

WGSS 395  
MoWe 4:00-5:15pm  
Classroom: South College E241

Office: South College W417  
Office Hours: By Appointment  
Contact: [kleng@umass.edu](mailto:kleng@umass.edu)

## **Feminism, Comedy, and Humor** Spring 2019

“Comedians who insist that...funny is funny and comedy should be able to challenge anything and be an ‘equal opportunity offender’—sure, but there’s laughter and there’s laughter...If comedy is going to be taken as an art form...it has to be able to be criticized. You can’t just say your reaction as an audience is either to laugh or shut up and that’s the only thing you can do.”

--Glen Weldon, “NPR: Pop Culture Happy Hour Podcast,” 19 December 2014

### **Course Description**

The popularity of shows like “Broad City” and the clout of performers such as Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Wanda Sykes have arguably put to rest the old stereotype that women aren't funny. More importantly, they have all shown that comedy and humor can be vehicles for feminist messages. In so doing, they have built upon a legacy established by performers, writers, directors, and activists extending back to feminism's "first wave." In this course, we will examine the intersections of feminism, comedy, and humor, and will explore questions such as: In what ways are comedy and humor gendered? What roles do race, class, and sexuality play? Why have feminists, and women more generally, been seen as inherently unfunny? How have feminists used humor and comedy for political ends? We will also broadly consider the ethics, politics, and social and cultural purposes of comedy and humor. Beyond analyzing a wide range of media, genres, and practices, we will create our own forms of feminist comedic interventions.

### **Caveat Emptor!**

Comedians are some of the fiercest defenders of the First Amendment, and indeed proclaim the comedic space as a privileged zone for all manner of speech and opinions. It is this declaration of freedom that makes comedy so powerful and dangerous. As a result, in the AV clips we will be watching there will, on occasion, be explicit language. There may also be views or opinions expressed that are personally offensive or triggering—even couched within texts that express views with which you other might agree.

### **Course Goals**

- Explore the dynamic intersections of comedy, humor, and politics from an antiracist feminist perspective
- Critically and creatively examine media and texts
- Wrestle with ambiguity in understanding the intent and effects of particular pieces of comedy
- Account for the “meaning” of particular works, recognizing the varied responses they provoke
- Engage both critique and creativity to develop our own humorous/comedic feminist interventions
- Maintain consistent engagement with the course and its material
- Engage peers with possibly differing ideas and opinions in respectful dialogue

### **Readings**

There are no readings to purchase. All of the readings are available either as ebooks through the UMass library catalog or through Library Course Reserve Materials (linked through Moodle). Some materials may be available through Netflix, but they are not required. There is a lot of reading; however, it is essential that you complete the readings, as discussions depend on everyone having done the work. Please budget your time accordingly.

## Workshops and Guest Talks

We are extremely fortunate this semester to benefit from the expertise of performers and creators from across UMass, the Valley, and beyond. Barring emergency, attendance and participation are mandatory. You will be expected to submit reflections on the workshops on Moodle within 24 hours of their completion, i.e. 5:15pm on the subsequent day.

## Evaluation

- **Participation (35%):** Participation in this class is very important. What we do in the classroom is as important as what happens outside. Your participation grade will be assessed based on expected criteria, such as regular attendance, participation in class discussions, small group work, and participation in workshops. In addition to these criteria, your participation grade will depend on:
  - *Completion of reports following workshops/guest lectures:* Following each workshop, you have 24 hours to prepare a one-page report on the workshop and your experience in it. What did you learn? How can you use it? Did the workshop cause you to think differently about some of the topics we discussed abstractly in class?
  - *Completion of reading reports:* Once a month, you will submit a reading report on Moodle before the start of class. These reading reports should be 2-3 pages long, and should offer your thoughts and analysis of the readings assigned that month. A good reading report would make links between readings, class discussions, and your thoughts/opinions on the course material. **Reports will be due: Monday, February 25; Wednesday, March 25; and Monday, April 29 by 4pm**
  - *Self Assessment:* Five percent of your participation grade will be based on a self-assessment, wherein you give yourself a grade out of five, and provide a paragraph explaining why you gave yourself that grade
- **Media Analysis (30%):** **For this assignment, you will work in pairs; you will each receive the same grade.** I will assign you to pairs by mid-February. Together, you will select one of the stand-up performances listed below and prepare a 6-page double spaced (1-inch margin, 12-point font) paper that examines the politics of a particular piece. Here we will focus on female-presenting comedians. In your assignment, you will describe both the form and the content of the text, and consider how it conveys political messages, explicitly and implicitly. Here, it is important to consider issues of representation, framing, delivery, substance, emotive force, etc... and its impact upon you as audience member. You should also do a bit of research on the performer and his/her/their background. **Doing this as a pair assignment allows you to take stock of disagreements you may have about the performance—i.e. whether one person thought it was feminist or not, whether one person thought it was funny/offensive/politically effective or not. This will allow you to employ some of the work on “audiencing” that we will be doing.** Some of these are available through Netflix; many are available through ereserves. If you have difficulties accessing these titles, please be in touch with me as soon as possible. If you have a performer in mind who is not on this list, but would be interested in analyzing, please be in touch as soon as possible.  
**Due on Moodle Monday, March 11 by 11:59pm EST.**
  - Wanda Sykes, “What Happened to Ms. Sykes” (2016)
  - Wanda Sykes, “Ima Be Me” (2015)
  - Jen Kirkman, “Just Keep Livin’” (2017)
  - Jen Kirkman, “I’m Going to Die Alone (And I Feel Fine)” (Netflix, 2015)
  - Maria Bamford, “The Special Special Special!” (2012)

- Chelsea Peretti, “One of the Greats” (Netflix, 2014)
  - Amy Schumer, “The Leather Special” (Netflix, 2017)
  - Amy Schumer, “Mostly Sex Stuff” (2012)
  - Mo’Nique, “I Coulda Been Your Cellmate” (2007)
  - Roseanne Barr Show (1987)
  - Sarah Silverman, “Jesus is Magic” (2005)
  - Aisha Tyler is Lit (2008)
  - Anjelah Johnson, “Not Fancy” (2015)
  - Sofía Niño de Rivera, “Exposed” (Netflix 2016; in Spanish with subtitles)
  - Garfunkle and Oates, “Trying to be Special” (2016)
  - Obvious Child (dir. Gillian Robespierre, 2014)
  - Lynne Koplitz, “Hormonal Beast” (Netflix, 2017)
  - The Incredible Jessica James (Netflix, 2017)
  - Iliza Schlesinger, “Confirmed Kills” (Netflix, 2016)
  - Cristela Alonzo, “Lower Classy” (Netflix, 2017)
  - Margaret Cho, “PsyCho” (Netflix, 2015)
  - Tig Notaro, “Boyish Girl Interrupted” (2016)
  - Tiffany Haddish, “She Ready!” (Showtime; 2017)
  - Ellen DeGeneres, “Relatable” (Netflix, 2018)
- **Final Project: Create a Thing!! (35%)** Here is where we move from critical analysis to creative work. For your final project, you will use the skills, modes, and genres we have studied to create a piece of political comedy or humorous intervention. Please note that, on my end, the emphasis in evaluation will be on **effort**, originality, and creativity; further details can be found in the section below titled “Evaluative Criteria.” **Presentations are due Monday, April 22 and Wednesday, April 24 in class; physical artefacts due Wednesday, May 1 in class.**

Number grades will be translated to the final letter grades using the scale shown below:

A	93-100%	C+	77-79%
A-	90-92%	C	73-76%
B+	87-89%	C-	70-72%
B	83-86%	D	60-69%
B-	80-82%	F	59% and below

### **Class Philosophy**

- Learning is a process...no one is going to know everything, especially right away. We’re here to help each other out.
- We will strive to find constructive ways to disagree, respectfully, and to try and avoid calling each other or attacking each other.
- We will practice respect for people who are speaking, and will actively listen to them. We will acknowledge different perspectives.
- We will think about what we want to say, and how that might affect other people
- We aim to acknowledge each other, get to know each other, and avoid assumptions

- We endeavor to remain present with the materials and engage with them, reflect upon them, and refrain from snap judgments
- We strive to be aware of our involvement in the class, and the involvement of others, and will be mindful of the motto of “stepping up and stepping back.” Learning is a collective process, and we all have something to contribute
- We aim to make space and leave space, to reflect on what someone else has said, and allow statements to land

### **Evaluative Criteria**

- Did the student demonstrate effort in the report/paper/final project?
- Did the student engage with course materials, ask critical questions, demonstrate thoughtful reflection?
- Did the student stay engaged with the readings throughout the term?
- Did the student demonstrate growth over the course of the term—or, if already practicing engagement, thoughtfulness, and critical reflection, maintain consistency?
- Did the student display respect for his/her/their peers? Did she/he/they demonstrate self-reflexivity?
- Did the student develop independent ideas and creativity in approaching the media analysis and especially the final assignment?

### **Attendance Policy**

More than two unexcused absences will result in the loss of half a grade. Every unexcused absence thereafter will result in an additional half grade deducted from your grade. If you know you cannot make it to class due to a legitimate conflict, illness, or emergency, please be in touch in advance of class, or within 24 hours of your absence. I will be taking attendance at each class meeting.

### **Seating Policy**

As part of your participation grade, please sit in a different seat at every class meeting.

### **Electronics Policy**

Laptops are allowed for note-taking and relevant course-related Internet work. Please refrain from using smartphones and tablets in class.

### **Late Assignments**

All assignments must be received by their due date.

### **Statement Regarding Pronouns**

There is a long history of dialogue and activism around how we address one another, with respect to both names and pronouns. Students should be referred to by the name they prefer, and with the proper pronunciation, by faculty and other students. I will gladly honor your request to address you by the name you prefer and gender pronouns that correspond to your gender identity. Please advise me of your name’s proper pronunciation, and any name or pronouns not reflected by the record in Spire early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

### **Policy on Use of Course Materials**

Course materials can be shared among classmates, roommates, friends and family. They cannot be shared on social media. Recording of class sessions is not allowed barring special permission; these recordings cannot be shared on social media.

## **Students with Disabilities**

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

## **Academic Honesty Statement**

Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent ([http://www.umass.edu/dean\\_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/)).

## **Schedule of Readings**

### Wednesday, January 23: Introduction

- Introduction to Class and Each Other

### Monday, January 28: Getting Started...

- Screening and reflection

### Wednesday, January 30: Discussing Big Questions, Defining Terms

- Homework assignment (reactions to screened performance)
- Naomi Weisstein, "Why We Aren't Laughing Anymore," *Ms* (November 1973)

### Monday, February 4: Defining Terms

- John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Blackwell, 2009), 1-26
- Andrew Stott, "Introduction," *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-16; see also Glossary, 195-200

### Wednesday, February 6: Why Aren't Women Funny?

- Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair* (January 2007)
- Linda Mizejewski, "Pretty/Funny women and Comedy's Body Politics: Funniness, Prettiness, and Feminism," *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 1-26

Monday, February 11: Why Aren't Women Funny, cont...

- Rebecca Krefting, "Laughter in the Final Instance: The Cultural Economy of Humor (Or why women aren't perceived to be as funny as men)," *Laughing Stalk*, 140-156
- Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 1-15.

Wednesday, February 13: The History of Race and Humor in the United States

- Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 1-35
- [HIGHLY RECOMMENDED BUT OPTIONAL]: Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977/2007), 298-366

**In Class:** Ethnic Notions (dir. Marlon Riggs, 1987) [KANOPY]

\*\*\*\*PLEASE NOTE: NEXT WEEK IS THE HEAVIEST WEEK OF READING OF THE COURSE:  
PLEASE BUDGET YOUR TIME ACCORDINGLY\*\*\*\*

Tuesday, February 19 [Monday Schedule]: Debating the Ethics of Humor

- Paul Lewis, "What's So Funny about a Dead Terrorist?: Toward an Ethics of Humor for the Digital Age," in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, edited by Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 214-232
- Gary Spencer, "An analysis of JAP-baiting humor on the college campus," *Humor* 2-4 (1989): 329-348
- Akane Kanai, "On not taking the self seriously: Resilience, relatability and humour in young women's Tumblr blogs," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019): 60-77.

Wednesday, February 20: Debating the Ethics of Humor

- Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington; Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1-23
- Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington; Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 116-147

Monday, February 25: Debating the Ethics of Humor ~ The Case of Rape Jokes

- Raul Perez and Viveca S. Greene, "Debating rape jokes vs. rape culture: framing and counter-framing misogynistic comedy," *Social Semiotics* (2016): 1-18
- Roxane Gay, "Some Jokes are funnier than others," *Bad Feminist* (Harper Perennial, 2014), 177-182

**In Class:**

"Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell: Extended Talk with Jim Norton and Lindy West

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtUb\\_E1qUHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtUb_E1qUHA))

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0aJnEq8yv0>)

Lindy West, "If Comedy Has No Lady Problem, Why Am I Getting So Many Rape Threats?"

<http://jezebel.com/if-comedy-has-no-lady-problem-why-am-i-getting-so-many-511214385>

Lindy West, "How to Make a Rape Joke," *Jezebel* (12 July 2012): <http://jezebel.com/5925186/how-to-make-a-rape-joke>

Wednesday, February 27:

**In Class:** Cameron Esposito, *Rape Jokes* (2018)

Monday, March 4: Analyzing Humor

- Gary Alan Fine, "Review: Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of the Human Experience, by Peter L. Berger," *Contemporary Sociology* 27, no. 4 (July 1988): 383-385
- Alice Raynor, "Creating the Audience: It's All in the Timing," in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, edited by Judy Batalion (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2012), 28-39
- Dustin Goltz, "Ironic Performativity: Amy Schumer's Big (White) Balls," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2015): 266-285

Wednesday, March 6: Analyzing Humor

**In Class:** Screening

Monday, March 11-Wednesday, March 13: SPRING BREAK!!!

\*\*\*\*MONDAY'S READINGS ARE EXTENSIVE...MAKE SURE TO BUDGET TIME AND MAYBE TACKLE SOME OVER THE BREAK!\*\*\*\*

Monday, March 18: Feminism, Activism, and Humor

- C. Willett, & J. Willett, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter: Bitches, Whores and Other Fumerists," in S. Crasnow & J. Waugh (Eds.), *Philosophical feminism and popular culture* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 15-36
- Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 1-30
- Janet Bing, "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" *Women and Language* 27, no. 1(Spring 2004): 22-33

Wednesday, March 20: **Reductress**

- Lisa Colletta, "Postmodernity and the Gendered Use of Political Satire," in Dickinson et al, *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 207-18
- PERUSE: *The Reductress*: <http://reductress.com/> in advance of class

Monday, March 25: Anti-Racist Humor

- Naomi Zack, "Black Female Crossover Comedy: Freedom, Liberty, and Minstrelsy," in S. Crasnow & J. Waugh, eds., *Philosophical feminism and popular culture* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 37-50.
- Jessyka Finley, "Raunch and Redress: Interrogating Pleasure in Black Women's Stand-Up Comedy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4 (2016): 780-798
- Check Out: Sisters of Comedy at <https://www.agundaokeyo.com>

Wednesday, March 27: CLASS CANCELLED

Monday, April 1: Humour, "Unruliness," and the Body

- K. Rowe, "The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter," in B. Arrighi, ed., *Understanding inequality: The intersection of race/ethnicity, class, and gender*, Second Edition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 261-276

- Jesse David Fox, “Nicole Byer Demands You Laugh at Her Fat Jokes,” *Vulture* (14 January 2019): <https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/nicole-byer-standup-comedy-fat-jokes-good-one.html> (available on Moodle)

Wednesday, April 3: Sexuality and Humor

- Jennifer Reed, “Sexual Outlaws: Queer in a Funny Way,” *Women’s Studies* 40, no. 6 (2011): 762-777
- Joanne Gilbert, “Lesbian Stand Up Comics and the Politics of Laughter,” in *Women and Comedy*, edited by Peter Dickinson et al (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 185-196

Monday, April 8: Class visit from Kelsey Flynn, Stand-Up extraordinaire

Wednesday, April 10: Improv workshop with Toast

Wednesday, April 17 [Monday schedule]: talk with Paige Smith-Hogan, stand-up comedian, improviser, producer... and Feminism, Comedy, and Humor alum!!

Monday, April 22: Presentations

Wednesday, April 24: Presentations

Monday, April 29: Screening

Wednesday, May 1: Reflection