor had decreased substantially and Mills was able to continue softly with an irreverent smirk: “I opened the window, so your blouse oughta be okay for a while.”

She giggled and bent down to pick her purse up. “Thanks.” The smile on Cairo’s face was genuine and it reached to her ears. For the first time all evening, Mills had made her laugh—truly. He lifted his shoulders, moved his head lower, and tried to gaze into her eyes, but she avoided him.

At this moment in time, Mills found her to be more attractive than ever, but he stuck with the charade and pointed out to her that the ridiculometer had given up for the evening. He made a comparison to an old auto with its timing way off. Cairo didn’t get it. Mills dumped a truckload of technical, computer, and mechanical terms at her, and Cairo stood there, buried by it all. Still trying to maintain an assemblance of pride, she said, “OK, what’s the big deal with this machine?”

Mills just stood there, listening. A look of disappointment gradually appeared on his face. On the monochrome monitor screen, the environment had bounced back to a shell

prompt. Since the machine had become completely silent, Mills had to come up with an explanation. He told her that a quirk in the electronics had broken the thing down and it had failed.

A cloak of silence covered the warehouse. Cairo could hear the crickets outside. Was this it? Was this the whole story? Did everything come down to a broken machine, one that didn't live up to its promises?

Then, as if the machine had answered her thoughts, a squeezing, rolling sound came from the back of the ridiculometer. The timbre was exactly that of a piece of paper squirting out of a laser printer. Mills' eyes opened wide, like he knew exactly what the sound meant.

"That's it."

"What's it?" Cairo answered.

"That's the back paper tray. I think finally it's finally produced something."

With a seductive blink of the eyes, she looked at him and said, "Let's see."

They both raced to the back of the ridiculometer, nearly falling over in the process. Mills got there first and stretched out his hand to grab the document. He held it up in front of his face.

While standing behind him, Cairo put her hands on his back and looked around his shoulder at the piece of paper. Both of them were struck with devastating bewilderment upon gazing at the document. The page looked like it was printed out from a website on tropical fish, but with a non-translated foreign character set of some sort:

They had stared at the document for nearly a minute before Cairo managed to ask,

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m not sure.” Mills clumsily ran his left hand through his locks of hair while holding the paper with his right hand. “It’s obviously from a web page, but the only part that’s in English is here.” He pointed at the words, ‘Sillago Trumpeter Sillage.’

Cairo was still behind him. She said, “What the hell is a Sillago Trumpeter Sillage? Why is it in all those weird characters?”

“It’s a web page that’s in Japanese. You can’t view it on an American computer. You need to have a Japanese operating system. If you don’t, the encoded characters will show up as garbage like this.” He circled his index finger in the air, in front of the page.

“Is a Sillago Trumpeter Sillage a kind of fish? I don’t get it.”

“I guess so.”

“I don’t get it. Why did the machine print this out? What does this have to do with how ridiculous the text is?”

“Well, look at this thing!” He turned around and held it up in front of her face. “This is one of the most ridiculous things I’ve seen in ages!”

Cairo had nothing to say. Mills continued: “You see...” He abruptly stopped mid-sentence and looked at the page. An evil grin slowly but surely materialized on his face and he looked like he had just solved the oil crisis. His skin wrinkled a bit and his exterior glistened. His teeth shined through his goatee, giving him a serial killer look.

“What is it?” Cairo asked.

“Remember that talking fish I told you about? The one on the couch over there.”

“Yeah.”

“The one created by the ridiculometer?”

“Sure.”

“She is the same kind of fish as this.” He pointed to the picture of the fish. “In fact, this picture looks almost exactly like her. Look.” He walked over to the couch and pointed at the fish, who happened to be sleeping again. “See?”

Cairo said, “So what? I don’t get it. I don’t really think this is ridiculous at all. It’s just...stupid.” She was shaking her head.

“Yeah. You’re right, I guess. I told you I never know what’s going to happen. With this machine, it’s always a surprise.”

“But this isn’t really that ridiculous. It’s just...well...O.K., maybe it is ridiculous, I don’t know. I’m ready for anything at this point.” She looked at the sleeping fish. It had the same reddish-orange exterior as the one in the picture. Long and skinny, the fish spanned the entire length of the couch, where it peacefully laid sleeping.

“Exactly. Hopefully she’ll wake up pretty soon and maybe you can interview her.”

After shaking her head a few times, Cairo replied, “Great. An interview with a talking fish. Do you really think anyone’s going to believe any of this?”

“No. They’ll think it’s completely ridiculous.”

Suddenly, they both heard a halfway house panhandler yelling at himself out in the street. The voice faded away as the person got farther down the block.

Cairo returned her attention to the matter at hand. “I still don’t understand what any of this has to do with being ridiculous. The connection with the fish, I don’t get it. It’s completely stupid, if you ask me.”

"I don't get it either. Well, maybe it would help if you read the essay that actually started the whole mess."

"I just read the essay, what are you talking about?"

"No no no, I mean the one I wrote and then gave to the machine when it created Nairobi in the first place."

"Another essay? What's this one about?"

"What do you think?"

"I have no idea."

"You'll like it. It's out of control, I swear to god."

"I don't know..."

"It'll only take a few minutes. You said you were a speed reader, right? Hang on, I'll go back in the house and get it." That being said, Mills exited the warehouse like a rocket, slamming the door open and leaving clouds of dust behind him.

Cairo sat down on the arm of the couch and looked at the sleeping Sillago Trumpeter Sillage while thinking to herself. She was beginning to get embarrassed with the whole endeavor. How was she supposed to write an article about this? No one would get it. She didn't even get it. At least not yet. The fish began to squirm a little in her sleep and seeing this made Cairo slightly drowsy herself.

The warehouse had taken on a deathly quiet overtone and its desolate, soothing quality led Cairo to close her eyes. She temporarily forgot that she was in the monotonous grey atmosphere of Mills' warehouse. Imagining herself back in her office cubicle, she visualized the maroon ceiling and the deep red walls. A few Haiku poems

came to mind. She could hear the Gipsy Kings in her head. The song was *Ai Me Manera*. Solitude ruled as she daydreamed.

She was just nodding off as Mills burst back in the warehouse with his arm held high, holding the article and waving it back and forth. “This is it,” he said. Cairo immediately opened her eyes and her half-dream came to a smashing halt.

“Give me the essay. I guess I need to read it.” She sighed and held her hand out. After mechanically jutting his arm out and giving it to her, Mills continued walking across the warehouse over to the far end. There, he sat down on the floor and hugged his knees.

Cairo, as with the first essay he had given her, decided that an initial flip through would be necessary before tackling it. No diagrams this time, but again lots of different things crammed into the same text. Again the digressing, wandering approach, but this time he seemed to be making an attempt at some sort of point. Again, the whole thing was centered around the practice of ridicule.

She got up and moved towards the card table while doing the flip-through. After sliding into one of the chairs, she placed the essay down on the table, placed her fingers down at the first line, and began reading.

Cyberthuggee and the Ridiculous World Order

Mills al-Hajwiri

The phenomenon of ridicule has always played a role in the plight of anti-authoritarian resistance, sometimes minor, sometimes major; its creative potential for disruption and its threat to order and stability make it an attractive strategy. Traditional characteristics of anti-authoritarian

resistance have been tactical in nature, capitalizing on the moment and countering the typically sedentary apparatus of power with a nomadic, take-to-the-street approach. When ridicule is utilized in this fashion, it injects an element of surprise, disappears before authority can redraw the map, and then takes to the streets and returns to strike as it sees fit. The act of ridicule is generally not intended to hasten the collapse of the system (which isn't possible anyway); rather it is an attempt to highlight the vulnerability of an absolutist and centralized agency of power.

Authoritarianism has an unbridled fetish for brevity, efficiency, and precision, all of which can be successfully, albeit temporarily, dismantled by explosive acts of ridicule.

While centralized authority is by all means still with us, its efficacy has fallen by the wayside and we have seen a gradual shift towards a decentralized power scenario: that of cyberspace, computer surveillance, data warehousing and electronic flows. What used to be a localized, solidified mass that was easily attacked, the apparatus of power is now by its electronic nature nomadic, omnipresent and invisible at the same time. The apparatus of power no longer has a permanent dwelling place and it moves about as it sees fit. In fact, the notion of power is no longer associated with any one particular person or thing that can be easily targeted. For this reason, resistant activity is much more easily controlled and this has drastic implications for the effectiveness of ridicule. Given this new scenario, the act of ridicule as resistance must be completely revamped.

However, all hope is not lost. After a general analysis of the centralized/decentralized metaphor and some of its uses and abuses, including ridicule as resistance, we will suggest a somewhat risky but adventurous foray that takes its cues from the multiplicity and unpredictability of Thuggee in nineteenth century India. The deliberately obscure, ambiguous and confusing tactics of the Thugs, including their unprecedented mastery of multiple identities, can perhaps shed light

on some possibilities for the creative use of ridicule in the new decentralized electronic culture. Taking our cues from the Thugs' practice of human sacrifice for the goddess Kali, as well as their effectiveness at disturbing the taxonomizing attempts of British colonization, we will suggest a polymorphous, marauding electronic anarchist cult that thrives on character assassination and ridicule. To fight decentralized power requires the use of a decentralized means and Cyberthuggee is the first step.

The most obvious example of the contrast between centralized and decentralized thought comes from the military. When discussing command systems in war, historians have compared a centralized command system with its decentralized counterpart and how the former is inappropriate for managing the amount of uncertainty or 'friction in the machine' [Van Creveld, 261-275].

In a centralized command structure absolute control is at the top and soldiers have no individual or local decision-making power. The genius in charge lays out the tactical doctrine, all decisions are at a global level, and command proceeds in a top-down, hierarchical fashion. All individual units must answer to the agency in charge. Plans must be articulated in extreme detail and compliance with these orders must be constantly checked. The goal is to maximize the amount of certainty at all times and prevent unforeseen circumstances. Although centralized command works well in situations of crisis, the problem with this approach is that it usually accomplishes exactly the opposite of its aim: it maximizes uncertainty instead of certainty; it allows for friction to spread instead of decrease. Being anything from a truck breaking down, to bad weather, to the independent will of the enemy, friction in war is defined as any phenomenon that interferes with the implementation of a plan [De Landa, 60]. In communication networks it is "noisy data." Friction of this kind cannot be properly accommodated for in a top-down, centralized chain of command because if unforeseen circumstances occur, then it takes too much time for the information to get

all the way back to the top of the command chain and it takes too long for new plans to get back down to the bottom. Even with the advent of newer communication media, centralized command cannot keep up with the flow of information. Since local units have no authority and since all the power and command are at the top in these cases, friction, uncertainty, and misinformation spread quite easily.

As a result many armies throughout history have opted for a decentralized approach, dispersing control throughout the system to the individual units. Rather than monopolize the entire decision-making process from the top, control is distributed throughout the system to form a self-organizing network, leaving much responsibility up to localized parts of the war machine. The genius in charge lays out the basic goals, but lower individual regiments deal with friction at their own level as they see fit, as opposed to a strict, top-down command system that deals with it all from above. This keeps the threshold of uncertainty closer to the bottom and serves as a much better model for dissipating the amount of friction in the machine, which if "accumulates, it can generate a feedback loop, like a runaway explosion, in which uncertainty multiplies, flashing through the nervous system and short-circuiting the war machine" [De Landa, 78]. Thus, a centralized, absolutist approach to command and control cannot eliminate friction accordingly.

Deliberate sabotage of the enemy's communications network is a classic example of introducing friction. Blocking the flow of information is time-tested, effective tactic. Another is a public attack on the morale of the enemy, which can be easily accomplished by the creative use of ridicule. The nature of centralized power can be effectively changed by ridiculing it in the public sphere. Ridicule is not a proponent for destruction, nor is it effective in wiping out the whole system; rather, it is just a creative way of introducing friction in the machine. When used as an avatar of uncertainty and friction, the act of ridicule simply functions as part of the overall system.

The centralized system and the decentralized system are not entirely polar opposites; Van Creveld postulates that interlocking the two is a prerequisite for a successful command system. The system must maintain some assemblance of stability and control, and at the same time roll with the punches and accept the instability that will always occur. A command system represents a formal communication structure, one which can easily become too formalized and without proper supplementation, become vulnerable:

In any large organization, the virtues of formal communication systems—standardization, brevity, and precision—cannot be denied; those very virtues, however, also make such systems more subject to interruption and less flexible as a vehicle for original ideas than their unchanneled, redundant, and imprecise informal counterparts...The danger that formal communication systems reduce command, and indeed thought itself, to trivia is a real one indeed. It must be guarded against by a design that deliberately leaves room for face-to-face, unstructured interaction among people who know each other well enough in order not to limit their exchanges entirely to the line of business [Van Creveld, 273].

Decentralized organization is also starting to make an impact in the research community, especially in the computer sciences. For decades, artificial intelligence (AI) researchers thought that centralizing all the intelligence in the brain or the central processing unit (CPU) of the computer would be an adequate model for replicating human intelligence in a machine. This was called symbolic AI, because symbols and rules were inserted into the controlling environment, and from there on the control was top-down and hierarchical. The idea was to model the human brain as a global entity from which all control flowed. Information was stored in the brain of the machine and the rest of the machine was given sets of rules by the brain on how to behave. This worked for some applications, but not for many others. Somewhere down the line, presumably in the mid-seventies, scientists began to realize that a bottom-up approach provided a much better alternative in many cases.

Rather than have a main source 'teach' intelligence, localized units throughout the system are interconnected in constantly varying ways, and intelligence is learned from the bottom up, rather

than 'taught' and controlled from the top down. All intelligence comes from these individual parts and how they interact with each other. Intelligence is thus an 'emergent' phenomenon that grows and synthesizes its way forward as opposed to being controlled by some main repository of information at the top. The behavior of the units is determined locally instead of globally. Rather than learning by a previously defined set of logical rules that comes directly from the CPU, individual components dynamically "engineer themselves from the bottom up" [Plant, 275]. This approach has come to be known as "connectionism" and it is exactly this flavor of decentralized thinking that has fueled a complete paradigm shift in the sciences and the humanities.

That's a ridiculous oversimplification of AI, but it reiterates for us the massive shift that has been happening for the past fifteen years or so. Amongst others, chaos magic, self-organization, and artificial life are showing that the traditional reductionist method of breaking a problem down into smaller parts is gradually being moved to the back burner. The centralized approach is not being totally thrown out the window; rather, folks from many disciplines are beginning to realize that it explains only a small amount of phenomena in the real world.

In his *Turtles, Termites, and Traffic Jams*, Mitchell Resnick calls this whole idea, "the centralized mindset" [Resnick, 4] and gives us even more examples. Foreign viruses in the human body are distinguished by a self-organizing, decentralized army of antibodies who "seek out bacteria in a systematic, coordinated attack," and methodically improvise their way without rigid regulations from any particular commander-in-chief. If the immune system operated by a centralized command structure, then a general would have to lead the forces and each antibody would have to carry explicit instructions, given from the top. We are lucky that the latter case is not how the immune system functions, as a considerable amount of friction (e.g., bacteria) would infiltrate the human body if the case was such.

Flocks of birds are another example. Contrary to what they might resemble in flight, they have no leader. Organizing themselves based on simple rules, i.e., how close the nearest bird is, they function with no centralized control. They need no coordinator [Resnick, 1].

In the corporate world, decentralized thinking is starting to make a big impact on the way that corporations do business. Similarly, in the top-down hierarchy of the academy, special degree programs that encourage connectionist-type learning by transversing disciplinary boundaries are starting to pop up on the horizon. They call into question the institutional compartmentalization and separation of disciplines by offering an admittedly difficult counter-approach: forging spaces between disciplines in a heterogeneous patchwork "not to cordon off, but to stitch together patches of students and professors...[and] travel along that inbetween space where boundaries mark off, privilege, or displace one space from another" [Menser & Aronowitz, 17].

In spite of its obvious failures, centralized thinking does however remain at the heart of many scenarios where power and control are forged from the top down. The entire concept of authoritarian power has traditionally depended upon a centralized approach, a sedentary, localized, "hold the fort" philosophy being the strategy. In these instances, the resistance to power facilitates a plethora of creative possibilities for the insertion of friction. Total annihilation of the apparatus of power is not necessary, nor is it possible; just a temporary short-circuit now and then will suffice and creative uncertainty will henceforth multiply. Ridicule is an act of creative chaos, one that injects uncertainty, surprise, and unforeseen circumstances. As long as an agency of power attempts to hold the fort in a centralized fashion, its vulnerability to ridicule cannot be underestimated. The power of ridicule lies in the fact that centralized authoritarianism has an obsession for instilling habits and routines.

Psychologists have discovered that many people prefer to stick with old habits and routine

approaches to solving problems. With a meaty bulk of prior knowledge at one's disposal, this adherence to strict routines can be particularly effective, however, there do exist situations where prior knowledge may in fact inhibit the solution to a problem. In these scenarios, the actual knowledge needed for an easy answer is nowhere to be found and creativity lies in finding new and unforeseen ways of putting things together [Crovitz, 82-84]. The creative impulse lies with discovering new methods for assemblage—it lies with finding holes in habit [Massumi, 104]. One must know the habits first, of course, but many times one must completely do away with all usual habits to come up with something creative.

Similarly, Arthur Koestler told us that creativity involves the connecting up of previously separate frames of reference, universes of discourse, or matrices of thought. To be creative, one must not revolve around one point of reference on one plane and stick with habitual thought processes. Many times the creator has to branch out into a completely different context that has nothing to do with the original problem or idea. Creativity, according to Koestler, lies in reaching the point where the contexts intersect: in the constant injection of new ideas that connect up old ideas. [Koestler, 34-44].

Along the same lines, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers linked creativity with chaos, uncertainty and spontaneous self-organization. Doing away with the classic thermodynamic rule that heat is always being lost and the universe is continuously running down towards maximum entropy, Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures declares them as self-organizing systems where order is spontaneously created out of disorder. Much of the scientific community has consistently ridiculed his *Order Out of Chaos* due to its concentration on the philosophical and holistic side of things rather than dealing with specific scientific problems, however, it is useful for us because he centered on the idea that the uncertain and chaotic aspects of reality are entirely constructive, and

how entropic disorder can lead to the spontaneous creation of order. The universe is not constantly running down, rather, entropy is positive and the universe is constantly renewing itself in what Prigogine calls a 'dissipative structure'. David Porush metaphorized it perfectly: "A dissipative structure is more a raft which floats inexplicably but definitely upstream, against the current, gathering flotsam and organizing it into its flotilla with some sort of autonomous force or direction. Dissipative structures seem to have a mind of their own" [Porush, 57]. The creative, energetic use of ridicule-as-friction can perhaps be the same autonomous force that swims against the tide of a top-down, centralized command system.

Cairo was barely beginning to figure Mills out. She turned towards him and asked, "So your whole approach is that everything is connected to everything else?"

Mills, still on the floor, hugging his knees, answered without looking at her. "Sure. Think of it as a ridicule of separation. How 'bout that?"

Cairo shook her head and continued reading.

Reflecting on that for a moment, we can return to the centralized mind set which for some reason still remains the core of many formal structures and much of Western thought. The accuracy, clarity, and precision associated with a centralized, formal communication system serves its purpose by attempting to minimize the number of ways that unforeseen things can happen and thus by limiting the amount of possible creativity [Van Creveld, 273]. Its function is to breed an insidious rigor of habit. In lieu of this, a fostering of the self-organizing, creative potential of ridicule comes to mind immediately. As a creative strategy for introducing uncertainty, there is nothing a centralized mindset is more vulnerable to than pure, unabashed ridicule. Mockery may not seem like a tool that one would desire to wield in the slightest bit, however, a formal command

system, by its very nature, possesses a soul of uncompromising platitude that is easily crushed by an incendiary outburst of ecstatic ridicule. Thus, ridicule can be a creative assemblage that stabs habit in the side and injects uncertainty, friction, and surprise. From his "Chaos" article in *Scientific American*, Jim Crutchfield: "Even the creative process of intellectual progress relies on the injection of new ideas and on new ways of connecting old ideas. Innate creativity may have an underlying chaotic process that selectively amplifies small fluctuations and molds them into macroscopic coherent mental states that are experienced as thoughts. In some cases the thoughts may be decisions, or what are perceived to be the exercise of will" [Crutchfield, 57]. Much like Prigogine's order out of chaos, we can envision a system based not on molecules or matter, but on bodies dissipating energy by creatively ridiculing each other. From this, a "higher" structure emerges and rather than a universe renewing itself, we have a system based on "constant poetic renewal" [Vale and Juno, 4].

Again, since traditional power structures have been centralized in nature, they have been susceptible to the act of ridicule reiterated as friction in the machine. However, this is changing. In a decentralized power scenario, the effectiveness of ridicule as friction is somewhat weakened. The power elite have begun to wise up, and since friction is less effective when inserted into a decentralized system, we have seen a gradual shift from a centralized and sedentary power scenario to a more nomadic and decentralized entity. With the advent of cyberspace, computer mediated communication, electronic surveillance, and cyberpolice forces, the locus of power has now slipped into ambiguity. In cyberspace, the powerful elite can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Power is now omnipresent and invisible simultaneously—it has retreated from physical space into cyberspace—from a centralized unit to a nomadic, decentralized presence. Just as sedentary armies throughout history were forced to adapt the methods of their rivals, the nomads, we see the

powerful elite now doing the same—retreating into cyberspace and going nomadic. The Critical Art Ensemble point this out in their book, *The Electronic Disturbance*. The dilemma has now become this: how do you subvert power that is omnipresent? How do you ridicule something when you don't know where it is or even *what* it is? Believe it or not, as Jack Palance used to say, it may actually be easier that way.

OK—now what? Power has been omnipresent for quite some time and any friction inserted in the machine will inevitably get wiped out and buried. Or will it? I suggest that the tactic of ridicule, if executed properly, stands a chance of not being buried by the apparatus of power. Ridicule is effective when utilized as a creative injection of surprise and as a tactic that capitalizes on the moment, hitting unexpectedly and then disappearing before the map can be redrawn. The trick lies not in boasting a new “order” or an overthrow of power and thus creating an exact same system which presides over its own domain, but in finding those particular holes in the habit of power, those particular zones, those derelict spaces within which one can temporarily disappear from the new omnipresence of power accordingly, and then return as one sees fit. In order to accomplish this, ridicule must be creative and connect ideas from previously separated modes of thought to utilize what Deleuze and Guattari called a 'minor' function of language: "Becoming minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness is called autonomy. It is certainly not by using language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming" [Deleuze and Guattari, 106]. The next step is to update this in order to deal with the new nomadic qualities of the power elite.

The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) are a collective exploring the interrelations between art, technology, radical politics, and critical theory. In the sequel to *The Electronic Disturbance*,

Electronic Civil Disobedience, they offer temporary solutions for resisting the new decentralized power. They suggest cellular formations of self-organizing, nomadic resistance and this is exactly what concerns us here: cellular "cults" of ridiculing machines that creatively stab power in the side, leaving wounds here and there. These cells are constantly transforming and dismantling themselves in their own space. They have no overall coordinator or genius in charge; rather, they form a self-organizing, decentralized network of resistance with each unit inserting ridicule from whichever coordinate it perceives to be most effective. The ridicule originates from all over the place, not just one easily located point of attack. We can easily envision a "cult," so to speak, which does exactly this; the only thing remaining is the metaphysical referent and we now turn to that infamous goddess from the "dark side of Hindu mythology": Kali.

Cairo spoke out loud. "Not the Kali stuff again! You just can't get this out of your system, can you?"

Mills remained silent. He was still on the floor, hugging his knees in the corner. Cairo continued reading.

Although manifestations of Kali are somewhat varied and her incredible popularity is indisputable, more often than not she is portrayed as a "mistress of death" who demands animal sacrifice, a goddess that caters to the fringes of society:

Her hair is disheveled, her eyes red and fierce, she has fangs and a long lolling tongue, her lips are often smeared with blood, her breasts are long and pendulous, her stomach is sunken, and her figure is generally gaunt. She is naked but for several characteristic ornaments: a necklace of skulls or freshly cut heads, a girdle of severed arms, and infant corpses as earrings. She is usually said to have four arms. The upper left hand holds a bloodied cleaver, the lower left hand, a freshly cut human head; the upper right hand makes the sign "fear not," and the lower right, the sign of conferring boons....Her two favorite dwelling places are battlefields and cremation grounds. On the battlefield she is usually said to carry a skull-topped staff, to howl ferociously, and to consume her enemies by eating their flesh and drinking their blood. In the

cremation ground she is described as sitting on a corpse [Kinsley 1986, 144].

This description of Kali, the Divine Mother, the feminine force, often leads to complete misunderstandings in the West, where one usually perceives this Hindu goddess as dark, terrible, absurd, horrifying, and violent. To some degree this is true, but only when looked at from a Western perspective. Kali is a dangerous deity who hides out in the exterior of “morality,” threatening the concepts of order and stability. Misconceptions are abound mostly because Western thought has a propensity for fearing, ignoring and repressing all that is violent, perverse, and disgusting. The West favors the Christian designation of opposites: good/evil, holy/unholy, spirit/flesh, sacred/profane. For millions of Hindus, however, Kali has been a beloved symbol for more than fifteen hundred years. In the Hindu pantheon her devotees affirm all that is disturbing, violent, and usually “forbidden” in the world and see Kali as the universal power that transcends beyond all that is either good and bad [Harding, 39]. Rather than pushing death-and-blood under the table, they accept the world as chaotic and out of control and heartily embrace the particularly unpleasant aspects of reality, acknowledging the good and evil that is in all of us. No division of the world into opposites makes any sense to them and Kali represents neither one nor both; she is benign and malevolent, she creates, maintains, and destroys, and she is completely beyond any division of opposites. She is all. For those who worship her, the goal in life is to become her—to embrace all good and bad and transcend all binary opposition. To deny and avoid the horrifying aspects of existence would be ridiculous...

Kali's dark reputation is also due to the fact that she gets intoxicated with the blood of her victims and demands animal and sometimes human sacrifice to remain alive. She is one representation of the divine mother, Durga, who gives blood and life to all female animals and humans. Life and blood are her psychic energies and as they dwindle, they must be replaced. This

is where sacrifice comes into the picture; an exchange of life for life, blood for blood [Sinha, 20-21]. Before human females give life, they must ceaselessly give blood for Kali. Likewise, in many animal sacrifices for Kali that still continue today, heads are cut off and blood is poured. In some cases, the same scenario of returning the blood to Kali is the ritual. In others, the sacrificing of goats may represent man's chopping off his greed, lust, selfishness and ego [Harding, 119]. In extreme cases, orgiastic rituals involving excessive intoxication were performed, sometimes with human sacrifice as the result. Kali is the ecstatic life-juice that drives the universe, constantly giving lives and taking them one after the other. Lives cannot be taken without first getting her permission.

This demand for lives as her sacrifice is exactly what led to Kali becoming the reigning goddess/saint of the notorious Indian murder cult phenomenon: thuggee, or the Thugs. Derived from the Sanskrit word *sthaaga* and the Hindi verb *thagana*, which means, “deceive”, *thuggee* gave the English language the word “thug.” Supposedly stamped out sometime in the mid-nineteenth century by the British, the Thugs randomly murdered and robbed from whomever they pleased. Their secret calculated killings were sometimes committed as sacrifices for Kali and they have also been known as the Stranglers or the Cult of the Black Mother [Daraul, 179-190]. Among many other sordid endeavors, they were known for their unprecedented technical ability of strangulation and their uncanny success at creating multiple identities and personas. Most of them were upstanding respectable citizens in the public sphere while reverting to thuggism in secret.

Confusion was a key tool at their disposal. Thuggee was just as much a practice at the art of deception as it was a cult or a secret society, hence their title, “deceivers.” Their mastery of deception, as well as their unconditional devotion to Kali, was completely misunderstood and vastly underestimated by the gallant, over-optimistic British officers who were tracking them down.

Nearly all of the literature on the Thugs is written from a British perspective, from the results of the codifying apparatus of colonialism and the interventionary authoritarian reform undertaken in the early nineteenth century by the British in India. As part of their attempt at colonial subjectivity, the British tried to develop an all-around taxonomy of the Thugs: their behavior, their identity as a whole, the nature of their crimes, what exactly constituted thuggism and what didn't. All attempts were made to describe the native, place him in a context, categorize him, naturalize him, reform him, and civilize him according to the moral viability of the colonizing apparatus. The idea was to retrieve as much information as possible regarding Thuggee and to construct a body of knowledge that deemed the Thugs as hereditary criminals by birth, "and thus subject to surveillance, control, and attempted rehabilitation" [Sanjay Nigam quoted in Roy, 129]. This picture was painted solely as a tool for social control by the British.

It turns out that the proliferation of the Thugs had nothing whatsoever to do with degenerate and dysfunctional qualities of Indian civilization as the British claimed, but more to do with reactions against the new centralized state and the reaches of the capitalist world-economy. Before the British arrived, the political system in India was more localized and decentralized. Iftikhar Ahmad calls to our attention that

power and authority in India were diffused and divisible. The political order rested on the accommodation of competing and autonomous centers of power rather than their elimination. This meant that localities retained a large degree of responsibility in matters of administration, defense, dispute settling, and the like. These functions were performed by various groups owing loyalty to, and drew their authority from, the community, not the state. Organized private violence was an integral constituent of such a political order [81].

When this political and economic system came under pressure from the British, the practices of the Thugs gradually shifted from a localized movement to a widespread, heterogeneous and disorganized political order. The political and economic strife caused by the intervention of the British escalated and more and more young men were recruited into Thuggism as a form of mass

resistance. Fluid and widespread in their activities, the Thugs worked with a polymorphous and constantly transforming theater of operations that challenged and effectively confused the ever-growing onslaught of State authority. The British colonizing authorities were thus forced to paint Thuggee as a strange and perverted secret society which badly needed to be reformed. This picture became the basis for all historical scholarship on the subject, most of which is completely unreliable and ridiculous.

Of interest for us are the Thugs' incredible and meticulous tactics of deliberately confusing, rupturing, and fouling up the British information-gathering mission with their multiple identities and their mysterious and obscure ways of operating. Many of the Thugs were respected citizens in their communities by day and homicidal maniacs by night. Most members of Indian society accepted the fact that they would never be able to ascertain who was a thug and who wasn't. Many times the Thugs would infiltrate packs of travelers and pretend they were part of the pack, only to end up slaughtering the whole group. These types of tactics made it extremely difficult for the British colonizers to figure out what was going on. In addition to this, Indian police and landowners would deliberately conceal evidence of thug crimes just to screw over the British. Perhaps Thuggee can provide an excellent model for ridiculing the colonizing and categorizing forces of authoritarian power:

If there is one thing that characterizes the thug,...it is the multiplicity and unpredictability of his manifestations....If native identity can be staged, can be plural, then what are the implications for colonial authority and colonialism's project of information retrieval? Thuggee, I would suggest, introduces a disturbance in the paradigm of information retrieval as well as the notion of native authenticity and ontological purity that is a governing trope of colonial discourse. The thug, through his capacity for disguise and impersonation, and his skill at negotiating multiple and competing identities, usurps the colonizer's privilege of complex subjectivity and of movement between subject positions, and thus can be read to assume some control over both the construction and flow of colonial knowledge [Roy, 131].

This exact *modus operandi* can perhaps be revamped for our current technological culture in

which the omnipresence of power is causing more and more problems. The internet and cyberspace have already brought whole new uses for the manufacturing of identities. Just the chat rooms alone have enabled people of all shapes and sizes to change their shapes and sizes. One's electronic presence has become almost as important as his/her physical presence.

Returning to the theories of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), we can suggest some specific Thugg-ish methods for resisting the new decentralization of power in the electronic milieu. CAE suggest that the use of power through number—from labor unions to activist organizations—is bankrupt, because such a strategy requires consensus within the resisting party and the existence of a centralized present enemy. However, in spite of the lack of consensus on what to do, most organizations do share a common goal—resistance to authoritarian power. Yet even in terms of goals there is no consensus about the practical basis of authoritarian power. The perception of authoritarianism shifts depending on the coordinates from which a given sociological group chooses to resist authoritarian discourse and practice. How then can this situation be redefined in constructive terms? To fight decentralized power requires the use of a decentralized means. Let each group resist from the coordinates that it perceives to be the most fruitful. This means that leftist political action must reorganize itself in terms of anarchistic cells, an arrangement that allows resistance to originate from many different points, instead of focusing on one (perhaps biased) point of attack. Within such a micro structure, individuals can reach a meaningful consensus based on trust in the other individuals (real community) in the cell, rather than one based on trust in a bureaucratic process. Each cell can construct its own identity, and can do so without the loss of individual identity; each individual within the cell maintains at all times a multidimensional persona that cannot be reduced to the sign of a particular practice.

This is exactly the manner in which the Thugs operated. Even though they had common hand

signs, a secret dialect, and common methods of strangulation, one can say that they did operate in differing communities and utilized multidimensional personas that fit any given social situation. Instead of British colonizers trying to taxonomize the natives, we now see the apparatus of decentralized authority developing information about individuals in order to maintain control and order in the cyber-world. The physical body in itself no longer exists, having given way to bank records, school records, medical records, tax records, et cetera. Your physical body is slowly becoming a data body. With all this information at its disposal, the apparatus of power has a great advantage and marketers can make you into a target audience for their products. The secret service, once devoted entirely to protecting the president and his family, has now become somewhat of a cyber-police force and almost all corporations have adopted some sort of computer surveillance system. For lack of any other prefix, “techno” culture is becoming a newer world order of sorts, not the free-for-all utopia that many think it is. Electronic communications technology has now become a tool for social organization.

The time is right to put Thuggee methods of disrupting the information-gathering process into practice; an explosive, unstoppable amount of friction in the machine and deliberate confusion of information flow is an effective tactic. When the process of information retrieval is confounded and altered, the organizational properties of the institution that is being confused become unstable—and should this be maintained for too long—the institution will eventually collapse. The various segments will have no idea if they are working at cross purposes against each other or if they are working in unison against competing institutions. Confusing, reversing, mimicking, and ridiculing the process of information retrieval is an effective means to disrupt any institution, whether it be military, corporate, or governmental. When such actions are properly carried out, all segments of the institution are damaged. If one can successfully corrupt and modify his own data

representation then temporary wrenches can be thrown into the system. The Thugs' methods of multiple personas and confusion of all circumstances can work perfectly in cyberspace.

Along with this, their expert technical ability of human sacrifice for Kali must be appropriated in a means that won't land us all in jail. Instead of human sacrifice for Kali, a similar strategy of ridicule as character assassination (sacrifice) can be envisioned.

Sacrifice is usually defined as giving something without expecting anything in return, and CAE, expanding on the theories of Georges Bataille and others, suggest that there are actually two kinds of sacrifice: One is guided by the principle of excess, the other by the principle of autonomy. The latter case is what we are interested in. Sacrifice guided by the principle of autonomy is an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the liberation of desire (ridicule), a compromise which must be accepted as part of the responsibilities of freedom. For the greater the autonomy, the greater the sacrifice required. Death and autonomy (as an expression of true desire) are inherently linked. Such sacrifices as these revolve around the ability to give, control, and take life at an individual level. Desire can take any emotional form, and it is difficult to accurately predict how it will manifest itself in action. A possibility always exists that the action will be violent in nature, and hence actively connected with mortality, the acceptance of which is a key tenet in Kali worship:

Kali's boon is freedom, the freedom of the child to revel in the moment, and it is won only after confrontation or acceptance of death....To ignore death, to pretend that one is physically immortal, to pretend that one's ego is the center of things, is to provoke Kali's mocking laughter. To confront or accept death, on the contrary, is to realize a mode of being that can delight and revel in the play of the gods. To accept one's mortality is to be able to act superfluously, to let go, to be able to sing, dance, and shout. To win Kali's boon is to become childlike, to be flexible, open, and naive like a child....Kali is mother to her devotees not because she protects them from the way things really are but because she reveals to them their mortality and thus releases them to act fully and freely, releases them from the incredible, binding web of "adult" pretense, practicality, and rationality [Kinsley 1975, 145-46].

The act of ridicule for Kali as a sacrifice guided by autonomy can be a feasible substitute for

human sacrifice. It goes right along with the "child-like" letting-go just mentioned. The act of ridicule, if one looks beneath the surface, is much akin to sacrifice, especially human sacrifice. Rather than strangulation, beheading, or other means of taking a *physical* life, the act of ridicule makes the particular life the subject of humiliation and assassinates its *character*. When one imagines the act of ridicule as a sacrificial, autonomous becoming, its devotional power becomes readily apparent. While random acts of human sacrifice for Kali may have been effective for the Thugs, this plan of attack probably won't fly in Western cyberculture in 1997. Character assassination can be a reasonable substitute. The Thugs can be resurrected as cults of ridiculers in cyberspace. Or, as Annalee Newitz once told me: perhaps we are all Thugs in cyberspace.

THE END

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Cairo placed the text down on her lap and pondered things over for a minute. Her thoughts were soon interrupted by Mills, who had gotten up and waltzed over to the table. The four legs of the empty chair slid across the floor with an irritating resonance as Mills

fell into the seat and sat down at the table with her.

After a few seconds of silence, Cairo spoke first. "Well, the cyberspace thing is still new to me. But I guess you've drawn a very interesting parallel here. But it breaks down."

Mills looked puzzled, but the expression on his face showed that he had anticipated that comment. "Yeah, I think I know what you're going to say."

"You see, you make a case..." She paused to gather her thoughts and prepare her criticism. "You make a case for the thugs versus a centralized authoritarian colonial system."

"Sure."

"But then you come out and say that they can be a parallel for resistance against a decentralized form of power. I don't know if that will work. Maybe you don't even need the Thuggee aspect at all."

"Yeah, I think I see what you mean. Well, anyway, it's not done yet."

"The cyberspace aspect is the most interesting part of it. You've pointed out that in cyberspace we have all these unfocused, decentralized flame wars. What are flame wars? I don't know that much about the internet. I know what it is, but..."

He cut her off "A flame is just an unwarranted attack on someone via email, or through the internet. Right now, everyone's flaming everyone else. It's the most chaotic, unfocused mess you can imagine. No one knows what the hell is going on."

"Exactly. That's where the essay should have gone." Her hands were folded together on top of the table.

“What d’ya mean?” For the first time since Cairo had arrived, Mills was actually interested in what she had to say.

“Look. Your idea in this paper is that we need to use decentralized resistance to fight decentralized power on the internet and the Thugs can be a model, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“The, what do you call it...” She looked back through the article for a few seconds. “The apparatus of power is now omnipresent and no one can find where the power is, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s how you should focus the article. You see, you should be saying that cyberspace is a mess of unfocused, decentralized ridicule *because* no one can find where the power is. This apparatus of power, as you call it. The apparatus of power could be ridiculing everyone and we would never even know it. Your answer is to have focused ridicule.”

Mills looked crestfallen, but still not going down for the count. “Focused ridicule? The whole point here is to be not focused, not to be stuck in one specialization. To be focused would ruin everything.”

As soon as he finished that sentence, Mills noticed the small tender smile on Cairo’s face. He stared at her lips. The bottom one was a little larger than the top and her slight tinge of ruby lipstick gave them an appetizing demeanor. He wanted to kiss the top one, then the bottom, and then both at the same time. Before the fantasy could come to its conclusion, Cairo continued.

“I’m good at getting people to focus. In college that’s what I did in many of my guidance classes.”

“But I don’t want to focus. I can’t.” Mills coughed out his words like a child who wanted to stay in bed and not go to school.

“Here’s how you focus. Here’s the plan.” She began to move her hands in the air to the rhythm of her speech. “You instigate a situation, a temporary situation, of focused ridicule. By doing this, you achieve this temporary autonomous zone that you were talking about earlier. Then move on and go somewhere else. When it comes to the ridicule, you just need to find some example of focused ridicule. That’s it—focused ridicule. See how easy it is?”

Mills started rubbing his chin forcefully. He seemed to have suddenly slipped into a shell, separated from the rest of the world. Cairo continued: “That’s what you want to achieve, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” He was still rubbing his chin.

Mills, noticing a magic twinkle in her eyes that reflected the fluorescent light bulb hanging from the ceiling, glanced at her face. Her high cheekbones curved gracefully enough to highlight the valleys that housed her mysterious eyes. The eyebrows were miniscule, as if they had been ever so slightly penciled on. He was starting to get attracted to her.

Why was she trying to help him with the essay? Hadn’t he wanted all along for her to disagree with him, argue, and eventually get upset? Instead, she seemed to suddenly be on his side. He had counted on this entire episode being confrontational from the beginning

and now, because she was relating on his wavelength, he began to get attracted to her. He couldn't dominate this woman, and this turned him on even more. In the words of Tom Jones, he was lost like a slave that no man could free.

Cairo's boss had been right. She could bring any self-proclaimed roughian to his knees and melt him like butter. Mills was becoming a gelatinous mass, gradually dispersing in every direction simultaneously.

"Are you following me?" She giggled exquisitely.

"Yeah, yeah," He answered, as if suddenly coming out of a trance.

"Does that make sense?"

"Sure. I just never thought of it that way."

Cairo sat back and stretched out her legs. She purposely stuck her chest out a slight bit while putting her hands behind her head. Mills immediately pinned his eyes on her breasts.

She appeared as if she had just gotten the better of Mills. Triumph oozed from her pores, and the final concept of an interview with Mills al-Hajwiri was beginning to materialize. Her thoughts raced. *I should just tell the story as it happened. No questions, no answers, no hype. This is good enough to be a book. How am I going to keep it short? It'll be a million seller—I'll make it a book afterwards.*

Mills was completely silent. His composure began to fizzle and sizzle and he started to fidget again. After running his hands through his hair a few times, he blurted, "So what else do you want to know? I've just about had it."

"Well, the whole aspect of decentralized power that you're talking about. You said

that comes from those guys, Deleuze and Guattari? Is that..."

"Well, not really. Decentralized power, ah...I mean...well, it's just...it's kind of an all-purpose cliché metaphor for anything that has to do with postmodernism."

"Oh."

"Maybe you should ask Nairobi." He pointed towards the Sillago Trumpeter Sillage, who was still sleeping on the couch. Both Mills and Cairo turned their heads simultaneously and looked at her. The gills were contracting and expanding as if she was breathing happily. Thick black eyelashes outlined her closed lids and it looked like she was hibernating.

Cairo began to realize that this interview didn't need to make sense after all. In fact, there was no possible way it *could* make sense. Usually, Cairo felt strongly that everything a guy says and does has to *mean* something. With Mills, that ideology would never, ever work. She would just have to roll with the punches, take whatever comes, and ask questions later. *Maybe the ridiculous magical reality has engulfed even him. I think it's happening to me too...Forget it. Roll with the punches.*

"The fish? You're not telling me that a fish could possibly know anything about Deleuze and Guattari?"

"You'd be surprised. The ridiculometer can work wonders. Go ahead. Ask her."

"She's asleep though. I don't like to just wake people up."

"She's not people. I told you that before."

"You just love to confuse people, don't you?" The angelic smile on her face drove Mills to fidget like a five year-old. He placed the nail of his index finger between his two

front teeth and slowly moved it up and down. “Well?” Cairo asked, after getting no answer to the other question.

“Hmmm? You know, the thugs loved to confuse people. Maybe I have thuggee in my blood or something.”

“This whole interview has just been you trying to confuse me. Right?”

“Look, you just asked about Deleuze and Guattari. I said to wake up Nairobi and ask her. You might learn something.”

“She’s sleeping. I don’t want to wake her up. She looks so peaceful lying there.”

“To hell with her. Wake her up and ask her some questions. You’ll probably get more out of her than you ever will with me. When the ridiculometer creates a fish like this, you never know what’s going to happen. She might have some interesting things to say.”

Cairo got up from the bent metal fold-up chair and sauntered across the room towards Nairobi. She had no idea that Mills was focusing in on the contours of her rear-end. After dropping down on her knees to look more closely at the fish, Cairo proceeded to sit down on the cement floor next to the couch.

Nairobi woke up just as Cairo began to look more closely at her. The fish slowly opened her eyes, blinked a few times, and gave Cairo an inquisitive stare. She looked irritated that Cairo had awakened her.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you up. Mills wanted me to ask you some questions. I guess this is part of the interview.”

Nairobi’s vociferation had a Southern obnoxious drawl to it, not unlike that of a

female Foghorn Leghorn: “Now—ah, ah—I say—you know, I don’t like to be woken up like this.”

“Sorry.” Cairo seemed a little embarrassed and stepped back a little. She blushed slightly and pointed to Mills. “He told me to do it.”

Nairobi looked right at Mills with a scowl that could make a grown man cry and then said, “You mean *he*’s responsible for this unwarranted attack on my snoozing habits?”

Cairo stammered on. “Mills just showed me the ridiculometer and he suggested that I ask you about these guys, Deleuze and Guattari.”

Nairobi pondered the question over for a few seconds and then spoke with a tone that was academic, but still Foghorn Leghorn: “Well—ah—Missy—you know they’re usually referred to as post-structuralist philosophers, but that doesn’t really tell you anything. They’re sort of like Nietzschean, post-Marx anarchists.”

A fish who knows Nietzsche. This is going to be a great story. No, a great BOOK.
 “Nietzschean, post-Marx anarchists? What does that mean? Did they use Marxism in their writings?”

The fish called Nairobi looked a little perturbed by the question, but she shifted her weight on the couch and nevertheless answered with readiness. Her method of speech was unlike anything Cairo had ever heard. Foghorn Leghorn was still there, but the style suddenly changed. The fish spoke like she was reading out of a research paper in the sky and not the way a fish normally talked: “Well, Deleuze and Guattari thrived on borrowing ideas from other writers, adjusting these ideas to fit their own scenario, riding the ideas to whatever intensity they saw fit, and then—ah—encouraging everyone else to do exactly

the same with those ideas that Deleuze and Guattari themselves conceived. Make sense?

That's philosophy, Missy."

"My name is Cairo, not Missy."

"Well. A little bit uppity this evening, aren't we?"

Cairo, completely speechless and struck with awe, remained motionless while she listened.

Nairobi shifted her weight on the couch and continued: "They invented an entire terminology based on this practice. One particular idea that interests me is their concept of nomad thought. That was actually Deleuze by himself without Guattari, but that's not important right now."

Now Cairo was able to speak. "Yeah. Mills mentioned that concept in his essay that he forced me to read." She turned towards Mills, gave him a motherly derisive stare, and then looked back at Nairobi. Cairo felt like a teamster representative after a weekend-long labor dispute. She'd had it.

Nairobi barreled on: "They developed the metaphor of nomadism as being a source of power against any centralized and sedentary form of control, or actually, against any absolutist and purist idea of anything. They advocated a free flowing release of desire in the form of nomadism to scramble the codes and categories that society places on you. Not being a nomad in the sense of just wandering around for the sake of wandering around. That would imply going from a particular point to a particular point. The idea is, instead, a pointless, wide open rural space outside of, but in relation to, the metropolitan city.

“As far as the Marxist stuff goes, they just uprooted ol’ Karl’s ideas for a more modern trashing of a capitalist society based on specialization and the division of labor. They were to Marxism what the Gnostics were to the Christians, in the sense of taking inspiration from a source that they thought was outdated and using it against itself. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” It didn’t. Cairo didn’t understand at all, but she faked it and pretended like she was following right along.

Nairobi carried on. “Another guy named Peter Lamborn Wilson linked it all up with traveling Sufi heretics, or something like that. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas have popped up in all sorts of places you wouldn’t even expect. That was exactly their intent—to steal concepts from other places, intensify them, and subsequently have them be intensified by others, however those others saw fit.”

Cairo turned towards Mills and asked him, “So you’re influenced by Deleuze and Guattari? Is that what this is all about?”

The fish chimed in before Mills had a chance to reply. “He’s basically just trying to use their ideas as take-off points to ridicule the idea of having to specialize in one area. Lots of degree programs that call themselves ‘anti-disciplines’ are starting to pop up on the horizon. People are starting to realize that you can no longer compartmentalize things and, for example, talk about science completely apart from technology. Or talk about mathematics completely apart from philosophy. Or talk about music completely apart from cooking or sex. Now—ah—you ever heard of that ol’ Situationist text, *The Critique of Separation?*”

For the first time since she entered the warehouse, Cairo had an answer. Assertion was her only dying quality: “No, I’ve never heard of any of this. What I do know is that many times people have to specialize in one area of research and stick with one particular focus. I mean, you can’t do *everything*. So he’s ridiculing the idea of specialization. So what? Who cares. I mean, this whole thing really isn’t that funny.”

Once again Mills opened his lips in order to reply, only to be stomped by Nairobi’s blatant hogging of the conversation. “Oh he knows *that*,” she said sarcastically. “He’s not trying to destroy all disciplinary boundaries, Missy. Of course not. Some people need to preserve the pseudo-sanctity of specific disciplines, fine. Let ‘em do it. The rest of them, like Mills, will go on with their lives and actually learn something.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Cairo threw her hands up and shook them back and forth. “I don’t want to listen to you rant about college. I’ve heard enough ranting from Mills tonight.”

Mills finally got a word in. “Hey wait a minute!”

They both ignored Mills. Nairobi looked directly at Cairo and suddenly changed the subject. “Are you Japanese?”

“What *is* this?” Cairo looked like she was about ready to burst into tears of frustration.

Nairobi continued to stare at her. The fish said, “You’re very interesting looking.” After turning towards Mills, Nairobi asked, “I say, boy, where did you find this one? She’s cute.”

Cairo just started shaking her head. She went back to the chair, sat down, and

slumped into it. Her thighs were together and her feet wide apart. “Go on. You were saying...”

Nairobi’s mouth straightened a little. “I can only attempt to give you an example, if you’ll listen.”

“Of course I’ll listen. Why do you think I came here? This is going to be an amazing story.” Cairo was already imagining the whirlwind of responses to her story about a madcap college teacher and a talking fish, and a ridiculometer. The whole thing was so ridiculous, that it had to sell. She knew it would.

For some reason, the fish felt that she had to get up to continue with the explanation of Deleuze and Guattari. She swam out of the couch and used her pectoral fins to push herself towards a motionless and emotionless position in the air right above Cairo. Making eye contact with Cairo was so easy it hurt. Cairo looked at Nairobi as if the fish was a movie star.

The fish once again spouted like Foghorn Leghorn, but still like she was reading directly from a research paper and not the way a fish normally talked. It was very spooky: “A wise man always knows how to suit his words to the occasion. His simplicity baffles the unworthy and his power is vastly underestimated by the State Machine. Now, ah—power, until recently, was exerted via a centralized command system, where all tactical doctrines are laid out in detail, one control-hungry apparatus ejaculating on the computer screen of subordination.

“However, no one can plan for the unexpected attack of the nomad. The nomad utilizes a tactical approach, capitalizes on the moment, hits, and disappears before the

State can redraw the grid.”

The fish turned towards Mills and whispered to him, “This is a metaphor, boy, you better listen.”

Back towards Cairo: “The nomad takes the striated grid of the State and makes it an all-you-can-eat sushi fest. Not knowing how to use chopsticks, the State likes its fish cooked and prefers beaten, truck-stop hags as opposed to the nomad’s predilection for orgasmic-looking Japanese waitresses. But the most nauseating thing about the State, and the most beneficial for the nomad, is its lack of humor, its vulnerability to ridicule. The State’s theater of operations necessitates its own banality and this is precisely why its walls are easily penetrable by the nomadic traces. Sheer ridicule may not seem like a potential weapon at first, but once the State’s massive sensitivity to such practices is discerned, public ridicule of the State becomes all the more effective.

“Why ridicule the State? I hear you cry. This can only exacerbate the situation. Well, to put it mildly, yes. I say, there is nothing that the State is trying to repress *more* than some hedonistic roughian trying to exacerbate the situation. We need exacerbation. We are all targets for the State’s repressive tactics and ecstatic ridicule can temporarily level the State.

“Now, don’t get me wrong: this leveling is only momentary, as the State has a way of quickly regaining its ground and reappropriating all of the nomadic game plan. The State’s power lies in its ability to eat the nomad’s casserole, learn the recipe by osmosis, and then open up its own restaurant. Except however, for ridicule: a nomadic tactic that the State will probably never appropriate. The State will never lower itself to this childish

reveling in the moment—that is—the practice of ridicule. It is a beautiful practice. It will always be with us.”

Hearing this from a fish named Nairobi was the last thing Cairo ever expected and at this point she was getting over the booze, but the whole scenario was blurring the differences between rants, incendiary tracts, and pure idiocy. She was fascinated.

Nairobi floated in the air, spreading her fins out as if ready to begin swimming. She seemed to be treading water, but in mid air.

For a few minutes, Mills just sat there in the chair like Santa Claus and did nothing. It was as if he wanted Nairobi to do all the talking for him—as if the fish was his alter ego.

Finally he slowly stood up and looked right at Cairo. He had a unique way of standing there, sovereign-like—not existing—but *projecting*, as if he was on a mountain top. His tangled locks of hair nearly covered his face and he seemed almost Christ-like. The shadow of his profile still crept back and forth along the opposite wall in the flickering blast of light that soaked the warehouse. Cairo was confused but interested at the same time. This was some weird philosophy of ridicule based on some Neitzschean, post-Marx, anarchistic desiring mess. Mills stood there silently while Nairobi continued.

“Mills, you see, is a nomad in this regard, and he has engaged in many particular ridicules of the State. And they were all beautiful. Robin Leach’s Gourmet Paradise in Malaysia has nothing on his debacles. Believe it or not, as Ripley would say, he is usually faced with a do or die situation. The striated grid of the State was in him like a brand on a farm cow. He lived, ate, and breathed the morals of the State. Suddenly, after years of studying ISMs within the constraints of the State, it all hit him square in the face: He

existed in a specialized niche designed, prefabricated, and tailored by and for the State. He was in a box. He was just one part that represented the glorious whole of the State Machine. The insidious opposition of bad/good was unavoidable. He was the thinking subject and was the fundamental building block for all that represents truth, justice, universal goodness, and established order.”

Cairo felt like she should at least offer something, so she said, “Sounds like he was definitely in a box.”

The fish ignored the statement and continued. “Okay—more of the example for you—Mills has no problem with being in a box. The State placed him in a box, but to their surprise, every time they came back to open the box, Mills had disappeared and there was a bomb in it. And this is exactly where ridicule becomes the hidden gun packed in the nomad’s shorts. Believe me, I have not been the first one to say that ridicule can change the nature of power. If you really find an insecure, power-hungry machine that can only function by cementing *its* reality in your brain, then ridicule can do a hell of a lot more damage than you might think. Why ridicule? I’ll tell you why.”

“Oh you will, huh?”

Fish sarcasm is a hell of a lot more intuitive than its human equivalent and Nairobi’s look after that comment from Cairo was much more than circumstantial evidence of this. Mills just stood there and watched from a distance like a rubbernecker slowing down to look at a traffic accident.

“Cairo, listen. You see, ah—everyone will always mistake the act of ridicule for an act of hostility or an expression of some dislike. The State thinks that ridicule is purposely

designed to accomplish something in particular—to elevate one's ego at someone else's expense. This is understandable, since in most dictionaries you'll find the word *ridicule* defined as an act that makes someone or something the subject of contempt."

Nairobi turned towards Mills. "Hey Mills, you remember that time years ago when you were working for the campus bookstore and they got a new time clock put up on the wall?" Her head elongated towards the phazed physique of Mills al-Hazwiri.

"Sure." Mills was overjoyed to be back in the conversation. "I made some snide, purposely stupid comment or something, and the boss walked in and said, 'What? You don't like my time clock?' He just didn't understand. None of them understand."

Nairobi the fish turned back to look at Cairo and continued with the reading-of-the-research-paper-type-of-talking: "The State will always assume that the nomadic traces are trying to destroy the State, when this is not the case at all. A flagrant act of nomadic ridicule has no intention of destroying the State, it is not an internal drive towards destruction; rather, it is a form of behavior that has a relationship with the State, but occupies an indeterminate zone which is simply affiliated with an 'outside.' It is an assemblage of desire that circumvents all dualities. When Mills ridicules something, he is not existing in opposition to that something. Being opposite would imply exactly that—being opposite; polar opposition. Instead, he is in a relation with the exterior. He is engaging in a type of behavior that is, ah—external to itself. He's not elevating his ego at the State's expense, for elevation would imply verticality. Think of it as a transversal of binary opposites, as a turbulent flow, a dissipation of energy, a release of the beast within man, similar to lycanthropy. Like turning into a werewolf."

At this point Cairo was completely lost and she could do nothing but shake her head and rub her eyes. She had no idea what Nairobi was talking about. Mills had mentioned Deleuze and Guattari in his writings, but Cairo had wrongly assumed that an explication of their ideas would simplify things. Maybe it wasn't supposed to be simple. Somehow all of this was connected, but not in any way that she'd be able to explain to anyone else.

Cairo turned towards Mills and asked him, "Am I supposed to understand any of this?"

"Well, not necessarily." Mills stood there, pulling at the hairs on his goatee. "That can be a good interpretation, though. Just take any particular idea that I've mentioned and go where ever you want to go with it. Think of it like it's multiplicity. Wander where you want to wander."

"What?" Nairobi's official fish features seemed to congeal with confusion.

"Violate boundaries. Traject. It's good for you."

"Look. In my opinion, this whole ridicule thing is just ...nothing." Cairo was deliberately feeding the fire. "You need to make fun of everything because you're a weak person. You're insecure."

Mills clenched his right fists into balls and the veins on his arms stuck out like cords. He dramatically paused for a few seconds before belting: "Look, there have been many incidents when I have made an individual a target for ridicule. That's easy. Even a fish can do that. But there was one particular incident when I used a person not as a target, but as an *avatar* of ridicule."

"An avatar of ridicule?" Cairo and Nairobi answered simultaneously.

“This one particular individual was already a basket case and he’d been causing problems on campus for the better part of two decades. Usually he hung out in the School of Music, but he also wreaked havoc in the physics department. He would live in the buildings, refuse to leave, and fill up about twenty lockers with nothing but stale Chinese food, underwear, and junk. Somehow over time he acquired keys to the entire building. He would damage property, sneak through rooms, and I think he even got arrested a few times for breaking into the building. He’s been banned from campus nearly ten times, but he refuses to leave. And no one has been able to do anything about it. He’s irritated nearly every professor in at least three different departments.”

“Wow.” She was finally interested in something. “He does sound like a basket case. Why didn’t they just get rid of him?”

“Nobody could get rid of him because nobody cared enough. Everybody would complain about him, but no one would take the initiative to actually do something about it. As always, people don’t want to get involved because it cuts into their leisure time. So what did I do? Right at the apex of his most recent charade, I promptly issued a doctrine that proclaimed myself as the instigator of all the problems he had caused since day one. I passed a document to all the parties involved announcing that I had been controlling him for years via a remote psychic operation that instructed him to cause chaos wherever he went. My intent in doing this was to ridicule the entire situation and everyone involved, including myself. The manner in which I did this, the way I pulled it off, was brilliant. Believe it or not, of the few dozen faculty members that I gave the document to, about eight or nine came up to me and commended me for doing it. Everyone knew this

individual and his record for causing problems, as well as the fact that the entire scenario was complete anarchy and nothing would ever happen to him anyway.”

Cairo was about to interrupt, but Nairobi beat her to it. “This sounds like a great story. Do you have a copy of the original document?” Her fins gallantly swept up and down in mid-air.

“Yeah,” Cairo seemed intrigued, “I’d like to see it.”

“Sure.” He staggered over to the dresser and bent over to open the bottom drawer. After sifting through a pile of papers, junk, photos, and the like, he pulled out a manila envelope. Slowly and surely, he opened it and looked inside for a minute. “Aha!!” He spouted. Obviously he had found the document.

“Okay, first of all, this was a Korean guy who basically lived in the Music building. This document may not make sense at first, but just picture this guy as a classic pain-in-the-butt that everyone knows, but can’t get rid of. He’s been a thorn in the sides of professors for two decades.”

“Every professor? Even you?”

“Not me. I’m not really a professor. I’m only part time, so I try to disassociate myself from the politics of the whole place. But every so often, an incident happens—an incident that is just calling out for ridicule. In this instance, right at the time when this guy was pissing people off the most, I distributed this document to the parties at large.”

Nairobi the Sillago Trumpeter Sillage began to get impatient and the Foghorn Leghorn gab returned. “Quit talking! I wanna see it! I wanna see it! Let me—ah—feast mine eyes *upon* this here manifesto.” She swam through the air towards Mills and tried to

read the document over his shoulder. Mills turned away and moved towards Cairo.

The paper rattled in the atmosphere and Mills, like a stage trouper, shot his arm out and handed the document to Cairo. With unbridled enthusiasm, she grabbed it out of his hand and looked it over.

Soon-Mo Kang as a Political Weapon

by

The Irreverend Mills al-Hajwiri

For the last seven years I have been using Soon-Mo Kang as a tool to cause confusion throughout this university. I am conducting this manipulative endeavor by means of a remote psychic operation that controls Soon-Mo Kang's every move. I am using Soon-Mo Kang as a political weapon to ridicule this university and all of its inhabitants. The act of ridicule can be a form of lycanthropy, a releasing of the beast that is in man. Some try to hide it, some try to repress it, but man is indeed an animal and should harness his own carnal desires as joyfully as possible. And no one brings out the beast in man more than Soon-Mo Kang. Ideally, teleoperating Soon-Mo Kang as an avatar of chaos will trigger a chain reaction so ferocious that everyone will become a target for my ridicule and every single one of you will undergo a lycanthropic transformation and ridicule each other. Thanks to me, Soon-Mo Kang has monitored and engineered every 'disaster' and 'catastrophe' that has blessed not only this mere department, but your entire campus community. Via the act of tele-ridicule and the indoctrination of Soon-Mo Kang as the mantelpiece, I seek the redemption of the monster as sacred archetype and liberating symbol of all that is forbidden.

Cairo laughed while reading the statement. "See? That's it!"

"That's *what*?"

She sensed his confusion and smiled. "That's your focused ridicule I was talking about."

Curling his lip ever so slightly, his mouth stiffened and his eyes flattened into a

terrifying squint. Mills began to sit down, as if he had just learned that a relative of his had passed away. “What? What focused ridicule? Now what are you talking about?” Defeat was on his face.

“I’m good at getting people to focus. It was my speciality in college.”

“I told you I don’t *want* to be focused. That’s the whole point.” He seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Cairo seemed triumphant, her smile gleaming with victory. “This whole episode is exactly what I meant when I said ‘focused ridicule’. This is it. By issuing this document you not only granted temporary autonomy to whoever this guy is, but you used the process of ridicule to a suitable end.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Well, let me see. This Korean guy, what was his name again?” She looked back down at the paper. “Oh yeah, Soon-Mo Kang. He was causing all these problems and everyone was angry with him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“By issuing this statement, you executed a form of ridicule that was focused. Sure, the whole situation, as you said, was complete anarchy and no one cared. But for this moment that the faculty read that statement, Soon-Mo Kang was given this temporary autonomy that you talked about. You ridiculed the whole situation and temporarily gave this guy some freedom. Now continue being a nomad, move on and go somewhere else. Am I getting through here?”

“I think so.” Mills was flabbergasted.

“You see, this is a perfect example of what you called friction in the machine. You added temporary friction into this whole scene, and now you should move on and go somewhere else and strike. You’ve been trying so hard *not* to be focused that you’ve missed the whole reason why this thing was so effective.”

All of a sudden, Nairobi chimed in: “She’s right Mills. I say—ah—you oughta listen to that woman. If you don’t, you’re a bonehead. And one bone is enough for your head. Trust me.” Her fins began to wobble, as if a breeze had unexpectedly made its way through.

Mills had no choice but to agree with Cairo. She was right on target and he wanted her badly. He hadn’t been so attracted to a woman in years. Mills felt like a football player who had just ran the wrong way down the field and into the wrong end-zone. He leaned back, stretched out his legs, and closed his eyes. Visions of Cairo naked went through his head.

Usually, trying to bring a woman into his world would make him feel better and boost his ego substantially. Usually, girls would be drawn to Mills’ guile, his quick wit, his charm, and above all, his uniqueness. They really do approach him like seagulls on a beach of bread crumbs and he’d always be able to sway them his general direction. With Cairo, no way—he would never bring her into his cradle of humanity. He would never get her in the sack, and this was precisely what made Mills want her even more.

“It’s O.K.” The motherly tone of her voice brought him out of his erotic daydream.

He opened his eyes and said, “So you think you’ve gotten me to focus, huh?”

Two rolls of her eyes went by. “No! You’re missing the point. You want this to be

a struggle. That's it—you just want to be contrary to whatever I say.”

Mills remained silent. She was right. He had wanted this whole episode to be a struggle. The enemy was surrounding him and as a last gasp for air, he tried to continue the struggle. *She really thinks she's made me focus. Typical woman.* Like an emperor who had just lost a kingdom, Mills tried to maintain a sense of pride.

Alas, the truth hurt and he realized that he would never be able to lure Cairo into his domain. The battle was over. It was time to start playing taps. *If only I knew how to play the trumpet. Does anybody here know how to play the trumpet?*

Nairobi was still floating in the air and immediately sensed Mills' depression. She swam a little closer, looked over his shoulder, and said, “Now, ah—ah—I say Mills, you really oughta heed her warning. She's as right as they get, ya know. All you need to do now is plan your next attack. Go ahead. Insert the friction somewhere else and engage in the practice of ridicule somewhere else...”

Cairo came next: “Exactly. I'm not criticizing you. I'm just trying to put this whole thing, whatever the hell you call what we've talked about here tonight, this thing, and put it into a context. You've actually done something good that you don't even realize. I'm not trying to change you or force you to focus. Come on, now.”

Mills' infuriation was obvious. His hands shook and he gritted his teeth. “You *are* trying to change me! How can you say that?”

“No!” Cairo was passive, but unrelenting. “You've got it the other way around. This whole thing here tonight, the whole entire charade. You've been trying to bring me into *your* world. It seems like you really, really want to get me into the bizarre things that

you're into. This whole thing has been some weird attempt to change *me*. Not you. That's why you sent me the press releases. Right?"

Even though Mills' eyes were widening and his jaws were gritting down harder, she continued, "Think about this. This whole thing is just a bunch of noise for nothing. There's no point to anything you do."

Despite Mills' huffing and puffing, Cairo carried through with the lecture: "You've got some twisted idea about changing other people. You shouldn't do that. You should let other people be the way they want to be. Life is a constantly changing process, come on! I'm beginning to think that you're afraid to change yourself, so you want some illusion of remaining the same. So you have to try and change others in order to achieve this."

"Oh? So now you're a psychoanalyst?"

"Oh my god." She turned her head to the side and held her mouth open in disbelief, as if she was looking at someone else who wasn't there.

Mills shifted in his chair erratically, huffing and puffing all the while. "It's not that at all. I just happened to be really into this stuff. I think you'd like it. I swear to god. I'd swear on a stack of bibles this high." He raised his arm up in the air and held his palm down, flat.

She crossed her legs and shook her head. "You're being irrational about this whole thing. What made you think that *I* would want to change *you*?"

"Oh? *I'm* being irrational?"

Cairo's form of speech was that of a woman trying to be subtle, smooth, and

confident while calling it off with a boyfriend: “Now, I appreciate being introduced to new things and reading your essays and all of that stuff, but I have my own interests as well. I’m not about to give it all up just to enter *your* world. Come on, listen to yourself.”

Mills just shook his head and said, “Fine. Forget it. You don’t understand anything. This interview is over, I’m sorry.” He threw his hands up. “You can write whatever you want. I don’t care. I’ve had it with reporters.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Cairo got up just as Nairobi swam through the air and whispered quietly in Mills’ ear: “You know Mills, ah—I’d say—ah, that woman is plain too good for you anyhow. She’s kinda like the highway between Fort Worth and Dallas—no curves. Before I was just sticking up for her as a front, you see.”

Mills remained silent.

Nairobi said, “Looks like you’ve been flim-flammed, boy.”

“Don’t give me that Foghorn Leghorn crap, you stupid... whatever the hell you are. She has all sorts of curves, you idiot.” He swiped his hand at the Sillago Trumpeter Sillage and missed. The fish swam, in the air, away from him, and moved back towards the couch.

Cairo was ready to leave and asked if she could go back upstairs to get her notebook and her raincoat. Mills nodded his head and told her that the door upstairs was unlocked.

“So this is it?” Cairo said, as if they were ending a long-term business relationship.

“Sure. Why not.” Mills remained seated. He put his elbow on the table and leaned

his head against his palm. The heel of his hand was right underneath his chin and his fingers stretched up the side of his cheek to the bottom of his ear.

“You’re just going to give up? You’re just going to sit there looking defeated?”

“Look. You came here. You interviewed me. This is what you get. It’s done, it’s over, I’m tired. Alright?”

“Alright.” Cairo shrugged her shoulders, turned around and headed for the warehouse door. He looked at her rear end as she exited the scene. Her miniskirt was a little disheveled and her buttocks wiggled like two puppies wrestling under a blanket.

Nairobi was back asleep on the couch. Mills remained in a seated position for nearly ten minutes after Cairo left. The fluorescent light began to flicker. Mills wondered, *What would Soon-Mo Kang do in this situation?*

* * *

The Athena Daily is usually dead on Sundays, but not this time. Every single student employee was on hand to listen as Cairo told the lurid yarn of her encounter with Mills. The small crowd of workers filled her cubicle to watch her write the article.

Haage was especially overjoyed, as this would be his story. He was going to take all the credit, since he felt it had been his idea all along. The Athena Daily would finally carve its place in the stale journalism scene of San Jose, thanks to him.

“You’re right,” Haage told Cairo, “This could be a book.”

“Oh yeah,” she answered, “I’ll start out with the original press release that he sent,

and then I'll tell the whole story. And I'll paraphrase both of the essays that he showed me. It'll be a million seller. Don't you think so?" She turned around in her cubicle and gave him a wink.

"Yeah, but I'd like you to concentrate on getting the article done first. I want it by next week."

"Sure, no problem. The book will come later."

The Gipsy Kings' tune *Ai Me Manera* steamrolled through Cairo's head as she started pecking away at her Macintosh keyboard. Her black designer shoes tapped furiously on the floormat, and her thin, elegant fingers were barely able to find the keys and crank out the first line: *Ridiculous: An Attempted Interview With the Irreverend Mills al-Hajwiri*.

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