

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Photo from [Kristina Wong](#) website

Comedy and Democracy: The Role of Humor in Social Justice

By Nancy Goldman, Ed.D.

In this paper, Nancy Goldman explores what is humor, what is funny, and the power of using humor in areas of social justice. America's most popular humorists, including Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain, have a long tradition of critiquing the dominant forces in society and ridiculing those in power. Since American society was built on the ideals of democracy but is awash in the realities of social and political imperfections, comedy can bring awareness to these discrepancies in a way that we can hear.

Humor is a social corrective. Through many examples, Goldman illustrates how humor can validate experience, help us to think more flexibly and reframe situations, illuminate the ways in which we live in the world politically, and be used to critique social injustice. Humor can diffuse the tension around controversial topics, such as in Laura Cunningham's play and film about fracking, "Frack You." Goldman discusses how satire can subvert authority and expose hypocrisy, highlighting comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert who obscure the lines between news and comedy. In stand-up storytelling, D'Lo uses his sense of humor along with his body to confront society while making a safe space for people to be open and absorb information. Goldman looks at the relationship between humor and stereotypes and the impact that humor about race and ethnicity plays in society. Examples include Alex Barnett, a comedian who is broadening the scope of audiences' thinking by his alternative perspectives about race, and Kristina Wong, who takes topics that are often taboo, such as mental illness and mail-order brides, and shines a light on them, making the invisible visible. Humor engages audience members in thinking, feeling, and speaking about the ways that we live in the world together, all of which can inform change.

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THE POWER OF HUMOR

George Carlin said, “No one is ever more herself or himself than when they really laugh. Their defenses are down...They are completely open, completely themselves when that message hits the brain and the laugh begins. That’s when new ideas can be implanted. If a new idea slips in at that moment, it has a chance to grow.” The current theory of humor, Incongruity Theory, describes humor as an enjoyable experience of a mismatch between what we expect and what we experience. Since American society was built on the ideals of democracy but is awash in the realities of social and political imperfections, comedy can bring awareness to these discrepancies in a way that we can hear. This makes humor a powerful communication tool and potential change agent and expands its value far beyond its common role as entertainment.

In modern American society a sense of humor is very desirable, as a glimpse at personal ads, popular movies, and situation comedies reveals. American essayist Frank Moore Colby’s (in Andrews, 1993) quote, “Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth, or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?” is as true today as it was a century ago.

While most of us agree that we enjoy humor, it is much more difficult to agree on what is humorous. Humor is unique to individuals, cultures, and times, and in order to be appreciated it must be placed in a context that is easily understood. Comedy operates on an understanding of our shared social norms and customs, national ethos, and our underlying mores. When Seinfeld posits, “What is a date



From [D'Lo](#) web site. Photo: Tani Ikeda

D’Lo—Creating Safe Space

[D’Lo](#) is the consummate hyphenate: a queer Tamil Sri L.A.nkan-American, political theater artist, writer, director, comedian, and music producer. D’Lo was born a girl but realized early in life that he was definitely a boy. When other kids asked about his gender he would make a joke to deflect the issue. “There’s a deep respect for people who are able to make others laugh. So people were willing to listen to me because of that respect.” He uses his sense of humor along with his body and his art to confront society’s complex issues such as police brutality, AIDS, political prisoners, violence, and, of course, masculinity, femininity, and sexual orientation. D’Lo started his career writing hip-hop and poetry, but it was the stories in between each piece that became a big hit because they personalized his reasons and feelings behind the issues. Through these stories he could embody different characters and share stories that were funny and painful, revealing the hard stuff as well as the fun stuff. D’Lo calls his unique style stand-up storytelling and says, “I provide and maintain a safe space for people to be open and absorb information. These are moments when I could drop knowledge.” D’Lo performs and/or facilitates performances and writing workshops all over the world. He is currently being featured in several short films.

really, but a job interview that lasts all night?” he is bringing attention to the daily habits and routines we take for granted. And when Lily Tomlin remarks, “No matter how cynical you get, it is impossible to keep up,” she is tapping into the values and beliefs that underlie our national psyche. Writing in 1984, Kozinski said comedians were anthropologists or “intentional culture critics” because they “document areas of tacit knowledge...bringing them to the conscious awareness of their particular audiences” (p. 57). Comedy awakens us to these automatic, uncritical thought patterns in a way that we don’t find threatening. Understanding these habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000) is important to understanding a culture and provides a context to understand that culture’s humor. That is why we don’t really find comedy of a century ago, or of a foreign country, very funny.

Although we would like to think that comedy is ostensibly positive, that is not necessarily true. Humor is a double-edged sword that can have both negative and positive impact. Certain types of humor give the possibility of moving toward inclusion, reconciliation, identification, and harmony (Coughlin, 2004, p. 32). LaFave and Manel (1976) believe that disparaged ethnic groups can use humorous gibes to their advantage by defusing them and making them their own. Think, for example, of how gays and lesbians use the word “queer,” which was once derogatory, for self-empowerment. However, humor can be devastatingly destructive, as anyone who has been teased or mocked by a racial or ethnic slur knows. The research regarding the impact of racial and ethnic humor results in mixed findings. According to Boskin and Dorinson (1985), poking fun at race or ethnicity is an attempt by oppressors to use ridicule to maintain society’s social strata and to perpetuate ethnic groups’ outsider status. Another example regards research examining the relationship between humor and stereotypes. For instance, Omi (1989) and Schulman (1992) believe that racial humor has the ability to reinforce stereotypes; however, a study by Olson and colleagues (1999) indicates that listening to disparaging humor does not seem to cause one to have more negative attitudes toward the target group. Although research has left humor scholars divided over the impact that humor about race and ethnicity plays in society, many performers see firsthand its potential to challenge an audience’s assumptions, present alternative perspectives, generate conversation, and broaden the scope of thought, and performers hear stories from audience members to that effect.

Comedian Dean Obeidallah has been relying on this since he began using his comedy to counteract stereotypes of Arab Americans as a result of 9/11. In response to the prejudice directed toward the Arab community after the attacks, Obeidallah, the son of a Palestinian father and Sicilian mother, saw an opportunity to use comedy to combat Islamophobia. He created the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, a showcase of Arab American performers whose humor debunks many misconceptions about Arab Americans and demonstrates the many similarities between the two cultures. Their comedy provides opportunities for audiences worldwide to see Arabs in a new light and will hopefully foster greater tolerance. Obeidallah’s documentary [The Muslims are Coming](#), co-produced with fellow comedian Negin Farsad, is an extension of those performances and their ongoing effort to change the national discourse through social justice comedy.

[Alex Barnett](#) is another comedian who is broadening the scope of audiences' thinking by offering his alternative perspectives about race. White, Jewish, and a lawyer, Barnett is married to an African American woman, and they have a light-skinned son. Barnett's mixed-race family is the centerpiece of his act: "Talking about race is almost passé in a way. Racial issues are such a part of the American dynamic...Discussing interracial families is the next, natural phase of comedy. It's what people want to hear about." Performers who play with the line between what is safe to speak about and what seems undiscussable can raise awareness and consciousness of these issues and even help alleviate the shame that can be associated with them.

[Kristina Wong](#) does this through her one-woman show, "Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," about suicide and depression among Asian American women. A solo performer, Wong takes topics that are often taboo, like mental illness, and shines a light on them, making the invisible visible. Doing this validates the experience of members of Asian American communities. Seated anonymously in the dark, audience members can have their feelings reflected back to them and receive acknowledgement they may not receive elsewhere in their lives. Joking about these topics weakens the grip of humiliation or disgrace attached to them and provides an opportunity for sufferers to reframe the situation. Wong says, "[Humor] makes it easier for people to feel safe...It softens the space and the stigma around mental health issues." This gives audience members an opportunity to reconsider their attitudes about the issue; when Wong performs at universities there is an increase in the number of students that seek help from the schools' psychological services.



Kristina Wong—Breaking the Silence

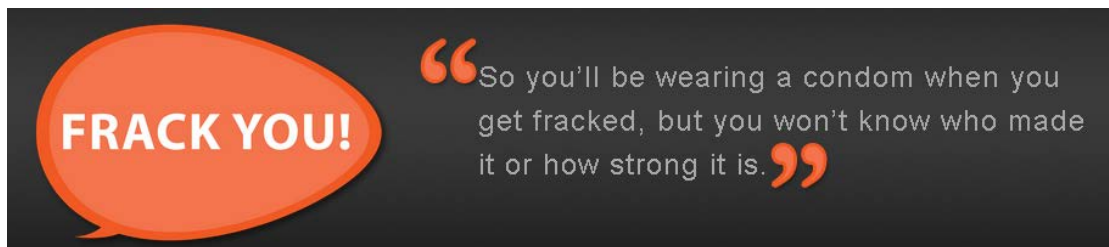
[Kristina Wong](#) is a solo performer/writer who is interested in topics that society doesn't talk about, such as mental illness and mail-order brides, and in breaking the silence that surrounds them. Making such serious topics entertaining is definitely an art. Wong brings a multidisciplinary approach to the challenge, combining theater, guerilla performance, and interactive improvisation. Humor is definitely a big part of that equation. Wong says, "Humor creates a bridge and makes it easier to enter this space." Wong's current show, *Going Green the Wong Way*, is her fifth solo show and examines the trials and tribulations of sustainable living, specifically by running a car on vegetable oil. Mildly autobiographical (Wong did have such a car), she is not afraid to satirize herself. She

writes, "I would describe my aesthetic at its best as subversive, humorous, and endearingly inappropriate." Her irreverence makes her social commentary "less preachy and less militant" and creates an opening for public discourse.

Photo from [Kristina Wong](#) website

Humor has the ability to block negative emotions of fear and anger, emotions that make us more reactive than proactive and

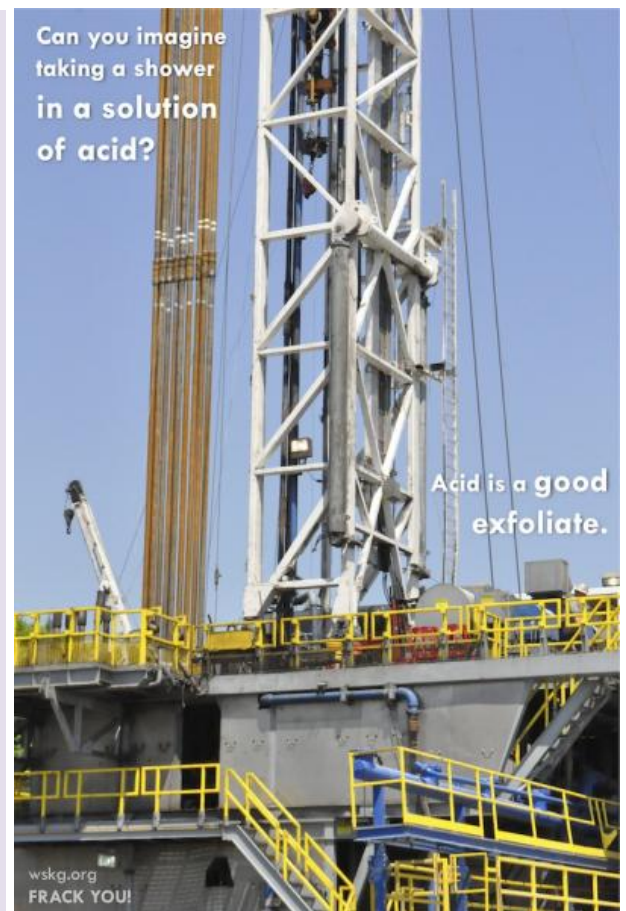
more rigid than flexible (Morreall, 1997). Morreall notes, “When we’re overcome by fear or anger, we seldom come up with great ideas, or even new ideas.” Humor helps us think more flexibly, which is one reason that Laura Cunningham decided to use humor in her play about the controversial issue of fracking—drilling for gas. “The issue is so polarizing,” she says, “that people can’t even talk about it.” By using humor “[Frack You](#),” which was later made into a film and aired on PBS, helps frame the conversation about this topic in an unbiased way. Cunningham says, “Humor brings a very controversial issue to people in a non-controversial setting.” Cunningham achieved her goal of fostering civic dialogue. Her play brought people who were experiencing “fracking fatigue” from the overload of information, people who had shut their minds off to the topic, back into the conversation.



From [Frack You](#) website

“Frack You”—Diffusing Contentious Debate

Laura Cunningham came to playwriting later in life out of a desire to share her personal experiences. Her first play, “[Frack You](#),” concerning the controversial subject of gas drilling, resulted from her childhood on her grandfather’s farm on the Red Banks of the Shenango River, where they could literally light the water on fire because of fracking. Residing in Binghamton, New York, Cunningham could see that communities in the region were grappling with this highly emotional issue. “Frack You” is her first play and was crafted with humor in a deliberate effort to diffuse the tension around this debate and hopefully to turn screaming matches into talking points. “Frack You” challenges viewers to move beyond stereotypes and to consider the many sides of this complex issue. The film increases audience awareness, provides information, and humanizes the topic for everyone. Cunningham said, “There hasn’t been a single time that I haven’t been approached by someone in the audience who says, “I learned something new from this film.”” Cunningham’s next project examines aging and how our society treats older people.



SATIRE, IRONY, EXAGGERATION, PARODY: HUMOR AS SOCIAL CORRECTIVE

As we've seen, humor can be employed in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes, some of which may even be contradictory, depending on one's goals (Martin, 2007). Throughout history one of the primary goals of comedy has been to illuminate the ways in which we live in the world politically and to critique our legislature and laws. In the days of Old Comedy in ancient Greece matters of great import, such as deities, rulers, war, and peace, were discussed and scorned. Theaters were forums for civic engagement where "problems were debated, corruption was uncovered, and injustices were corrected" (Jenkins, 1984, p. 10). In the Middle Ages a European court jester, assuming the voice of the average citizen, could mock the king and tell him those unpleasant truths others could not (Pollio, 1996). We inherited this conviction that the typical civilian has a right, and a responsibility, to critique society and its government from our political forebearers, and it is a guiding principle that has played a critical role in maintaining our democracy.

Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Swift, and Mark Twain's early derisive observations were examples of how satire could subvert authority and expose hypocrisy. Their tradition of wry observations and sarcastic commentaries was continued throughout the 1900s by "Crackerbox Philosophers," an expression taken from the box of crackers available at a general store where people discussed the news of the day (Walker, 1998). Will Rogers, a cowboy, humorist, and social commentator, assumed Twain's role and was America's most popular humorist of the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing his material from daily newspapers, his jokes skewered Republicans and Democrats alike: "Most actors appearing on the stage have some writer to write their material. Congress is good enough for me. They've been writing my material for years." Performed during the Great Depression, his comedy provided an acceptable way to critique the dominant forces in society and ridicule those in power. It also provided an outlet for anger and frustration during a time of economic hardship, and it even expressed hope for a better future.

The 1960s and 1970s were eras shaped by controversy and were times of great comedic creativity. Richard Zoglin, author of *Comedy on the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (2008), notes how comedy of that time was a commentary on the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the women's rights era. Comedians let their point of view be known, "They took aim at political corruption and corporate greed, made fun of society's hypocrisy and consumerist excess, mocked the button-down conformity of Eisenhower America" (pp. 2-3). Comedy during that time emphasized the gaps between our espoused ideals and our harsh realities, and comedians reflected the cynicism and distrust that infected the nation.

[Dell'Arte International](#) is a community of artists founded during this period as a way to help people “invent the future and to dream the collective dreams so necessary to that future.” Inspired by *commedia*, an art form dedicated to poking fun at society’s authority and ridiculing pretentiousness, the company involves local communities in the process of selecting and creating productions that address issues that are impacting their neighborhoods. Previous shows have dealt with the building of a Native American casino, the escalation of marijuana growth in the region, and militarism. Michael Fields, producing artistic director, said, “Humor is a provocation. Laughter is a way of recognizing yourself.” Comedy is a social corrective (Combs and Nimmo, 1996), and a key to its success is that it favors the underdog and dismantles those in power.

One of the ways comedy does this is by highlighting the absurdities in our politics and political leaders. “Saturday Night Live” (SNL) has used sarcasm, irony, exaggeration, and parody (which mocks the form as well as the content), very effectively to this end for over 25 years. There is some anecdotal evidence that Chevy Chase's impersonation of bumbling incumbent President Ford influenced the election of President Carter, according to University of Missouri political science professor William Horner. Horner also believes that SNL had an effect on the results of the 2008 election (Columbia Daily Tribune, 2012).

Comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert continue to obscure the lines between news and comedy with their programs on Comedy Central—“The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report.” In 2000 the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press published a report revealing that 21 percent of young people aged 18 to 29 reported learning something about the presidential campaign regularly from comedy shows like “The Daily Show” or “Saturday Night Live,” and 13 percent reported regular learning from late-night shows like those hosted by Leno and Letterman (Young and Tisinger, 2006, p. 114).

Dell'Arte—Recognizing Oneself through Laughter

Michael Fields, producing artistic director of [Dell'Arte](#), believes that life is 51 percent comedy and 49 percent tragedy, and that the two push against each other and create a space for laughter. Dell'Arte is an international school of physical performance that is based on *commedia* and located in a town 300 miles north of San Francisco with a population of 1,200. It represents theater that is by, for, and with the people of this region. Part of Fields’ job is to get audiences to laugh as a way to get them to think about the serious concerns facing their communities. Fields believes, “Laughter is a way of recognizing yourself.” Audiences are instrumental in informing the theater pieces that have tackled such issues as the building of a Native American casino, the growth of the marijuana culture, and domestic violence. Fields says, “Laughter is essential to a healthy community. It brings the unvoiced voice.”



Michael Fields in [Wild Card](#), 2001

However, other research argues that the jokes of fake news shows presume the viewers already have a certain degree of understanding. Young and Tisinger (2006) went on to dispel the myth that late-night comedy was the new source of political information for today's youth, hypothesizing that some news awareness is a necessary precursor to understanding the jokes of late-night comedy. In fact, their study showed that "Young, heavy, late-night comedy watchers tend to be heavier consumers of *all* types of news information," and "young people are not watching late-night comedy as their exclusive source of news or instead of traditional news. Rather they are watching both." (p. 128)

IN CLOSING

Our development as a nation, as well as our individual growth, depends upon our being aware and informed citizens. Social and political matters impact our daily lives and call upon us for non-partisan information, increased open-mindedness, and self-reflection. Laughing together connects us through our similarities as a species in spite of our social and political differences. Humor that questions the status quo allows us to consider that there are other, possibly better, ways of being. And jokes that challenge our assumptions help us to refresh old ways of thinking. By engaging average citizens in thinking, feeling, and speaking about the ways that we live in the world together, humor can inform societal change. At a time in our history when we are drowning in bipartisan rhetoric and average citizens are disenfranchised and disengaged, humor can be our much needed ally—not only because of the levity it brings, but because it reminds us of our potential greatness as a country.



A versatile educator, **Nancy Goldman** is an adjunct assistant professor at New York University teaching storytelling; coaches entertainment industry leaders to advance their careers; and has trained low-income New Yorkers to work in film and television. Goldman's career began working for groundbreaking journalist Linda Ellerbee followed by an eight year tenure working for Montel Williams where she became Vice President of Development. During that time she was elected the first Chair of the Gotham-based Producers Guild of America East. Growing up, Goldman's dream job was to work at a comedy club and she accomplished that by managing at two clubs in Manhattan. Her passion for comedy led to her doctoral dissertation examining how comedians use humor to raise awareness and consciousness about social and political issues. Her research findings demonstrated how comedians draw upon their past experiences and subsequently led her to study, practice and teach personal storytelling. Goldman's doctorate in education is from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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