While visiting New York City in 1936 to drum up funds with which to complete his music degree at the Tuskegee Institute, Ralph Ellison was the guest of Langston Hughes at a Broadway performance of Jack Kirkland’s phenomenally successful stage adaptation of Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1933). To the mortification of himself and Hughes, however, he caused a scene when he started to laugh uncontrollably at the antics of the poor whites depicted on stage:

For me the shock of Caldwell’s art began when Ellie May and Lov were swept up by a forbidden sexual attraction so strong that, uttering sounds of animal passion, they went floundering and skittering back-to-back across the stage in the startling action which father Jeeter, that randy Adam in an Eden gone to weed, named “horsing.” For when the two went into their bizarre choreography of sexual “frustrabation” I was reduced to such helpless laughter that I distracted the entire balcony and embarrassed both myself and my host. It was a terrible moment, for before I could regain control, more attention was being directed toward me than at the action unfolding on the stage.¹

Notably, this “extravagance of laughter” both singled Ellison out as an object of sight for the rest of the audience and indicated his own inadvertent identification with Caldwell’s poor white trash, who in real life would have been anathema to him because of the threat of violence they necessarily carried with them: “But even closer to my immediate experience, wasn’t Ellie May’s
and Lov’s ‘horsing’ all over the stage of Tobacco Road embarrassingly symbolic of my own frustration as a healthy young man whose sexual outlet was limited (for the most part) to ‘belly-rubbing’ with girls met casually at public dances? It was and it wasn’t, depending upon my willingness to make or withhold a human identification. Actually, I had no choice but to identify, for Caldwell’s art had seen to that.”

Literally split in two during this laughing fit—one half laughing wildly while the other critically dissected what this laughter might be made to mean—Ellison found that “as the unruly world of Tobacco Road finally returned, my divided selves were made one again by a sense of catharsis. Yes, but at the expense of undergoing what a humiliating, body-wracking conflict of emotions! Embarrassment, self-anger, ethnic scorn, and at last a feeling of comic relief. And all because Erskine Caldwell compelled me to laugh at his symbolic, and therefore non-threatening, Southern whites, and thus shocked me into recognizing certain absurd aspects of our common humanity.”

Describing this as an embodied experience of Kenneth Burke’s “perspective by incongruity,” Ellison goes on to note that it was “as though I had plunged through the wacky mirrors of a fun house, to discover on the other side a weird distortion of perspective which made for a painful but redeeming rectification of vision. And in a flash, time was telescoped and the imaginary assumed the lineaments of past experiences through which Jeeter Lester’s comic essence became a recognizable property of characters and events that I had known in the past.”

Published in 1985, Ralph Ellison’s “An Extravagance of Laughter” clarifies a great deal not only about the obscene potentials of Caldwell’s work in particular but also about what was at stake in early twentieth-century literary obscenity more generally. The grotesque body-rubbing performed by Lov and Ellie May on a Broadway stage failed to elicit a genitally organized response from Ellison because of what was so conspicuously withheld from sight. Not sex or nudity but strangely staged back-bumping is all that Caldwell is said to have provided, to which Ellison, still adjusting to life in the Big Apple, could not help but react with explosive hilarity. Caldwell’s art of “frustrabation” is thus Ellison’s way of wittily condensing the eroticized charge of laughter that is described in terms of smut by Sigmund Freud, for whom such outbursts of mirth could in fact release the built-up sexual tensions caused by a failed seduction without necessarily foreclosing sexual satisfaction of some sort eventually. The immediate frustration of a man’s public attempts to seduce a woman into having sex with him does not mean that the virtualization of such an encounter in his mind and those around him will fail to offer compensatory pleasures, perhaps even aggressively pursued ones. Masturbatory self-regard may thus take place either because of this frustration or in spite of it, and what Caldwell’s work powerfully demonstrated to Ellison during this laughing fit was that distinguishing the one from the other may not even be possible. Are Lov and Ellie May grinding their backs together because they cannot actually couple with each other
on a Broadway stage or in spite of that fact? That is to say, is their back-bumping situationally determined or is it instead an expression of an obstinate individual will capable of asserting its limited agency in defiance of such a determination? Correlatively, does Ellison’s extravagant laughter confirm that he is the powerless object of Caldwell’s smutty staging—“I had no choice but to identify, for Tobacco Road’s art had seen to that”—or does it reveal to him who he really is instead by allowing him to “recogniz[e] certain absurd aspects of our common humanity”? Is “frustrabation” an experience in objectification (in being more “done to” than “doing”) or in identity formation (in figuring out who one really is among other people)?

As we have seen at length, these are precisely the questions that literary obscenity raises for James T. Farrell, Wyndham Lewis, and Lillian Smith as well, though each has abiding reservations as to what sorts of identities and readers may ultimately arise from such encounters with obscenity. For one thing, Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy tends to figure objectification as an experience in overidentification. Studs becomes the dispossessed object of a variety of contemporary societal forces—popular culture, reactionary anti-Communism, Catholicism, and so forth—by responding too forthrightly to the contradictory stimuli and cues provided by his surroundings. The interference pattern created by these overlapping prompts constitutes who he is at any given time, and since these behaviors and identities never really synchronize, he can be made to do anything even while he himself intends to do nothing. Conversely, Lewis’s Cantleman preemptively ironizes this relationship by assuming that who one is need not correlate with what one may be conspicuously compelled to do. If the Western world in the early twentieth century was indeed filling up with people who only knew how to read obscenely—that is, with their bodies rather than with their minds or in their own words—and if Watsonian behaviorism indeed provided psychology with a vulgar explanation for why this was happening and how those in power could best use it to their own advantage, then Lewis insisted upon the possibility that “to do” and “to be” do not necessarily comprise the same thing: to read obscenely is not to be an obscene reader in the end, to respond amorously to Stella does not mean Cantleman is actually in love with her, and to give in to the lure of sex in a time of war is not the same thing as being the dupe of nature or the nations of Europe. Cantleman is not an object of his milieu because of what he does but rather in spite of it. That the final sentence of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” undercuts the adequacy of this comportment does not belie the fact that Lewis himself sought to embody it time and again in his own postwar literary career. As for Smith, she took all too seriously the possibility that “to do” is indeed the same thing as “to be” when it came to responding to the obscene words of the Jim Crow South. Otherwise, there would seem to be no rational explanation for why segregation remained the case
in the 1940s and 1950s when there were so many persuasive logical arguments to be made against it. The capacity of words to act in the world through the bodies of the people who encounter them is taken as given in Smith’s writing, and rather than try to secure a space for one’s self or identity by way of hostile irony or performative contradiction, Smith devoted the last years of her life to stripping language of its effective force instead. By abstractly recasting the civil rights movement in the allegorical terms of man’s evolutionary history and destiny, Smith strove to make the obscene words of segregation turn into mere stand-ins for the irrational appeals of dehumanization, into so many ordeals to be surmounted on the path to man’s eventual humanization. Forcing words to mean instead of do, Smith tried to make the world safe for the endless conversation of liberalism.

Though their political orientations do not line up at all, these authors wrote obscene works that confuse because of explanations with in spite of explanations, such that the one comes to inform the other inextricably. Having an uncontrollable bodily experience because of words on a page and in spite of them therefore confirms that we are indeed both “done to” and “doing” at the same time. For Farrell, Lewis, and Smith, however, experiencing an overwhelming embodied response because of and in spite of words on a page is not something that can be merely attributed to the once-potent efficacy of the English language. For Lewis and Smith in particular, there are malign social, cultural, and ideological forces behind the susceptibility of early twentieth-century readers to literary obscenity, and this is what most notably differentiates Studs Lonigan, Cantleman, and Nonnie Anderson from that exemplary reader in European modernist obscenity, Emma Bovary, who never asks who or what in her world is pulling her strings when she tries to make words get off the page and come to life for her. For literary naturalists and those modernists—like Lewis—with a tendency to interpret cultural phenomena in terms of determinism and cooptation, obscenity was not a problem in and of itself; rather, it was problematic because of what it indexed, which was a growing vulnerability to harmful forces and trends in society by way of our susceptibility to mute words on a page. What Lewis and Smith in particular sought to do with their “obscene” writing, then, was to point fingers and name names, to flesh out what and who stood behind early twentieth-century obscenity.

Caldwell is an invaluable counterpoint here precisely because his work is more concerned with how words might be understood to get off the page rather than who or what stands to gain if they ever do. Of course, this is not to say that his novels of the 1930s and 1940s are bereft of such content. Eugenics discourses are all over the cyclorama novels, and like many other naturalist writers of the 1930s, his political commitments were credibly fellow-traveling. More than any other naturalistic exponent of literary obscenity in English at this time, however, Caldwell tried to account for how an unmanageable bodily response to printed words might come
about in the first place, and his solution—that such a response occurs by virtue of the conspicuous failure of such words to evoke an immediate response—informed his compositional reliance on repetition and his preoccupation with powerful visual experiences that elude verbal expression. Caldwell's writing thus testifies not only to the dormant potency of words in and of themselves but also to the shift in the proscriptive focus of legal obscenity from books to visual culture that was taking place in the first half of the twentieth century.

This same shift is cannily reenacted in Ellison's essay, which is nominally in honor of Caldwell's writing, though what Caldwell actually wrote does not get mentioned at all. Instead, the scene for Ellison's appreciation of Caldwell's art is a darkened Broadway theater, not a comfortable chair in a quiet room with a lot of light by which to read. In a stunning sleight of hand, Ellison honors the octogenarian Caldwell by praising Jack Kirkland instead, insofar as the performance of a theatrical adaptation of Tobacco Road is made to stand in for—indeed, it wholly supersedes—the act of reading that novel itself. If the Freudian smut of Caldwell's writing translates quite well into the physical immediacy of the play's "frustrabation," then that attests to the prominence of smutty triads in Caldwell's compositional methods and to Kirkland's fidelity to those methods. Accordingly, Ellison does offer a lot of insights into Caldwell's writing in "An Extravagance of Laughter," but remarkably he manages to do so without once noting the difference between a theatrical adaptation and a book, between being wracked with smutty laughter while viewing a play with an audience and having a similar experience while reading a novel alone at home. On the one hand, Ellison would seem to be suggesting that the two experiences are equivalent, that books indeed remain a force to be reckoned with when it comes to our susceptibility to uncontrollable bodily experiences. On the other hand, Caldwell's novel at most provides the mere pretext for the encounter with an audience that the performing arts and visual culture are hereafter better equipped to satisfy. Caldwell's Tobacco Road may be smutty, but Jack Kirkland's Tobacco Road is actually smut. Extending this logic into the period in which Ellison wrote his essay, we might note that Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless (1988) may have "obscene" content, but Robert Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio series (1978) and Karen Finley's We Keep Our Victims Ready (1989) are actually obscene. The demotion of writing's effective force with respect to visual culture, performance art, and new media may be something we simply take for granted today, but the proscribably "obscene" works of Lewis, Caldwell, and Smith still represent a range of exemplary responses to obscenity at a time when such a demotion was only just emergent. By respectively reducing obscene reading practices to performative contradictions, predicating the ability of obscene books to arouse readers on their ostentatious failure to actually arouse readers, and robbing obscene words of their sensory content through abstraction and allegory, each
wrestled with literary obscenity both because of and in spite of the bodily appeals of words on a page. Muddying the distinction between because of explanations and in spite of ones is certainly a common feature of the works of each of these authors, but it also contributed to the world we inhabit today in which legal obscenity persists regardless of whatever effective force words on the page may still fitfully possess here and there.

Ellison’s essay thus gives us a striking reason for why this came to be the case. For him the result of Caldwell’s obscene “frustrabation” is a “rectification of vision” whereby he experiences extravagantly and hilariously—that is to say, bodily—an unlikely sense of unity with a “repugnant cultural other.” Here the uncontrollable effects smuttily produced by Kirkland’s actors on a Broadway stage—and supposedly Caldwell’s words on the page as well—act to promote an unlikely sense of recognition that not only humanizes the Other but also teaches Ellison a new lesson in what it means to be human himself. Whereas it is an occasion for cutting off almost all meaningful ties to other people in the works of Lewis, and whereas it ineluctably facilitates the continuation of segregating mores in those of Smith, literary obscenity in Ellison’s missed encounter with Caldwell’s writing produces instead a profound sense of empathetic identification that fosters improbable interpersonal connections across lines of race and class.

In other words, Caldwell got obscene books laughed off the stage, and if this Smith-like civics lesson in humanization—and not the darker homicidal impulses of Cantleman’s performative chortles—is all that is to be found in the smutty mirth that occurs when words do indeed get off the page, then how could anyone really be afraid of literary obscenity anymore?