

Book review

Borum, Caty (2023). *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power*. New York University Press.

The volume by Caty Borum is a lively, passionate, and timely presentation of how social-justice humorous genres (in author's terms *comedy*) – sketches, stand-up performances, live shows, sitcom pilots, docu-comedy, etc. – can favour social change and empower civic groups “historically alienated or disenfranchised by democratic institutions” (p. 5) in the USA. The volume is constructed around the necessity to help these groups (people of colour, women, immigrants, ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities, etc.) draw attention to their status, to highlight the need for justice, equity, visibility, and a new status quo.

The author is not only a scholar (Associate Professor at the American University School of Communication in Washington, DC; Executive Director of the Centre for Media and Social Impact, at the same university), but also a person with a consistent experience as a practitioner (media producer having the legendary Norman Lear as role model) and a social activist (via the incubator for comedy *Yes, and... Laughter Lab*). These three coordinates of the author are emphasised throughout this book, which continues the work from *A comedian and an activist walk into a bar: The serious role of comedy in social justice* (Borum Chattoo & Feldman 2020).

The volume has an introductory section, seven chapters, a conclusion section, followed by the usual paratextual apparatus (acknowledgments, a list of interviewees, the notes, a names and subjects index, etc.). All the chapters and the introduction have a title that includes an important quotation from the interviewees (artists, activists, media representatives) framing the main topic of each section. The chapters have a similar construction: they begin with a zoom in on an example, followed by a zoom out on a general presentation of the topic, a more theoretical approach, and return to an ethnographic case study that illustrates the topic. The first three chapters favour the blend of the various “hats” of the author: emphasising the academic (theoretical perspective on humour, functions of humour, or creativity), the practitioner (presenting the artistic production process, how decisions are made in the entertainment industry, etc.), the activist (focusing on the relationship between the activist organisations and the entertainment industry). The other four chapters focus on various ethnographic case studies regarding the groups that need civic power.

The dense introduction of the volume “‘It’s like taking your vodka with a chaser’”: Comedy as civic power in the participatory media age” has many functions: it presents the practitioner, scientific, and activist background of the author; it anticipates the key notions of the volume: civic power (following Rahman & Gilman 2019), cultural power, participatory culture (Jenkins 2019), postmillennial media, creative power, etc.; it announces the topics and the structure of the volume. The author stresses the importance of cultural power – appealing to the public opinion and the policy makers – to build civic power – its ability to reshape the entertainment industry and pop culture so as to become more inclusive:

the entertainment industries are light years away from a fully diverse system of cultural gatekeepers, but the upheaval of the business points in favour of hearing from storytellers previously deemed by

Hollywood marketing machines as too “risky” to reliably sell to whitewashed (and heteronormative and patriarchal) mass audiences (p. 13).

Comedy is a means to achieve cultural power, and the author offers some examples of civic engagement in various TV programmes (*The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *Black-ish*, *Insecure*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, or *Reservation Dogs*) and the activity of organisations advocating the rights of various alienated or misrepresented groups (Define American, Colour of Change, Hip Hop Caucus, etc.). Comedy has several functions that are instrumental for the need of these groups: “a mechanism to attract attention, persuade, critique the status quo, open taboo cultural conversations, disrupt harmful dominant narratives, humanise those who are othered, and invite desperately needed hope and optimism” (p. 7). The book covers at least three important aspects: the role of the creative process entailed by humour for supporting the challenge of social-justice issues; the process of co-creating social-justice comedy by activists and comedians in order to culturally empower marginalised groups; the collaboration between the entertainment media (industry and gatekeepers) and activists.

The first chapter of the volume “‘Desperate Cheeto’: How comedy functions as deviant creative resistance” starts with an example from the USA: Randy Rainbow’s parodies targeting Donald Trump. The author then zooms out, presenting examples of political humour from Ancient Rome to communist regimes in Europe (as a Romanian, I have appreciated the joke about cold and hot water, on p. 33), or the Arab Spring etc., and then zooms in again on USA. The second part of the chapter is mainly theoretical, focusing on the functions of humour (mainly pp. 41-46), cognitive effects, psychological effects, social implications, dangers (authoritarianism, patriarchal autocracy) to democracy, etc. A prominent role in this section is devoted to defining *deviant/deviance*. Considering comedy and social justice as “symbiotic”, the author labels comedy as a type of deviant thinking due to the ability to offer a new perspective on reality in an appealing and persuasive way: “[c]omedy is valuable for social justice [...] because its very essence comprises unexpected, creative, playful, incongruent ideas: deviance” (p. 39; see also pp. 108-109).

The second chapter of the book “‘It’s all about who you know’: Pitching and producing comedy in the transforming entertainment industry” starts with the example of the African American female comedian Sarah Cooper, who is popular on YouTube due to her parodies of Donald Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic and promoted on TV programmes by her online success. Caty Borum focuses on the entertainment industry and Hollywood (streaming networks and the rise of social media entertainment included): she tackles, for example, the inequality in decision-making positions and in the representation of women, persons of colour, members of the ethnic and sexual minorities, etc.; the importance and the challenges of creating social capital and wider networks; or pitch meetings. There are also examples of studios, companies, or producers who encourage the social-justice productions.

Dedicated to activism, the third chapter “‘Hollywood won’t change unless it’s forced to change’: How activism and entertainment collide and collaborate” focuses on TV representations of women, African American communities, Latino, Asian, or Muslim communities. There is emphasis on the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and the attitude toward Muslims after 9/11. The author offers a diachronic presentation of the relationship between activist organisations belonging to marginalised groups and communities (i.e. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Media Action Network for Asian Americans, National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, National Organisation for Women) and Hollywood and the entertainment industry: from letters of protest to audiences and collaboration. Cultural activism highlights what Jenkins (2019) examined as *participatory*

culture and participatory politics. Caty Borum also draws attention to the concept of *narrative strategy*, that is,

a cultural and communication practice by which social-justice practitioners collaborate with entertainment-industry executives, writers, and producers to shape positive portrayals of marginalised communities and social issues in scripted and nonscripted entertaining narratives, critique negative portrayals, and produce and disseminate their own entertainment-storytelling content (p. 91).

The ethnographic case studies begin in the fourth chapter titled “‘You learn to be racist from people you love’: Co-creating comedy for antiracism public engagement”. The chapter opens with the example of the comedian from Southern USA Corey Forrester lampooning racism and homophobia; after offering other similar examples from the USA, the author presents meetings between social activists and comedians (the process of co-creation) in order to produce funny moments on serious topics (such as racism or homophobia). There are several sections highlighting the author’s own experience and the fruitful collaboration with Bethany Hall for the Centre for Media and Social Impact, Comedy ThinkTanks, etc. The process and protocol of the co-creation (the collaboration between writers, comedians, and activists) is detailed (see pp. 104-106).

The second ethnographic case study, in chapter 5 “‘Invisibility is not a superpower’: Asserting Native American identity through Humour”, is dedicated to Native Americans. The chapter zooms in, at first, on the life story of a Native American woman, Crystal Echo Hawk, an activist promoting the Native American Identity. The life story is followed by a discussion regarding the onscreen representation of the Native populations and their perception by the American public: the most prominent characteristics of the depictions and of the public perception are dehumanisation and invisibility. The second part of the chapter focuses on co-creation activities for humorous programmes that will bring Native Communities into the general attention. Caty Borum also mentions various humorous genres from Native writers, artists, and comedians, as humour is an instrumental part of Native culture.

The next chapter “‘Maybe they think beauty can’t come from here’: Resilience and power in the climate crisis” focuses on climate injustice and racial injustice affecting African American communities (with emphasis on Norfolk, Virginia). A central position is given to the co-creation of a docu-comedy, *Ain’t Your Mama’s Heat Wave*, and to its success story. The author also evokes Hurricane Katrina and the people of colour affected by it in 2005; it should be noted that the topics of climate change and poverty were also discussed in Borum Chattoo & Feldman (2020).

The last chapter of the book, “‘I’ve always been a syringe-half-full kinda guy’: Changing the entertainment comedy pipeline”, starts with the example of the comedian Murf Meyer from an underprivileged community and with a drug addiction in his teens and youth. In his humorous performances, he addresses the topics of mental health and self-medication (addictions). The author changes the focus of the chapter on the *Yes, and...Laughter Lab* (YALL), on the projects and the artists helped through the co-creation process:

The Yes, And... Laughter Lab is an innovation in comedy development that intentionally aims to lift up and inspire diverse comedy writers and performers whose stories are hard to find in the entertainment marketplace, and whose humour addresses social topics in entertaining, enlightening, deliciously subversive ways (p. 191).

Caty Borum presents the activities of YALL chronologically, as well as their practical outcomes.

The conclusion section of the volume “Taking comedy seriously” focuses on the functions of humour, “a formal mechanism to help strengthen democracy and build an equitable society that honours its pluralism, rather than seeing comedy as frivolous dalliance in that pursuit” (p. 209), and on its ability to fuel social change.

As mentioned by the author in her introduction, the targeted readership includes not only the academia, but also activists, artists, community organisers, communication strategists, or people from the entertainment industry. For some readers, the volume could seem technical and “dry,” while for others very subjective (due mostly to frequent evaluations of people, topics, situations, etc.). The author tries to maintain a balance between emic and etic perspectives (people directly involved in creating and performing humorous discourses vs analysts and theorists) on humour and its functions.

As a linguist with an interest on humour, I would have wanted to see more examples of humorous discourse/texts resulting from the co-creation process, and an analysis in terms of the discursive mechanisms deployed to trigger humour. Unfortunately, there are very few examples (in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) of transcripts from the humorous performances and only one short analysis. Chapter 4 provides a sample of parody on racism in the Southern USA, a humorous fragment transcribed and analysed (pp. 120-122). There are also short fragments transcribed from the beginning of a TV show in Chapter 5, from a docu-comedy in Chapter 6, or from a comedy podcast in Chapter 7, but no analysis is offered for these samples.

There are some editorial choices that do not seem entirely reader-friendly: for example, there are final notes, also mentioning the references of the volume; nevertheless, the references should have been listed separately as well, as the notes are not the easiest way to have access to the theoretical support of the book. The Index contains names and subjects together; an index of subjects distinct from an index of names would have been more welcoming for the readers.

Caty Borum provides various interesting data on the entertainment industry, popular culture, and activism and advocacy groups in the present-day USA, which is simultaneously revealing and thought-provoking for readers less familiar with the postmillennial American setting. In addition, the practitioner’s perspective combined with the activist’s take and the academic view on humour offers a fresh and vivid perspective on how humour works to trigger social change.

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