
Critical Exchange

The Political Force of the Comedic

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Contemporary Political Theory (2021) **20**, 419–446. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00451-z>; advance online publication 13 November 2020

Political comedy, whether it is in the form of an entertainment news show, meme, cartoon or even when a comedian uses their set to focus on a political issue has become ubiquitous in the past 20 years. This is not just an American phenomenon. Countries worldwide have their own political comedy shows. Comedians who confront authority have been elected to office. A sense of humor is now seen as a requirement on campaign trails. We suggest that comedy's dominance in popular



culture is not only a means to inform and entertain audiences who are largely confronting precarity, increasing police power and state abandonment of its governing role, but also because it is the preferred genre: as the old saying goes, they laugh to keep from crying. Ridicule and parody, from both sides, also serve to energize audiences, and have done so for decades.

This critical exchange is focused on how *political* comedy deepens the attention span of audiences, prepares them for policy, energizes their attitudes toward elites and perhaps educates them. Political comedy is often scoffed at because it can't pass the test of turning audiences into agents, or, even less daunting, voters. Political comedy has also been seen as having little value for critique (Ferguson, 2018). What if comedy's role in politics is something now more akin to music or any other aesthetic experience? People are not surprised when musical artists sue politicians for using their songs, but with comedy, somehow the bar for political efficacy is set much higher. One way to look at comedy is not through the traditional modern sense of agency but through the work it might do in preparing the ground work – the affective cultural shift – necessary to effect widespread change at some future point in time.

There are two sets of analysis of political comedy in this exchange. The first look at comedic interventions into politics. Both essays by Finley, and by Willett and Willett, analyze examples set against the style of authoritarian political leaders. US's Donald Trump and Uganda's Yoweri Museveni's inability to take a joke is the necessary backdrop for these examples, serving to make them even more dramatic. Jessyka Finley argues that the satire of Sarah Cooper and Stella Nyanzi should be seen as 'a manifestation of Black feminist thought', particularly 'because it diverges from standard academic thought' (Hill Collins, 2000). Willett and Willett describe K-Pop's TikTok stars as 'pranksters' who intervene in the mediascape to unhinge a president unphased by facts or moral discourse. As I write this, Trump threatens to ban TikTok from the United States.

The second kind of analysis looks at how political comedy functions in a social media dominated environment. Momen analyzes and regrets that social media platforms cut citizens off into niches where they can enjoy their humor without reference to a more enlightened understanding of political order. The 'irrationality' produced by the postmodern condition makes comedy ineffective at provoking widespread political action. Krefling's contribution pulls out two prominent stand-up comedians, Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle, to demonstrate how they use 'seriousness' to amplify already ongoing social movements in the form of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, respectively.

We hope that this critical exchange can inspire new thinking and insight beyond debates about political agency and critique. As we move through the 21st century, it is clear that state institutions no longer play a dominant role in directly forming hegemonic values. We need to look at the products of the cultural industry and their



critics to figure out where any kind of possible resistance may be possible. We believe comedy is a strong starting point.

Julie Webber

Has political satire turned rational in our post-rational world?

America canceled after disastrous final season (Smith, 2020)

Like love, satire is intuitive, irrational, and silly. It resonates in our emotional brain but stirs up the rational part by imparting useful insights. It connects the seemingly incoherent parts and often creates a rambling oration that clears up our reasoning. The subtlety of satire is in its indirect, incidental, and implied insinuations: it leaves an impression on our minds without torturous diatribes. The irrationality of satire flows through our funny bones to our rational understanding of ourselves as well as our worlds. There is no doubt about the laughter that satire evokes in current American political discourse, but its sway has changed its course.

Satire comes in various shapes and forms. Satire has always functioned as a political tool in American history, but its character, audience, and most importantly, its context, have gone through a radical transformation. Literary satire gained a mainstream audience with its visual presentation when cartoons became crucial components of magazines and newspapers. Performative satire, meaning stand-up comedians or improv artists, however, were always on the fringe of society. Television only allowed sanitized satire for its family audiences and political satire commenting on race relations or foreign wars was taboo in the early decades. It was the Watergate scandal that finally allowed the unrestrained mocking of the president, and not surprisingly, American political satire still focuses on politicians or key personalities rather than the overall structure that keeps churning out problematic issues or behaviors (Momen, 2019, p. 44). Satire often takes credit for being able to articulate serious insights in language that tickles our funny bone and resonates with a deeper value system. Although there is ample global evidence that satire can work as a tool of resistance, we have to examine the American context closely before we can accord such an accolade to the genre of satire.

American political satirists are no longer on the fringe, but at the center of television and other digital media that dominate our lives. They have become popular cultural figures with loyal audiences, not the kind of notorious radicals who were dreaded for not respecting social and religious conventions. A powerful satirist like Lenny Bruce died an untimely death in the 1960s, mired in debt and sickness, after constantly being prosecuted by the police for the sharp edge of his satire. The change in the cultural status of the satirist has only occurred in the new reality where public space overwhelmingly amounts to digital presence, a drift that is likely to fortify in the post-COVID-19 world of segregation and the renewed importance of distanced entertainment.



Satire has always functioned as a useful tool in American politics, although it only obtained a mainstream presence, which replaced its fringe and radical dynamic in the last two decades. A number of satiric gems buttressed the scholarly evaluation of the Reagan and second Bush presidencies, portraying the two milestone administrations as irrational and postmodern, and deserving to be laughed at for their inconsistent principles and ruthless tactics of image manipulation. Nevertheless, the overall rationality of the American political system – namely, trust in the logical nature of policies and the functionality of processes – was the basis of satire that highlighted instances of corruption and unanticipated policy impacts as the result of flaws and inefficiencies, or the stubbornness of dominant political figures. This superiority mode of humor focuses on periodic political or cultural blemishes, marked by the undertone that these imperfections are the *only* problem, and therefore does not examine the historic roots of the overall mishaps. An apt example would be the flurry of satire that erupted against the mishandling of the Iraq War, which emphasized the deficiencies of political figures like Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, but seldom placed the Iraq War in the long series of American foreign policy misadventures.

In contrast to this genteel and rational tone, there exists a different mechanism of humor, one that questions the validity of the social and political system itself. This relief mode of humor exposes the discrepancies and bigotries inherent to the system and can be very powerful in oppressive regimes. The biting and cynical sarcasm of Lenny Bruce or the subdued and smoother tone of George Carlin utilized this mode, but present-day satirists who can lay claim to the cultural clout of social commentators have mostly been hesitant to question the systemic hypocrisies of American culture or the political system and continue to target individual personalities or specific actions rather than contextualizing their thematic continuities.

Finally, the third mode of humor is incongruity where poking fun and locating the absurd becomes the whole show. This style of revealing irrationalities becomes the substance of the play, not its historicity or meaning. This mode is perhaps a perfect match for analyzing the Trump presidency.

The language of satire is inherently irrational. It exposes and exaggerates, it pinpoints the gaps in apparently rational structures, and it grasps the folds of rationality where misuses and manipulations occur. The surprise, the play, and the unexpected all come together to provide a new viewpoint to a known event. Social justice movements, especially those embodying protest, have tried to emulate the language of irony and a playful demeanor to expand their supporter base. The problem arises because the irrational mode of satire is effective when the political system is rational. If the political system itself becomes irrational, then there is nothing left to reveal or new meanings to be unearthed. Satire can still create laughter, but it fails as a tool that can trigger higher consciousness.



It is worth noting that satire has always played a much more prominent role in authoritarian regimes, where hiding information is a major preoccupation of rulers. Satire then creates the crack in the political veneer, where what was once unspeakable can now be uttered, garbed in humor. More importantly, satire against the powerful is often rooted in the common impression of the decadence of the powerful. American satirists played a crucial role during the Iraq War, preceding conventional journalists in their questioning of the justification of the war. Where they fell short was when their focus remained on a few major political figures and not on the continuity of American foreign misadventures. I have yet to see any satire of how similar the Iraq and Vietnam wars were. The performative mode of satire is also quick and shifting. Its structure enables it to point toward inconsistencies but does not allow prolonged attention and analysis of policy issues.

Another problematic aspect of our current world is how reality itself has diverged from everyday understanding. Using the example of the well-known 1950s movie *Rashomon*, Manjoo (2008) has elaborated on how our political reality caters to two different groups of inhabitants, who not only have different policy preferences but different belief systems about the world, leading to a bifurcated partisan news reality. Satirist Stephen Colbert coined the word ‘truthiness’, which captures the notion of accepting only what is comforting and familiar and negating whatever feels threatening. The fact that truthiness has been accepted as a new concept in the formal thesaurus is evidence of our mutually exclusive binary world. The loss of shared meaning has turned satire into a biased tool that can only be used by one group against the other. Satire does not connect us in laughter, it further detaches us in aversion. We are unable to laugh together but can easily get angry at each other. Satire always generated fury, but that fury was against the powerful. Now we belong to multiple camps and get incensed against selected groups.

The reality of politics and everyday life is indeed dissimilar across racial and sociocultural groups. Who is more vulnerable in the current pandemic or who is more likely to be the victim of police brutality are realities that are divergent and rooted in historic trends. What is new in satire is that when it has finally gained a prominent voice in mainstream society it has turned partisan, or at least is strongly viewed as being so. The same satirists who used their art to critique the Iraq War and Bush’s numerous debacles remained silent against the killings caused by President Obama’s drone wars. Obama indeed stirred up ferocious humor (from the right) as has Trump (from the left), but the humorist and the audience now belong to two distinct camps. When we still believed in a rational political system, the powerful satire launched by Colbert against Bush administration policies at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner in 2006 was shunned by the media, but by 2017, with Trump as president, we no longer believed in the rationality of the political system. All Hasan Minhaj had to do was list the actions of the Trump presidency to earn his accolades as satirist. This is not meant to be a



critique of Minhaj's aptitude as satirist; rather, it points to the lack of opaqueness in the material that was available to him. The difference between how Colbert and Minhaj were treated by the media does not correlate to the popularity of the two presidencies, but how much irrationality has been normalized as part of the political process. Our politics has become post-rational, embodying postmodern tendencies that accept the simultaneous existence of multiple realities.

By highlighting the irrational components of our ostensibly rational social and political norms, satire questions the rationality of the overall system. The role of satire is to point out the cracks in the rational discourse, but if politics itself sheds its rational façade and exhibits overt perversion, then what becomes of the role of satire?

This, to me, is the crucial concern for today's satire. On the one hand, satire has been keeping us as (if not more) informed as the news media, starting from the Bush presidency onwards, by exposing hidden manipulations orchestrated by the power elites. On the other hand, the constant barrage of exposés has somewhat normalized the scale and nature of corruption, without the methodical scrutiny that historically was supposed to follow such unmaskings. Colbert formed a Super PAC in front of a live TV audience, collected donations, and used the donations for political advertisements, thereby revealing the lawlessness of political campaign contributions. He earned a Peabody Award for his efforts, but failed to make a dent in the wild practices of PAC money that shape our elections. The Colbert Super PAC was one of the most insightful and delightful performances in recent political satire. We all laughed in disbelief yet that was the limit of the impact of that piece of satire.

The Trump presidency, seemingly a goldmine for satire, has actually made it impotent. The difference between formal news coverage of Trump and satirists' portrayal of Trump has been all but erased. John Oliver, Hasan Minhaj and even Trevor Noah continue to make us laugh, but they deliver valuable information as well and interpret the information more like journalists.

Their style may be rooted in evoking laughter by juxtaposing dissimilar effects, but they are hardly revealing any irrationalities that tarnish the rationality of the system. What they highlight is hardly hidden, and in fact is often proudly proclaimed. Their art has been relegated to presenting explicit facts or events rather than uncovering hidden layers to divulge fresh meanings.

One of the most thoughtful analyses of political protests after the May 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis came from Jon Stewart who perhaps commands as much respect as a political commentator as a satirist. He succinctly captures the connection between economic disparity and police brutality: 'Police are basically "border patrols" between "Two Americas" who exist to perpetuate segregation' (Haltiwanger, 2020). He had eloquently reported similar protests in Baltimore with effective sarcasm a few years ago on his show. The retired satirist



demonstrates how plain language without outrageous scorn or twists works best to capture the ongoing political calamity.

Satire was powerful once because it was outlandish and freestanding and, was therefore, disruptive of social, political, and cultural belief systems. With the proliferation of multiple belief systems, which can often be bizarre and idiosyncratic, satire has lost its power of persuasion. It only caters to discrete sets of believers, and does not need much skill to reveal the truth. Satire thrives on the language of shock, irony, sarcasm, and even profanity. If truth is not hidden, then the surprise factor in the revelation is absent. If irony becomes absorbed in the rational discourse of politics, then sarcasm loses its bite. In the context of dual or multiple realities, the sharp tone of satire sounds like rote accusation, not the depiction of an alternate explanation.

It is in the Trump era that the veneer of rationality has been formally erased from political discourse. Although it seems as if the Trump presidency is a never-ending treasure trove for satirists, they are actually facing a harder challenge to make fun of the manifest irrationality. There is no need for deconstruction or to plough through multiple layerings, because the political performance itself contains duplicities as badges of honor. Satire can take a stab at political ills, but is unable to shame the rogue action or the perpetrator of the act. Satire helplessly narrates the actions of the goons in the hood, imitating trolling rather than providing new meaning for the misdeeds by way of employing comedic dexterity.

Satire has lost its edge and has become part of the mainstream, being reduced to an effective rational tool to critique the excesses of power and corruption. It has lost its flair to shock us or to show us how irrationality is weaved within the very fabric of our social and political structures. The depravity in question no longer needs to be revealed with tact and panache, because the immorality itself has been elevated as performance. Even the rowdy and raucous language of satire seems too tame to capture the unrestrained Trump presidency and the unforeseen impacts of the global pandemic.

Satire is competing with reality to appear absurd to retain its customary perverse demeanor. The main tool in its arsenal, irony, has been swept away by actual news items such as ‘Utah man yelling “All Lives Matter” aims bow and arrow at protestors’ (Geinor, 2020). With Ivanka Trump heading the ‘skills-based hiring’ initiative in the White House, an exasperated journalist recently declared, ‘Irony just broke!’ (Reed, 2020). President Trump’s much touted post-lockdown Oklahoma rally was tarnished by TikTok teens and K-Pop fans who reserved thousands of seats for the event and never showed up (Ahrens, 2020). This is all real news with serious political implications, which cannot be made any funnier by satire. When we are drowned in irrationality, satire becomes simultaneously omnipresent and redundant. Citing the contemporary example of fictitious TikTok rally participants, the Willetts (in this Critical Exchange) elevates prank and play as fruitful mechanisms for unnerving the object of ridicule. But the exposé provided



by satire seems redundant and the only thing more disorienting than the actual is the prank or troll that takes the inherent absurdity even farther in a playful but not necessarily ideological direction.

I am not predicting the death of satire, but I do believe that satire now has changed its language and purpose and has squarely situated itself along the rational spheres of politics, news, and journalism. It has enriched the media space with its presence, and may have made us more politically aware and even active, but that has all come at an expense. The price of being commonplace and popular is acceptance of the norms and values of the political system. The fringe radical role of satire that could question any and all mores is now relegated to mere partisan critique. Satire may continue to be funny and sharp, but it cannot pierce our reasoning as we all have made up our minds.

Here is my epitaph, then: *Satire canceled after reality takes over.*

Mehnaaz Momen

Exposing ‘chocolate-covered bullshit’: The political power of black women’s satire

The first decade of the 21st century was dubbed the golden age of political humor by Rob King (2012), who writes about ‘the impulse to blend humor and political nonfiction as a way of critiquing the inadequacies of political and media discourse’ (p. 264). This golden age has continued into the 2020s. Ordinary citizens can marshal humor to challenge state institutions and structures of institutional power, while also entertaining audiences. M. Lane Bruner (2005) characterizes carnivalesque protest as that which features ‘the blending of the fictive and the real, the use of popular forms of humor, the inversion of hierarchies’ (p. 144), and argues that such protests, if subjects perform them within the most favorable conditions, have the capacity to transgress, reveal the limits of, and perhaps even defeat some forms of institutional oppression (p. 137).

I agree with Bruner’s assessment of the efficacy of political humor, especially for black women who I have previously argued (2016) use satirical humor as a creative site for politicking. In this piece, I draw on Lauren Berlant’s theory of humorlessness and Bruner’s notion of the humorless state to consider the politics of Black women’s satire, closely reading the work of two contemporary Black women humorists: Ugandan academic and feminist activist, Stella Nyanzi and American parodist, Sarah Cooper.

There is a relationship between adherence to form, when it comes to using humor to target heads of state as both Nyanzi and Cooper do, and whether or not the state (or representation of the state) that is the target of critique, is ‘humorless’ or not (Bruner). According to Lauren Berlant (2017), ‘What constitutes humorlessness...is someone’s insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the



relational dynamic' (p. 308, emphasis in original). Sarah Cooper and Stella Nyanzi undercut this relational dynamic as they use humor to target heads of state in ways that demand we look more closely at how they wield and maintain power. However, it is clear that the satirical critique needs to be intelligible *by the state* writ large for one's humor to be politically efficacious, with the fewest consequences to the humorist (Bruner) – and this intelligibility, as these cases reveal, has much to do with the stylistic form in which it is presented.

We might consider Black women's satire as a manifestation of Black feminist thought as conceptualized by Patricia Hill Collins (2000). As Collins notes, 'Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory – it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the *purpose* of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. [Black women] aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice' (p. 9, emphasis in original). In other words, when we interrogate questions of satirical form, it forces us to think about the range of stylistic modalities Black women humorists use to persuade their audiences and bring about social transformation.

Kirsten Leng (2019) explores the political humor of Florynce Kennedy, a lawyer and activist who is the veritable foremother of Black feminist satire. Using humor to understand the way oppression functions to coerce consent to hegemony was crucial to Kennedy's political praxis, and it was her satirical humor aimed at exposing the hegemonic order that captured people's attention. Kennedy's satire meant to reveal what she called 'chocolate-covered bullshit', which, as she explained, was 'absolutely necessary in order to control people, and get them to want to take the shit you dump on them' (p. 220).

Dr. Stella Nyanzi is a Ugandan feminist activist and academic who takes up the mantle of Flo Kennedy, using satirical humor to challenge the coercive power of Uganda's near-authoritarian, long-ruling head of state, President Yoweri Museveni. Nyanzi uses humor to construct a public identity that butts up against hegemonic ideals of African womanhood and compulsory acquiescence to the patriarchal state. Her derisive, explosive satirical humor is a modality through which Nyanzi expresses her politics in ways that foment political and social transformation in Uganda.

Nyanzi is a staunch feminist activist, and prolific researcher, yet it is her profane, often vulgar protests that are her 'claim to fame'. Headlines about Nyanzi tend to focus on her irreverent, unrepentant attitude toward authority. Nyanzi, who has hundreds of followers, often uses Facebook to disseminate her political satire. Scholars have recently shown social media to be a 'vehicle for serious political engagement', and political humor functions in several crucial ways, according to Davis *et al.*, 'expressing opposition, establishing political subjectivity, and bolstering civic support' (2018, p. 3905). Stella Nyanzi's 2017 Facebook post, where she hailed President Museveni as 'a pair of buttocks', is a provocative



example of the persuasive power of her humor on social media. In January of 2017, Nyanzi posted on Facebook:oppression, suppression and repression!

Museveni matakoo nyo! Ebyo byeyayogedde e Masindi yabaddde ayogera lutako ... (*Museveni is very much a pair of buttocks. When he spoke in Masindi he was speaking as buttocks do.*) ... I mean, seriously, when buttocks shake and jiggle, while the legs are walking, do you hear other body parts complaining? When buttocks produce shit, while the brain is thinking, is anyone shocked? When buttocks fart, are we surprised? That is what buttocks do. They shake, jiggle, shit and fart. Museveni is just another pair of buttocks (Nyanzi, 2017). Translation cited in Tibukano.

Nyanzi's post clearly expresses her opposition to the policies of Museveni, who removed the constitutional age limit for the presidency in 2018, but more subtly it implicates Ugandan citizens' complicity in the regime's excess of power and her use of vulgarity serves as a 'wake-up call'. Some scholars (Tamale, 2017; Tibakuno, 2019) have suggested Nyanzi employs 'radical rudeness'; a political tactic dating to British colonial Uganda in the 1940s, when people chose different types of highly visible, disruptive, disrespectful, and insulting behavior to bring about desired political change (Summers, 2006).

Nyanzi's Facebook posts are contemporary examples of radical rudeness in action; Nyanzi was arrested and charged under Uganda's Computer Misuse Act of 2011 'for harassing and using indecent language against the President and the first family online' (Article 19, 2017). Nyanzi's excremental reading of Museveni, for which she served 33 days in prison, is an exposé of Uganda's citizens figuratively covered in (chocolate-covered bull) shit. Its indignation and use of satirical metaphor reproduce the excesses of the state that are associated with unchecked institutional power, and the post's potential to persuade led the state to attempt to gag her.

Although Berlant identifies humorlessness as an 'individual pathology and the self-reproductive drive of power, norm, and law' (p. 313), the case of Stella Nyanzi provides a clear example of how we can use Bruner and Berlant together for a more nuanced understanding of humorlessness, elevated to the level of the state. While Berlant takes on humorlessness at the level of the individual, Bruner analyzes it as a phenomenon characteristic of repressive political states that brook no satirical or humorous critique.

I argue that the same affective states are in play, only on a different scale. Uganda should be classified as a humorless state, where 'corrupt governments, populated by people wanting to use political power to maintain their unjust advantages, have a very limited sense of humor and stifle public critique to maintain their status' (Bruner, p. 142). Just as the humorless individual sees only their perspective, the humorless state refuses to engage with the multiplicity of viewpoints inherently present in satirical criticism.



Nyanzi's Facebook post functions politically in all three important ways that constitute social media humor as a site for political engagement: she expresses her opposition to Yoweri Museveni; she establishes herself as a political subject; and she develops a framework for the public to oppose Uganda's leadership to dislodge Museveni and the ruling political party from power (Davis *et al.*, p. 3905). Even after being jailed, Nyanzi emerged all the more strident in her derision toward the president, refusing to be silenced even under the threat of imprisonment.

In 'honor' of Museveni's birthday in 2018, Nyanzi posted a poem with six stanzas dedicated to the president's mother's vagina. The poem offered a scathing critique of Museveni's then 33-year rule of Uganda, focusing on the ways he had destroyed the economy, undermined public institutions, and 'prematurely aborted any semblance of democracy, good governance, and rule of law' (Nyanzi, 2018). The poem is thematically structured around the metaphor of Esiteri's, i.e. Museveni's mother's vagina, itself a representation of the decaying wound of the post-colonial Ugandan condition.

Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.
How bitterly sad a day!
I wish the smelly and itchy cream-coloured candida festering in Esiteri's cunt
had suffocated you to death during birth.
Suffocated you just like you are suffocating us with oppression, suppression
and repression (Nyanzi, 2018)!

This first stanza sets the tone for the rest of the five stanzas, each more extravagant in their vulgarity and more comedic in their excessiveness and incisiveness than the last. Nyanzi's poem is confrontational, conjuring an affective response with its crass, dark humor. Nyanzi was again arrested for posting the 'vagina poem' on Facebook and convicted of cyber harassment under the same 2011 statute.

Against her will, Nyanzi appeared in court via video in 2019 to hear her sentence of eighteen months, nine of which she had already served. Three guards stood behind her as she shouted profanities and invectives, raising both middle fingers, challenging and rebuking the magistrate. Her microphone was cut, yet Nyanzi continued screaming, 'The justice system does not work for us! Fuck you... You have no right to mute my volume!'

The video of Nyanzi was projected into a courtroom packed with her supporters who cheered, clapped, and ululated as she spoke. 'I did not consent to come here!' Nyanzi shouted as she lifted her top, exposed her breasts, and began juggling them in her hands and dancing (Kagumire, 2019a, b). The video toggled away from Nyanzi to her supporters inside the court, many doubled over laughing. This public expression of transgressive outrage was not simply to shock the court; Nyanzi's breast juggling was meant to amuse her supporters and at the same time critique the very social boundaries that refuse to take women seriously as political subjects.



Yet Nyanzi fails to conform to typical profile of a satirist because, as Harrington and Manji (2013) maintain, satire's 'success requires that speaker and audience have in common certain moral values' (p. 9). Nyanzi's political satire takes a variety of generic forms and her humor is, at times, challenging to categorize. This is not surprising given that her humor targets a particularly humorless state, and one must cast the net wide in terms of means of persuasion, in order to be heard and have a chance at uptake of one's critiques.

For Nyanzi, humor is of course an artistic expression and she employs various sophisticated stylistic and aesthetic tools. But her humor is primarily expedient – to be employed as a political tactic meant to move people to act against hegemonic power. The moral element of her satire (the critique) is more important to her than the form her humor takes. Since humor is not sanctioned as a valid form of critical political speech (indeed, in a humorless state, little is!), a multiplicity of tactics/techniques embodies a scattershot approach that might reach the widest audience, or resonate among different portions of the populace.

American comedian Sarah Cooper has become a pop cultural figure during the coronavirus pandemic with a series of Donald Trump lip-syncs created with the TikTok app. Cooper hews much closer to the formal elements of political satire with her online parodies, if we understand that the primary function of parody is to 'offer an interpretation of a text that is really just a likeness of an original form, a copy that is infused with a critical perspective or take on a preexisting genre' (Becker, 2014, p. 426). 'How to medical' was the viral parody that brought Cooper to the spotlight, a video in which she lip-syncs the exact words Donald Trump spoke at a coronavirus taskforce news conference on 23 April 2020.

At this media event, Trump offered some eyebrow-raising suggestions for killing coronavirus inside the human body. Cooper mouths Trumps words, not missing a syllable. 'We hit the body with a tremendous, whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light', Trump/Cooper says, gesturing to aides who are seated off camera. Cooper cuts to herself in the role of a bewildered aide, who plays the traditional 'straight man', the rational foil to a surreally, yet all-too-real, Trump. 'Supposing, I said, you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or ... in some other way', Trump/Cooper continues. Cooper gestures toward her mouth, ears, finally her rear end (Cooper, 2020a). Cooper performs a striking political parody, rarely blinking, yet her eyes dart around the room conveying a sense of barely grasped control and command, paired with unease. Her performance is careful and calibrated, juxtaposed with Trump's garbage word salad, his uninformed and dangerous ideas for treating COVID-19, which creates a dissonance that gives rise to a cutting, derisive send-up of the commander-in-chief.

Cooper does not simply use President Trump's inept leadership and failure to adequately deal with the most significant crisis in a century as comedic fodder. Her selection of Trump's words, the way she satirically places Trump beside himself (Hariman, 2008, p. 249) as she mimes his words, indicates that Cooper is making a



substantive political claim, exposing his deep anxieties and political ineptitude (Davis *et al.*, p. 3899). Trump's words tumbling perfectly out of Cooper's mouth indicate the thoughtlessness behind his language, an absence of any real plan of what he will do or say in the face of a global crisis.

'It's been really spectacular. Yeah, I think, uh, I don't think anybody's done a better job...with testing, with ventilators, with all of the things we've done', Trump/Cooper claims in 'How to strong death totals'. Cooper stands before a whiteboard and checks off a box for each. 'And our, our, uh, death *totals*, our numbers per million people are really uh, very, very strong' (Cooper, 2020b). Cooper's gestures manifest a caricatured, parodic copy of Trump where she indicates his anxieties and neuroses, expertly citing public speaking tics, like his congested snuffle, that have been skewered across pop culture. Cooper performs them precisely and accurately, to great comic and political effect. Cooper now has dozens of parodic lip-syncs of Trump, a series called 'How to president'. In her relentless mockery, a political shift happens as his exact words are transmogrified into vacuous spewing, an amalgamation of the fictive and real that renders Cooper's parody carnivalesque (Bruner, p. 141). As Cooper brings us through the surreal nightmare of the Trump presidency using his very own words, Hariman's assessment of the politically persuasive function of parody seems to ring true. 'The parodic copy is far removed from the serious discourse by a series of displacements, each of them involving another drop in legitimacy, and yet it also directly points toward the center of its target' (p. 252).

Cooper's lip-syncs delegitimize Donald Trump in a way that, while playful and funny, have persuasive power. There is a well-established and illustrious history of American political satire. And unlike Museveni, who has the full apparatus of state power at his disposal to punish and chastise his critics, Trump (for now) must abide others' expressions of their first amendment rights and withstand their satirical barbs and parodic arrows. Her parodies are intelligible by the state, if not its current head.

There is something more illicit about what Cooper does, say, as opposed to the political parodies of *Saturday Night Live*. Yes, Cooper's parodies are playful. But parody as a generic form, 'centers on presenting the most realistic yet humorous impersonation' (Becker, p. 427). As Cooper's primary satirical vehicle, her playfulness may be overdetermined, obscuring the political expedience that she, like Stella Nyanzi, holds as her primary intent: to expose the repressive, hegemonic power of states with little to no tolerance for dissent or transgression – the 'humorless state in action' (Bruner, p. 142). Trump's vain preening at the podium barely conceals a painful and glaring insecurity and incompetence.

Cooper's performance, in which she sets Trump beside himself and occasionally performs the mute, horrified, rational straight man, is well-suited to Berlant's theory of humorlessness. Trump's 'striving' is 'abject' (p. 307) in the extent to which it fails, at competent government, as a unifying force, as the leader of a



country which refuses to recognize in him the sovereign leader that he yearns to be. Woe unto him, that his authoritarian impulses exist in a ‘non-humorless’ state, one that allows, recognizes, and sanctions comedy as political critique. Cooper deftly holds the mirror of parodic satire up to point out the inherent comedy in his abiding humorlessness – in Cooper’s parody, Trump becomes Berlant’s comb-over subject (p. 310). Although Trump has never publicly acknowledged Cooper’s videos, it is widely suspected that his efforts to ban TikTok are an effort to silence one of his most incisive and popular critics by way of shutting down her medium.

What does it mean that out of all the many targets of humor, these two Black women chose their heads of state? Nyanzi’s and Cooper’s satire is politically significant as an expression of ‘soft power’, as Bruner puts it: their skewers bet on the idea that ‘changing the ways people think changes the kinds of communities they create’ (Bruner, p. 150). Put another way, contemporary Black women’s satire has the potential to do much more than amuse and entertain. It can be a persuasive vehicle through which they ‘appeal to negative emotions in order to generate responses of anger, sadness, disgust, and outrage over the current world order’ (Sørensen, p. 132). Using humor, they reveal the policies and ideologies coming out of the heads of state as ‘chocolate-covered bullshit’. And that is no joke.

Jessyka Finley

Comedy’s ideological kerfuffles: From #MeToo to Black Lives Matter

Started by Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo Movement reached a crescendo in the fall of 2017. Tasmanian stand-up comic Hannah Gadsby could not have planned a better time to launch *Nanette*, a stand-up comedy performance combatting gender violence, homophobia, and misogyny. Unlike many comics seeking to appear ‘woke’ during their performances, Gadsby acknowledges unjust systems and unpacks injustices and their deleterious effects on the minds and bodies of women, gender queers, and LGBTQ. She remonstrates against sexual assault echoing the outrage of hundreds of women coming forward with their own stories during the height of #MeToo. In June of 2018, *Nanette* became available in the US, and the viewing public exploded with praise, awe, and a sprinkling of scorn – primarily for using anger and refusing to play by comedy’s rulebook. The public mainly heaped accolades on this innovative special for its comic vulnerability, deft deployment of joke structures, and savvy manipulation of audience expectations. Despite this groundbreaking success, she was *not* nominated for a Grammy in 2018 for best comedy album. Instead, Dave Chappelle won (that year and for two consecutive years after that), despite his platform of transphobia and sexism. We also know him for his use of the comedic arts for racial advocacy. Comedy extols and models bigotry just as it condemns and challenges the same – sometimes even from the same source.



Comedians are complicated and comedy is highly ambivalent, provoking strong and often contradictory feelings. Fans may appreciate the same joke differently – ranging from guffaws to outrage – just as a joke can reinforce stereotypes or dispel them. That comedy can reproduce inequality and combat injustices means that comedy can be the source of the problem or the solution.

I explore comedy's capacity to both undermine *and* support contemporary social movements: #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. This ideological seesaw plays out in the behaviors of comics themselves, in the jokes they tell, and the effects of comedy on our behaviors and attitudes. The examination of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter means I will primarily discuss misogyny and racism. However, there is no form of discrimination – classism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism – wherein comedy is not ambivalent. Because humor can be ideological, you can find examples of comedy supporting *and* dispelling all manner of efforts to eradicate and maintain social hierarchies. Indeed, comedy is a road map of ideological debate and a negotiation of identity – individual, communal, and national – that reveals much about who we have been in the past, who we are now, and who we might become.

Some comics behave badly. The #MeToo Movement demonstrated that sexual misconduct is ubiquitous to the female experience. One of comedian Nikki Glaser's most popular jokes explains the protocol women must follow when a man solicits sexual favors. Glaser (2019) jokes: 'If a guy takes his dick out and you don't want to see it and you're uncomfortable. You know what to do. You just kind of like go: "Ha ha" [*she starts retreating*] You just kind of laugh nervously and kind of back out of the room and then go "Okay" and shut the door [*pause*] and then get blacklisted from the industry [*loud laughter*]. So, there's a system in place [*clapping and laughter*]' She attests to being the victim of sexual assault at the hands of another comedian, along with plenty of other female comics citing the same.

Of course, comedians are capable of sexual assault. More fascinating and less obvious is the public's reticence to believe women who attest to sexual abuse perpetrated by comics. Patrice Opplinger and Kathryn Mears (2020, p. 155) argue that affective disposition theory can explain the 'cognitive dissonance' audience members experience when learning of a comic's sexual depravity. This theory presupposes that we have difficulty believing and blaming a comic for bad behavior, especially when those subjects are 'purveyors of humor and joy' with endearing comic personae (p. 165). The United States collectively shuddered to think that Bill Cosby, the beloved all-American dad, could drug and rape dozens of women over several decades.

Rather than using communication theories like Opplinger and Mears, Philip Deen employs a philosophical approach to weigh the 'relation between the moral character of comedians and the aesthetic value of their stand-up comedy' (2019, p. 290). He concludes that we should be able to divorce the two and continue



enjoying the artistic work of perpetrators of sexual assault so long as it isn't hurting anyone. I don't entirely agree nor disagree but his arguments prompt larger questions: why are we so eager to forgive sexual misdeeds and why do we grant graces to comics not afforded other sexual predators?

Many players in the comedy industry protect its offenders and do so via a series of transactions baked into this cultural form.

First, comedy protects its offenders with the cloak of humor. This is how Louis C.K. could be so transparent about his sexual depravity in *Louie* and his stand-up, with impunity. The form suggests we should suspend disbelief that a comic means what they say even as it presents comic personae as authentic.

Second, the comedy community gives men the benefit of the doubt. And, since most comics champion free speech, this means that comics like Louis C.K. can allude to their own misbehavior, decry it as a joke and reference their right to free speech. Ironically, female comics subject to harassment can only allude to the misconduct of others for fear of reprisal. For example, Nikki Glaser jokes about how no one believes the claims of just one woman. Before coming forward about being sexually assaulted by a fellow comic she asked around about the guy. No other women confirmed misconduct on his part. After taking jabs at U.S. culture of victim-blaming, she concludes the joke (2018): 'So until more women come forward, he can still enjoy doing his podcast [*laughter*]'. The devastating part: comedy in either scenario is being used to protect male sexual predators.

Thirdly, just as in the broader entertainment industry, people around the perpetrator protect him. Bill Cosby and Louis C.K.'s managers were aware of their sexual misconduct, and Tig Notaro – a fellow comic greatly aided by C.K.'s endorsement of her comedy – knew years before the news broke and worked to sever business ties with him behind the scenes. The history of defenses made on behalf of bad behavior is extensive in the comedy world. However, for every misdeed there is a chorus of comedians denouncing that behavior.

Comedians have ascended to some of the highest ranks in the public's estimation because they speak honestly about human rights violations and political corruption...and not just on stage. Comics vocalize their opposition to inequality through social media and charitable causes. For example, off-stage Hannibal Burress defended his performance repudiating Bill Cosby for drugging and raping dozens of women. Using Instagram, Beth Stelling called out fellow comic Cale Hartmann for physical violence and rape, comedians Dana Min Goodman and Julia Wolov exposed Louis C.K. for masturbating in front of them, and after half a dozen young women alleged that Chris D'Elia solicited sexual acts from them while minors, comedians publicly vocalized disgust for his behavior. Six months before Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sex crimes, comedian Kelly Bachman saw him in the comedy club in which she was performing. No other comic addressed his presence but when it was time for her set, she improvised jokes at his expense. Her public shaming of Weinstein polarized the audience, eliciting boos and cheers,



illustrating that while comedy is not inherently ideological, it can still promote or challenge beliefs – in this case the belief that rape is unacceptable.

Most disturbingly, audience reactions reveal that not everyone agrees with that belief. As a survivor of rape, Bachman knows the cost for speaking up about sexual harassment. It can mean the loss of a career and not necessarily for the perpetrator. An easy way of knowing the values of a comedian is to see where they throw their time and dollars.

Comedians commonly align themselves with causes and organizations demonstrating what's important to them. This can coincide or not with their comic personae. Seth Rogan along with an army of other comedians used their social media accounts to show support for Black Lives Matter. Comedian Karan Menon posted a video to challenge the 'All Lives Matter' refrain. In an interview with Seth Meyers, Michael Che expressed sadness that his joke on Black Lives Matter from four years earlier was experiencing a surge in viewership on YouTube. Of course, some folks fancy it and others do not. Comedy – the stuff of humor—can be highly polarizing just as the comedians who produce it.

Since humor often reflects the sensibilities of the person performing, it stands to reason that jokes will be varied, reflecting both racist and anti-racist perspectives, sexist and anti-sexist perspectives. Comic material illumines the variety of rhetorical mechanisms comedians can use to make bigotry palatable. Scholars Simon Weaver (2011) and Raúl Pérez (2013) identify the ways comedians traffic in racism by distancing themselves from racist acts by reporting on them (they are observer not actor), by situating themselves as anti-racist before telling a racist joke, or by insisting they are operating in a play frame that absolves them of guilt for the racist joke. Self-deprecatory material coming from marginalized comics allows audience members to laugh at others without guilt – after all, they invited the laughter – be they women reinforcing unattainable body ideals by calling attention to their physical flaws or people of color capitalizing on stereotypes to get a laugh.

These and many other strategies can be put to use to advance bigotry. Shared comedic responses to instances of racism or sexism can also keep whistleblowers in their place. Comics use the stage to respond to #MeToo, uniformly praising the women courageous enough to come forward. Some go on to assume a more clucking tone. The gist is: 'Please stop because you're scaring everyone, even the good guys'. Not an insignificant number of comics, male and female, incorporated some variation of this discourse into their comedy as #MeToo raged on. Christina Pazsitzky (2018) says: 'I'm a feminist. I'm behind the #MeToo Movement and the Times Up but we need to have deeper conversations man cause this stuff isn't black and white. It's different shades of gray jizz [*laughter*]. Anyway the problem is we're scaring all the guys. Not just the bad ones'. She proposes a humorous and cringe-worthy public shaming ritual for rapists and pedophiles that would make Nathaniel Hawthorne proud. Jim Norton (2019) offers his take on the same



discourse: ‘You know, #MeToo the movement definitely has validity to it. But it’s made dating a little bit scary. Like every man is nervous’. At the core of this discourse: the guys who rape are worried because women are turning them in, and the good guys are worried that now they might accidentally rape someone. Therefore, women need to stop speaking out. No matter how anyone frames this discourse, it functions to silence actual victims and re-centers ‘good guys’ as the victims in #MeToo.

Jokes reveal myriad strategies for dissembling the powerful and corrupt. Examining comedy as resistant to patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism has long been at the center of feminist comedy studies. Charged humor, or humor that works on behalf of social justice has been a staple of stand-up comedy since its early manifestations. Pioneering comics Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, Dick Gregory, Lenny Bruce, and Lily Tomlin demonstrated comedy’s capacity for social critique.

Contemporary charged comics like Wanda Sykes, Hannah Gadsby, Cameron Esposito, and Amanda Searles capture feelings of injury, weariness, and anger espoused broadly by hundreds of women during #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. During the height of protests for Black Lives Matter in June 2020, Dave Chappelle gave a moving performance in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. This murder (alongside the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor) catapulted the Black Lives Matter Movement back into the public eye. He titled the performance: *8:46*. It is both the time of his birth and the amount of time Derek Chauvin (an officer with a history of infractions) had his knee on Floyd’s neck before he died. He sets the tone early: ‘I don’t mean to get heavy but we gotta say something [*clapping*]!’ He excoriates white supremacists like Dylann Roof, who executed nine African Americans in a church and FOX reporter Laura Ingraham for telling LeBron James to ‘shut up and dribble’ after he discussed the difficulties of being Black in America in an interview with ESPN in 2018. Jokes are absent as he methodically recounts the murders of Christopher Dorner, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, John Crawford, and Philando Castile. Interspersed throughout this grave chronology of violence, he weaves his own history including the race advocacy work of his great grandfather, AME Bishop William David Chappelle who was born into slavery. It is a sobering synergy of the personal and the political, the individual and the nation, the historical and the present.

The performance garnered 27 million views in one month attesting to the importance the public accords trusted comics. Importantly, the success of anti-racist jokes encourages and shapes the production of new material over time. Comics will serve up the dish praised most highly by their fans – this could be bigoted or anti-bigoted – conferring power to consumers. Perhaps if audience members understood the implications of laughter in the service of racism versus



anti-racism we might place greater pressure on comics to avoid hacky jokes bedazzled with exhausted stereotypes and worn out tropes.

Comedy produces strikingly different outcomes for consumers, none surprising. Racist humor strengthens racism, and anti-racist humor breeds anti-racist attitudes and behaviors. Generally, this happens unbeknownst to us. Whether approaching questions as a philosopher, rhetorician, or research psychologist, academics care about the impact of speech on others including the propensity for speech to incite harmful behavior. Research indicates (Ford, 2000) that sexist humor perpetuates sexist thinking which shores up patriarchy and increases likelihood of sex discrimination. Exposure to sexist comedy increases the rape proclivity for men scoring high for enjoyment of hostile sexism. Put differently, if you are already likely to view women as inferior, exposure to sexist humor will reinforce negative behavior towards women (Romero-Sánchez *et al.*, 2010).

Other scholars (Thomae and Viki, 2013) confirmed the validity of earlier studies and further show that sexist comedy creates a prejudiced norm, meaning when sexism is introduced as innocuous in an environment, rape proclivity increases. Importantly, that norm is key for sexist humor to lead to discriminatory behavior. If there are cues from the comedian that they don't actually believe what they are saying, this can mitigate the effects of bigoted humor. Disparagement humor – whether connected to sex or race or any other identity category – has decidedly anti-social effects, pitting one group against another. Conversely, comedy can function in pro-social ways that validate marginalized identities and experiences.

Comedy has the power to educate, convince, and shape human beliefs and perceptions for better or for worse. Positive audience reception of Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* focused on her astute critiques of patriarchy, sexual assault, and heteronormativity. Across social media, viewers attested to changing attitudes around male privilege, consent, and gender shaming. Attitudinal shifts following a specific comic performance are difficult to quantify, but there are endless anecdotal accounts of comedy leading to behavioral changes. Scholars in the humanities use reception studies to assess broad impact of cultural texts. But we need more studies in the social and natural sciences focusing on the persuasive power of comedy, particularly humor intending to expose and remedy social injustices.

In the meantime, comics are making no small plans. Comics continue to hope that their use of humor to support movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter will change our institutions and ways of life. Some scholars (Saucier *et al.* 2016, p. 82) have surmised that 'as joke tellers educate their audiences, racial humor may actualize its potential for promoting thinking and discussion about social change and, in doing so, threaten the sustainability of a hierarchical society'. But we should never forget that as hard as comedy works to incite change, it works just as hard to keep people in their place and bigoted beliefs intact. Whether the jokesters, the



jokes they tell, or the implications for those laughing – comedy is always an expression of values and we mustn't forget that despite mouthfuls of laughter.

Rebecca Krefting

The politics of prank: The Rise of K-pops' Army and the unhinging of a President

In the midst of a chilling resurgence of authoritarianism and a politicized pandemic, there has emerged what may well be the largest ever global movement for social justice. 'I Can't Breathe' were the final words of George Floyd whose murder sparked a Black Lives Matter campaign that has called for the defunding of the police and sent a president of United States running off to hide in his bunker. As protests and backlash have reshaped the political landscape, isolation, false politicalization, and the inherent inequality of the pandemic has fueled white supremacy and a shameless president.

Tragically, as we write this, Trump continues to threaten and further marginalize those he sees as of no value except to serve as scapegoats in a dangerous game of divide and rule. Without question this is a serious moment. Yet, as we seek more allies for social justice, we find ourselves turning to those who have all too easily been dismissed as the least serious and to their mischievous pranks for finding new possibilities in what Angela Davis characterizes as a historical peak of intensity and promise. K-pop or more specifically the BTS Army, an international boy band fandom identified with giddy girls, has become a global force to be reckoned with in a larger fight for social justice. And it has done so in the most playful and seemingly unserious way. With the help of Twitter and TikTok, the army has weaponized childlike pranks to unhinge a president who has himself relied on name calling and other preadolescent antics as his go-to political strategy.

To be sure, R&B and Hip Hop have brought Black consciousness to places and produced alliances that we could not have foreseen in the transnational rise of K-pop and its fandom. Yet, as Josh Kun points out in conversation with Angela Davis, Robin D.G. Kelly, and Gaye Teresa Johnson on the surge of police violence against Black people, 'K-pop ... is so rooted in Black popular music' (University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2020). At times K-pop's appropriation is simplistic, failing to acknowledge its roots and falling into its own brand of racism. But with the band BTS 'as popular as the Beatles' their music seems to appeal to a multicultural revision of the 'Beatlemania' – the just-pubescent followers ... with their frenzied screams' (Ehrenreich, 2007, pp. 209–210).

The commercialization and patent entertainment value of these producer-driven bands has made them too easy to dismiss. Like disco, this cultural movement may seem like fodder for capitalism and a means to distract youth minds from engaging in serious political thought and action. This is entertainment you can dance to



without pretense or claim to the avant-garde status of radical art. And like disco, K-pop artists and fans – who celebrate self-love and desire with panache – get labeled as narcissistic. But also, like disco, this movement has often unanticipated political ramifications.

Angela Davis suggests that the major force driving social movements around the world in support of BLM is Black music. Through music, Black freedom struggles have already infiltrated world consciousness explaining a felt solidarity with Black America that is missing for oppressed groups such as the Syrian Kurds and Palestinians. And yet, Davis observes, Black music has served such groups in their struggles. Gaye Teresa Johnson agrees, pointing out DJ and rapper D-Nice hosted a quarantine show during the most fearful nights of the protest that drew thousands of people because the music is good. From the soulful cries of the Civil Rights Era to the insistent rhythms of Hip Hop, Black music carries what Johnson calls ‘insider stories’ that others may not understand but can participate in. Messages from the past communicate a striving for Black freedom that may not fit into words but can be heard and felt globally (University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2020).

As these stories spread, so too does ‘solidaric empathy’ with Black America (Willett and Willett, 2019, pp. 121–148). As we have argued in *Uproarious*, solidaric empathy requires only a felt connection – a kind of resonance – among those who otherwise do not share interests or social identities. A sense of connection can provide an impetus for social movements that may be lacking centralized leadership and systematically developed beliefs. Such empathetic resonance is especially relevant in an age of social media where affects can quickly spread and gather momentum. In its most radical instance, a felt solidarity can motivate concern for those previously viewed as enemies and lead to unexpected alliances for political action. In the case of Trump, we are dealing with an irremediable problem person, what the ancient Greeks concerned with tyranny termed a *hubristēs*, and someone any teen might recognize as a bully (Willett, 2008, pp. 21–22). Where the enemy cannot be moved by facts or moral discourse, the setting is ripe for an alternative political ethics.

Enter the prankster. When the prankster, much like the African American trickster figure, is faced with the ignorance and arrogance of bad actors, they choose to do politics otherwise. Where moral suasion fails, they fashion tricks aimed to unhinge those in positions of power. No doubt, the white supremacy that Trump channels will survive him, and his self-unraveling could bring down not just a president, but generate unforeseen, tragic reactions. The threat of social death is real and persistent in Black America. Nonetheless, through music, Robin D.G. Kelly argues – or even more broadly through empathetic resonance, we suggest – ‘we make breath’ and, as Angela Davis adds, ‘imagine what we do not yet know’ (University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2020).



To imagine what we do not know, we turn to the moral impulse of the world's most popular band, BTS, who overwhelmed with gifts of adoration encouraged their followers to give back to local neighborhoods and donate to charitable organizations. It should be no surprise that K-Pop's fandom would take up and intensify this moral impulse in a time of massive unrest and protest. For not only are fans currently mobilized and ready for action, but they also have a history of embracing social causes that goes back to the 2000s.

Confronting U.S. Trumpian authoritarianism and the crack down on BLM protestors, initial acts of moral altruism and activism transformed into what we dub the politics of prank. As Josh Kun notes, building on Angela Davis' point, 'black music can become a language of solidarity through musical fandom...K-pop fans have become this incredible mobilized online-resistance Army who have used their fandom...to actually work together to crowdsource their opposition to law enforcement' (University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2020). More specifically, when the Dallas police, relying on an app called iWatchDallas, solicited images of so-called illegal activity from the protests, stans overwhelmed the app with fancams – short video clips of their favorite bands. Soon after, K-pop fans, already involved in protests for human rights in both Hong Kong and Bangladesh, again took action in even broader support of the fight against racial injustice. When #WhiteLivesMatter surfaced on Twitter, it was not just BTS, but Blackpink, Monsta X, and ONEUS stans who took over the hashtag by drowning out the message of white supremacy.

However, for BTS stans, messing with right-wing fringe groups and the police turned out to be warm up acts. Using TikTok, an adolescent social media app, they seemingly pulled off a trick that may well have helped derail Trump's first post COVID-19 stop on his 2020 campaign trail. The rally was already shrouded in controversy in part because it was originally planned on Juneteenth, a day celebrating the end of slavery, and because the location would be Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 1921 the city suffered one of the most horrific race massacres in American history. Only reluctantly did Trump's campaign manager change the date, but the location remained the same. Unfettered by COVID-19 or controversy, Trump expected much from his base deep in red state territory. Like a kid trying to win a popularity contest, he bragged that millions would show up to celebrate the restart of his campaign. Given the degree to which his supporters believe COVID-19 is a hoax, the expectations were that the Trump campaign would be energized by loyal supporters. Yet for reasons not easily accounted for, there were just over 6,000 in attendance in the indoor area that held over 19,000. Crowds that were presumably going to fill the grounds outside the stadium were virtually nonexistent. At first, it was hard to know what decimated the attendance at his big event – COVID-19 would deter very few of his hardcore supporters. But not everyone was surprised. Teenage TikTokers had been in on a playful plan of political disruption while adults for the most part remained oblivious. As the deflated event unfolded, news



outlets such as the *New York Times* began to report just how Tik Tok Teens had registered for tickets they would never use and pulled off the ‘best senior prank ever’. As Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez put it in a celebratory tweet directed at the President ‘... you just got ROCKED by teens on TikTok [who] ... tricked you into believing a million people wanted your white supremacist open mic enough to pack an arena during COVID-19. Shout out to Zoomers. Y’all make me so proud’ (Lornez, *et al.*, 2020).

Yet who would think zoomer tricks could really mess with the self-proclaimed president of the greatest nation of the world? Questions have even been raised as to whether or not K-pop fans have well-thought out political motives for their shenanigans. After all, on National Puppy Day, the fans flooded social media with images of their favorite band, sounding more like puppy love than political acumen. In contrast, satirists like Trevor Noah are unmistakably political and use pointed satire to expose social injustices, making these K-pop pranksters seem rather innocuous. While teenage pranks have tended to be dismissed and given a slap on the wrist or reprimand from an adult in charge, satirists from Lenny Bruce to those in authoritarian regimes have faced everything from exile to death-threats and imprisonment. However, an adolescent bent for hilarity to not just rattle authorities, which kids always like to do, but to challenge authoritarianism has characterized a history of the prankster. Among them we recall leader of the Flower Power Movement and Youth International party (Yippies), Abbie Hoffman. Hoffman’s *Steal This Book* (1971) was a blueprint for how to live for free that brought more than just ‘mischief in the modern world’. This anarchist’s gestures added fuel to the fire of a cultural revolution. As it turns out, this was a classic move. The ancient anti-imperialists knew the power of the ironist against the *hubristai*. So did Herbert Marcuse, who was not only Angela Davis’ teacher, but also Hoffman’s. Marcuse was known to moon those he judged beneath any authentic engagement.

With our current political administration, we have learned that not all tricks are just for kids, at least not if you classify Trump as an adult. If Richard Nixon, the all work and no play president of the late 60s to early 70s era, was able to maintain a sober appearance and apparent immunity to the antics of the flower children, the politics of prank lands differently on a president who operates on the same playing field as the tweens and teens who take aim for him. The quintessential pre-adolescent and tween tactic, name-calling, was Trump’s ticket to the Republican nomination for president in 2016, and then he used this same childish play of the playground bully against his Democratic opponent. Once again turning the debate stage into a comic stage, this time he felled the serious policy wonk and perhaps most qualified presidential candidate ever, Hillary Clinton. On this altered stage, Clinton couldn’t shake the role of the pedant – a stock character and fixed target of laughter. Skills honed from the experience of a mature political leader just don’t seem to operate on the same field as a lunchroom food fight. After all, we are



dealing with a president who pranked his way to the white house. This time, however, he may have met his match. When cartoonish tough Trump resorted to an updated version of the yellow peril by renaming COVID-19 the ‘kung flu’, he not only insulted Asian culture, but took on K-pop kids and their Army.

As much as pranks bring attention to the lies, hypocrisy, and petty narcissism of the braggart or the fool, their primary aim is not to expose, which is after all the work of another genre of humor, namely satire. While satire undertakes the serious moral work of unmasking vices, pranks draw on a more puckish sense of humor with the effect of unhinging and unnerving their target, rather than engaging in any moral discourse with him or his crazed fandom. The emotions at stake between the two genres are different. Satire often stems from heavy feelings of outrage, or righteous anger. Pranks, on the other hand, express a variant of that ‘collective joy’ that Ehrenreich explores through Beatlemania (Ehrenreich, 2007), except here we find not teen ecstasy but teen hilarity – or what fans may experience as giddiness – and mischief gone viral. To be sure, the goal of the prankster is not to play by the rules but to disrupt business as usual. Pranks seem to offer a better weapon than either fact checks or mature satire against the Trump regime. Like setting up the substitute teacher or in this case a president who doesn’t know what he’s talking about, high school pranks may be more effective than moral or factual correction by media nerds or liberal commentators who were never respected by the Trump base anyway. The more sophisticated arts of satire don’t seem to faze a president who delights in sticking his tongue out at any real talk. On the contrary, intellectual efforts to undermine him can come off as the culture of insiders and elites, thus only further strengthening his connection with his base. In contrast with these intellectual efforts, giddiness is a highly contagious affect that can sweep over us like a seductive wave. Mehnaaz Momen is right to argue (see her essay in this exchange) that political pranks do not constitute ideological statements or systematic philosophy, but we think various forms of humor perform the emotion work necessary to alter perspectives and offer a chance for change. News from late-night comics and history lessons from Dave Chappelle among others may well have set the stage for the current multi-racial global protests against systemic racism to include significant white participation. At a time when the political winds shift direction based on a late-night tweet, the powerful resonance of collective laughs can generate unexpected solidarities and boost progressive social movements.

Of course, like other K-pop bands, BTS, despite having recently donated a million dollars to BLM, may be more known for their schoolboy charm than for overt political aims of their own. But their popularity turns often enough on the same puckish humor that drives the political pranks of their fans. When asked by Stephen Colbert what BTS hoped to achieve in ten years, one BTS artist joked ‘a mustache’ (*The Late Night Show with Stephen Colbert*, 2019). Like kids defacing a yearbook picture of the principal, BTS possesses a playful popularity that continually undercuts all authority, even their own, and does so with youthful



pleasure. This tactic is particularly useful when it comes to facing off with a president who doesn't want to take anything seriously and doesn't seem to flinch in the face of the usual serious discourse, satirical or not.

From Colbert and Trevor Noah to Samantha Bee, late night stand-ups repeatedly expose Trumpism with satire that speaks truth to power. In sharp relief, BTS fans, who may follow no particular script and flood social media just for kicks, have channeled the rhythm and tones of their favorite boy band to meet the anti-authority authoritarian on his own level. The result is a stunt not so deep for the presidential prank in the White House not to recognize or register.

BTS, a boy band manufactured for profit and pleasure, seems an unlikely source of subversion. The Army's heartthrobs are vehicles of serious teen desire to be sure, but political spokesmen – let alone party activists – they are not. Yet we have learned from BLM to take seriously those easily dismissed. Mobilized not by the truth telling of Trevor Noah or of Hip Hop and R&B artists, but by a mix of charming conceits and tones of hilarity together with a call for altruistic action, giddy girls may have fueled a politics of prank. Perhaps, as Angela Davis and Gaye Teresa Johnson suggest, even apart from a band's intent, the rhythms of freedom that travel from Black music to Korea channel a felt solidarity against white supremacy. We may never know for sure, but it does seem that a little prank has delivered a major gut punch in the unhinging of a bully in chief. At least the timing couldn't have been better.

Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett

Acknowledgments

Much thanks to our research assistants for this Critical Exchange, Rebekah Spera and Liza Willett.

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