

WGSS 395
We 5:30-8:00pm
Classroom: South College W101

Office: South College W417
Office Hours: By Appointment
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Feminism, Comedy, and Humor Spring 2017

This Year's Theme: Comedy and Politics

“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

This course will explore the relationship between comedy, humor and politics from a feminist perspective. Taking an expansive definition of “politics” as “the practice and theory of influencing other people on a global, civic or individual level” (Wikipedia), we will explore why comedy provides such a potent vehicle for political messages and statements, and what kind of influence it exercises. We will push these questions a bit further to ask whether comedy is necessarily a subversive genre or whether it tends to support the status quo; we will further attempt to make sense humor that seems to do both of these things simultaneously. Importantly, our goal is not to dissect why something is or is not funny. Rather, we will think about the ways in which a particular performance/piece of comedy is political, how it works, and what its effects are. To answer these questions, we will explore the gendered, sexualized, and racial dynamics of comedy. Our course readings will include both written texts and various audio-visual media; however, we will focus primarily on US stand-up, sketch comedy, and television shows from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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, particularly 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

Course Structure

For the first eight weeks of classes, our meeting time will focus on our readings and screenings. Three weeks will be dedicated to workshops that aim to provide you with skills to create your own piece of humor. The last two weeks of class will be dedicated to presenting your projects.

Readings

The course readings are meant to introduce key concepts, arguments, and ideas from the critical scholarship on comedy and humor. There are no readings to purchase. All of the readings are available either as ebooks through the UMass library catalog, through ereserves (linked through Moodle), or on Moodle. Some materials may be available through Netflix, but they are not required. It is essential that you complete the readings, as discussions depend on everyone having done the work. For this reason, there will be weekly quizzes on the readings. These quizzes will be completed on Moodle in advance of our class meetings; more details on the quizzes below. Because we only meet once a week, and this is an upper-level undergraduate seminar, the readings are considerable.

Workshops

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 reflections on the workshops within 24 hours of their completion.

Evaluation

- **Participation (25%):** Participation in this class is very important. I view what we do in the classroom as important as what happens outside. Your participation grade will be assessed based on a) attendance; b) participation in class discussions and small group work; c) participation in workshops; d) completion of response papers following workshops. **Five percent of this 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.**
- **Quizzes (30%):** For each meeting that we readings are assigned, you will have a quiz. Thus, you will have quizzes due on the following dates:
 - February 1
 - February 8
 - February 15
 - February 22
 - March 1
 - March 8
 - March 22You are expected to complete the quiz on Moodle by 15 minutes before the relevant class meeting at the latest. Each quiz will be 10-15 questions. The questions will be multiple choice and true/false. They cover content; they are not designed to “getcha.”
- **Media Analysis (20%):** **For this assignment, you will work in pairs.** I will assign you to pairs by the end of 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 women comedians. To this end, you will have to 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 you 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 reserves. 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 Friday, March 17 at 11:55pm on Moodle.

- Wanda Sykes, “What Happened to Ms. Sykes” (2016) [available on YouTube]
 - Jen Kirkman, “I’m Going to Die Alone (And I Feel Fine)” (2015)
 - Maria Bamford, “The Special Special Special!” (2012)
 - Cameron Esposito, “Same Sex Symbol” (2014)
 - Chelsea Peretti, “One of the Greats” (2014)
 - Amy Schumer, “Mostly Sex Stuff” (2012)
 - Hari Kondabalu, “Waiting for 2042” (2014; audio)
 - 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)
 - Spy (dir. Paul Feig, 2015)
 - Bridesmaids (dir. Paul Feig, 2011)
- **Final Project:** Create a Thing!! (25%): 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. Together, over the course of the term, we will decide on the particular parameters of the project (including whether you want to work alone, in pairs, or in groups), as well as the grading rubric. However please note that, on my end, the emphasis in evaluation will be on **effort**, originality, and creativity. **Presentations April 19 and 26; physical artefacts due April 26**
 - **Bonus Points Opportunity!** (5%): Attend International Women’s Day Celebration at the Student Union of March 8 from 4-5:30, and prepare a one page report on the event. Will contribute 5% extra to your final grade! Submit your reflections on Moodle. **Please see March 8 entry for further details.**

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 an 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. There will be no extensions. Assignments that are not submitted by the due date will receive a zero.

Food!

We are meeting during mealtimes—please feel free to bring victuals!

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.

Students with Disabilities

I will do my best to accommodate disabilities and specific needs. To arrange accommodation, please contact Disability Services: (<http://www.umass.edu/disability/index.html>).

Academic Dishonesty

This course follows the university guidelines for academic honesty. According to the Dean of Students Office, academic dishonesty is the attempt to secure unfair advantage for oneself or another in any academic exercise. For our course, this includes plagiarism and facilitating dishonesty. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty and require further information regarding the Dean of Students' policy, please see http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/#A

***Should any questions arise at any time, please feel free to contact me.**

I aim to answer emails within 24 hours*

January 25: Introductions

February 1: Unpacking the Politics of Humor, Pt. 1

-What political work does/can humor do?

-Are there “ethics” of humor?

Required:

Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington; Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1-23 [ereserves]

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 [ereserves]

Nicholas Holm (and respondents), “Reassessing the Right to Laughter: Humour, Dissent, and the Liberal Imagination,” *AntePodium: Online Journal of World Affairs*, Victoria University Wellington (2011): Read pages 1-27, 34-40 [ereserves]

Hershal Pandya, “Maybe Political Correctness Isn’t Ruining Comedy,” *Splitsider.com*, February 8, 2016: <http://splitsider.com/2016/02/maybe-political-correctness-isnt-ruining-comedy/> [Moodle]

Recommended:

Gary Alan Fine and Christine Wood, “Accounting for Jokes: Jocular Performance in a Critical Age,” *Western Folklore* 69, no. ¾ (Summer/Fall 2010): 299-321 [ereserves]

Gary Spencer, “An Analysis of JAP-baiting humor on the college campus,” *Humor* 2, no. 4 (1989): 329-348 [ereserves]

Stephen A. Smith, “Humor as Rhetoric and Cultural Argument,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 51-64 [ereserves]

Salvatore Attardo et al., “Humor and political correctness. A roundtable discussion conducted via e-mail.” *Humor* 10, no. 4 (1997): 453-513 [ereserves]

Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene, “Introduction: Popular Culture and Post-9/11 Politics,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, xi-xxxv [ereserves]

February 8: Unpacking the Politics of Humor, Pt. 2

-What role does the audience play in adjudicating the politics of humor?

-To what degree is the politics of humor subjective?

-Can we come to any consensus regarding the “meaning” of a text?

Required:

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 [ereserves]

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 [ereserves]

Dustin Goltz, “Ironic Performativity: Amy Schumer’s Big (White) Balls,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2015): 266-285 [ereserves]

Paul Lewis, "Joke and Anti-Joke: Three Jews and a Blindfold," *Journal of Popular Culture* 21, no. 1 (1987): 63-73 [ereserves]

Recommended:

"Trump Therapy: With Love From Abroad," *New York Times*, December 4, 2016: https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004802677/trump-therapy-with-love-from-abroad.html?emc=edit_tnt_20161204&nid=69742765&tntemail0=y [Moodle]

February 15: Race and Humor, Pt. 1

-How has humor served as a vehicle for racism?

-How have distinctive humor cultures grown up within particular communities (e.g. African American communities)?

-How does contemporary humor navigate race? Does humor serve to divide or unite communities?

Required:

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, 363-400 [ereserves]

Simon Weaver, "Jokes, Rhetoric, and Embodied Racism: A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of the Logics of Racist Jokes on the Internet," *Ethnicities* 11, no. 4 (2011), 413-435 [ereserves]

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

Recommended:

Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977/2007), 298-366 [ereserves]

Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 1-13, 237-244 [ereserves]

Documentary: "Why We Laugh" (2010) [ereserves]

February 22: Race and Humor, Pt. 2

-How has humor served as a tool to combat racism, and to give voice to racially marginalized communities?

-What are the challenges confronted by anti-racist humor? Especially when we approach anti-racist humor through an intersectional lens?

Required:

Simon Weaver, "The 'Other' Laughs: Black Humour and Resistance in Anti-Racist Comedy," *Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2010), 31-48 [ereserves]

Linda Mizejewski, "Chapter Five: 'White People Are Looking At You!' Wanda Sykes' Black Looks," *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 155-189 [ereserves]

Recommended:

Jessyka Finley, "Raunch and Redress: Interrogating Pleasure in Black Women's Stand-Up Comedy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4 (2016): 780-798 [ereserves]

Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, 132-177 (on Whoopi Goldberg) [ereserves]

March 1: Gender, Sexuality, and Humor, Pt. 1

- Why are women considered inherently unfunny?
- What power—and (according to some) danger—lies in women’s laughter?
- What are the unique challenges faced by female comedians?

Required:

Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair* (January 2007) [e-reserves]

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 [e-reserves]

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 [ereserves]

Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 1-15, 19-37 [ereserves]

In Class: Documentary: *Why We Laugh*

Recommended:

Documentary: *Wisecracks* (1988) [ereserves]

March 8: Gender, Sexuality, and Humor, Pt. 2

- How can humor serve as a tool of feminist resistance? How have women used it to such ends?
- Are there seeds of feminist potential within humorous archetypes?

Required:

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 [ereserves]

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 [ereserves]

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

Elise Czajkowski, “In ‘Asking for It,’ Adrienne Truscott Reappropriates the Rape Joke,” *New York Times* (10 April 2015): http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/11/arts/in-asking-for-it-adrienne-truscott-reappropriates-the-rape-joke.html?emc=edit_tnt_20150410&nlid=69742765&tntemail0=y [Moodle]

Recommended:

Follow: “Funny Feminism” on Weird Sister: <http://weird-sister.com/category/funny-feminism/> [Moodle]

David Colon, “The First Comedy School for Teenage Girls Aims to Improve Comedy Farm Teams,” *Splitsider.com*, July 6, 2016: <http://splitsider.com/2016/07/the-first-comedy-school-for-teenage-girls-aims-to-improve-comedy-farm-teams/> [Moodle]

Divya Shekhar, “With feminism to fuel their humour, women stand-up comedians take a dig at issues that aren’t publicly aired,” *The Economic Times*, November 8, 2016: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/with-feminism-to-fuel-their-humour->

[women-stand-up-comedians-take-a-dig-at-issues-that-arent-publicly-aired/articleshow/55301146.cms](#) [Moodle]

*****BONUS POINTS OPPORTUNITY:** Attend celebration of International Women’s Day on March 8th, 4-6 PM in Cape Cod Lounge at the Student Union. This year’s national theme is “Be Bold for Change”. Write a one-page reflection on the event. Stay until the beginning of our class meeting.

March 15: No class ~ Spring Break!!

March 22: Stand-Up workshop with Jess Miller! (Reflection due April 13 by 8pm)

March 29: Improv workshop with Toast! (Reflection due March 30 by 8pm)

April 5: Satire Writing Workshop with *Reductress*! (Reflection due April 6 by 8pm)

Recommended:

Arielle Gordon, “Inside the Rise of Reductress,” *Splitsider.com*, November 15, 2016 [Moodle]: <http://splitsider.com/2016/11/inside-the-rise-of-reductress/>

Bonnie Wertheim, “Reductress Takes Its Satirical Voice Beyond the Internet,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2017 [Moodle]:

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/style/reductress-satire-upright-citizens-brigade-how-to-win-at-feminism.html?emc=edit_tnt_20170309&nliid=69742765&tntemail0=y

April 12: Humor and Activism

- How have activists (i.e. not professional comedians) used humor as a vehicle for protest?
- What are humor’s unique properties as a mode of activism?
- What might humor mean for activists themselves?
- Is humor an effective activist tool?

Required:

Marjolein ‘t Hart, “Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction,” in *Humour and Social Protest*, edited by Marjolein ‘t Hart and Dennis Bos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-20 [ereserves]

Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 72-104 [ereserves]

Amber Day, “Irony in Activism,” *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 145-185 [e-reserves]

Recommended:

Dave Philipps, “University of Texas Students Find the Absurd in a New Gun Law,” *New York Times* August 24, 2016 [Moodle]: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/us/university-of-texas-students-find-the-absurd-in-a-new-gun-law.html?emc=edit_tnt_20160824&nliid=69742765&tntemail0=y

April 19: Final Project Presentations

April 26: Final Project Presentations and Submission of physical materials