



SCRN 291: COMEDY & QUEERNESS FALL 2022

SEMINAR: THURSDAYS, 2:50-5:50PM, TC 112

SCREENINGS: MONDAYS, 4:15-6:45PM, RAZZO HALL

PROF. ROX SAMER (THEY/THEM)

EMAIL: RSAMER@CLARKU.EDU

OFFICE HOURS: TUESDAYS, 12-1PM, & THURSDAYS, 1-2PM, & BY APPOINTMENT IN TC 311. EMAIL TO SCHEDULE 12+ HOURS AHEAD.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This capstone course will be devoted to the study of gender, queerness, and comedy. We will revisit classic theories of comedy and humor but alongside contemporary queer and trans standup and comedy television before delving into the rich archive of feminist scholarship countering centuries of myths of women as humorless beings. We will learn how for comediennes daring to be funny has long itself been a gender transgressive act, which they have in turn wielded to satirize patriarchy and articulate a range of feminist politics. Lastly, we will study the queer humor at work in the most perennial of TV genres: the sitcom. The final weeks of the semester will then be devoted to students conducting and presenting their own original research into what comedy and humor offer trans people, queer people, and all those who buck gender norms.

Students should leave the class with:

- A thorough introduction to comedy theory
- Deeper knowledge of the history of feminist and queer stand-up and TV comedy
- Familiarity with a wide range of media and cultural studies research methods
- Advanced undergraduate research and research presentation experience

REQUIRED TEXTS

Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1912)

Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905)

Alfred Martin, *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom* (2021)

All other texts required for this course will be available as PDFs on Moodle.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING POLICIES

Participation: 15% of final grade

Moodle Assignments: 15%

Paper #1: 15%

Paper #2: 15%

Capstone Proposal: 5%

Capstone Presentation: 10%

Capstone Project or Paper: 25%

Your final grade will be calculated as a score out of 100 possible points for the semester. A standard 90-80-70-60 scale will be applied.

“A” work extends and expands our in-class discussions and offers original and creative thought. It meets all elements of the assignment or exam prompt and responds with a high degree of organizational foresight. “A” is reserved for outstanding work.

“B” work responds to the assignment or exam prompt insightfully, revealing strong command of the material we have covered. “B” is reserved for good work. “B” work, however, is less bold, less original, and/or less organized and well written than “A” work.

“C” work completes assignments and meets assignment requirements, while demonstrating a partial understanding of course content and minimal original thinking.

“D” work meets the technical requirements enumerated in the assignment or exam prompt, while failing to demonstrate any significant course-specific learning.

“F” work fails to meet the requirements of the assignment or exam, including but not limited to: lack of concrete textual analysis, inability to answer prompts, insufficient length, excessive grammatical and/or spelling errors, or late submission.

Please see program-wide policies on course screenings and late coursework. In short, screenings are not supplemental but central to our courses. Timely submission of assignments is expected, and there are standardized penalizations for late work.

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Barring illness, emergency or development of covid-like symptoms, you are expected to attend every class meeting. Students who miss class will be ill prepared for assignments. If you miss a class meeting, it is your responsibility to secure notes from a classmate and/or meet with the professor during office hours to learn about what you missed.

Students are expected to attend class prepared to discuss all homework. Good class participation involves contributing to the discussion in an informed manner, being attentive to that conversation, and being respectful of the participants in it.

Across the semester, we will talk about a wide range of complicated and emotionally charged topics, including matters of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I want you to develop the ability to take a strong position on the issues that matter to you most, to defend what you believe in, and to question one another about those beliefs with both kindness and conviction. Acknowledging that we all bring different backgrounds and experiences to the various topics at hand, I also want you to learn how to listen carefully to what others are saying and be willing to change your mind when the ideas, questions, or arguments you hear are convincing. Listening to and learning from the opinions and perspectives of others gives us a broader view of the world we share and is the first step to building a better world to live in together.

Relatedly, I want to encourage you to take risks and get involved, even when it might feel easier keep to the sidelines. Here are some guidelines, which should help:

1. Contribute at least once a week to class discussion. Whenever possible, speak in "I" statements and do not generalize or try to speak for the class as a whole or some demographic or group as a whole.
2. Treat one another with respect. This includes using each other's correct pronouns (and correcting yourself if you make a mistake).
3. Know that anything you bring up is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or otherwise respond respectfully to what you have said.
4. Begin comments by responding to what other students or the professor have said before you. If you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction, inform the class of as much and make sure they are ready to move on.
5. Practice making arguments, not simply stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials before you and be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

This course, like all other 1 unit courses at Clark, comes with the expectation that over the course of the semester students will devote 180 hours to its study. In addition to the roughly 40 hours we will spend together in the classroom you should plan to devote 140 hours to your readings, screenings, and assignments. Much of this time should go to reading each week. If you put in this time, you ought to be prepared for class.

PARTICIPATION, PT. II (WEEKLY IN-CLASS COMEDY)

Each week we will open and close class in the same fashion. We will begin class by each sharing a joke we heard or wrote or a humorous incident from the past week. These should be pithy, of our own telling, and take one minute or less per person. We will then conclude class by submitting humorous captions for a random *New Yorker* cartoon. On Fridays, students will be prompted to vote for the week's funniest caption. At the end of the semester the two students who have been voted the funniest caption writers by their classmates will have their choice of capstone presentation spots.

The purpose of these in-class comedy assignments is to build our communal sense of humor and try our hand at the hard work that is comedy performance and writing.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Over the course of the semester students will develop either a scholarly research project or a creative project of intellectual substance related to the course topic.

Scholarly research projects can take the form of either a 25-page paper or a 15-minute video essay. Students should note that video essays often take more time to complete than written essays. Creative projects may take the form of a short comedy film, comedic web series, stand-up act, comedy film or TV script or work in another comedy medium (the length and specifics of which will be determined in consultation with the professor). Students taking the creative option ought to already be skilled in their medium of choice. Those creating video essays and creative projects will also be expected to produce either a polished written supplement, explaining their creative choices and connecting their project meaningfully to course content.

Students will submit a proposal and annotated bibliography for approval. Each student is expected to schedule a meeting with the professor to discuss their final project topic the week of November 7th. At the end of the semester each student will give a presentation on their final research project. More details forthcoming.

SUBMITTING WORK VIA EMAIL

Submit all assignments as Word docs via email. When submitting work, be sure to include a header at the top of your assignment that includes your name. Also be sure to save all files as "LastName_Assignment," i.e. "Smith_Paper1" or "Smith_Paper2." Students who fail to do as much will be penalized a third of a letter grade.

READING FOR THE CAPSTONE

It is imperative that you come prepared discuss all readings for each Capstone session. To that end, I encourage you to schedule regular weekly reading hours for yourself. Many of the readings can be completed prior to screenings. Those that name specific comedians in their titles would ideally be completed following screenings. Please consider reserving a couple hours each weekend, prior to Monday screenings, and a couple hours each Tuesday, following screenings, to complete your weekly reading.

I have worked to assign excerpts where I can. I will sometimes note pages of focus for a given reading (on Moodle). This is different than excerpts. It means the entire reading is required; however, you are being encouraged to focus your attention to select pages.

WEEKLY MOODLE POSTS

Each week you will have a Moodle forum post due Tuesday by 11pm. You are also expected to respond to one of your classmates' posts each week by Wednesday at noon. These posts are designed to prepare you for active and productive participation in seminar discussion on Thursday. I highly recommend taking notes on each of our readings and answering for yourself the following questions and prompts:

1. Who wrote this book, article or chapter? (Do a quick search of their scholarly profile and report back what you find.)
2. What is the author's thesis?
3. What methodology or methodologies does the author use?

4. What sort of intervention is the author making?
5. Who is the reading's audience (whether specifically delineated or implied)?
6. Briefly summarize the progression of the author's argument, including two or three smaller, supporting arguments.
7. Define two key concepts (either the author's own or others' they cite).
8. What are the best examples or evidence provided for the author's argument(s)?
9. What passages would you be especially enthusiastic for the class to discuss? And, why?

In lieu of asking you to submit such notes in their entirety each week, I am asking you to submit your responses for a single reading. I have divided the class in four groups (A, B, C, D). Each week group A will submit responses to the corresponding reading in the syllabus, etc. Please make your group/reading clear in the title of your post.

Group A: Buckhorn, Dilorio, Doxsey & Duggan,
Group B: Ford, Haithwaite & Kennedy
Group C: LeClair, Lynch, MackRosen & McEnroe
Group D: McGregor, Wykes & Young

Each week you will also need respond to one student in a different group/with a different reading than yourself. These responses can take a variety of forms, but consider noting if you arrived at a different answer than they did for one or more of their questions or if you too would be interested in exploring a similar passage and why.

Each of your Moodle posts should be roughly 500 words in length and each of your responses roughly 250 words in length. Please provide page numbers in your forum posts, so your classmates know what passages specifically you are referring to.

Please note that some of these questions (like the methodology question, intervention question, and audience question) will have clearer answers some weeks than others. Please do your best to answer as accurately and thoughtfully as you can.

Like participation more generally, you will not receive regular grades on these assignments. But, if you submit these assignments punctually and consistently thoughtfully, you will receive an "A" for this portion of your grade come December. If you are not punctual in submitting these assignments, forget to do them altogether, and/or regularly submit them with signs of little thought or care (including poor grammar and typos), you will receive a lower grade.

EXTRA CREDIT

Over the course of the semester, I may announce screenings, talks, and/or other events on campus or online related to the subject of our course. Attending each of these will earn you a half point of extra credit. Should you attend four such events, you will earn two points of extra credit, such that an 88 (B+) would become a 90 (A-). To earn your extra credit, write me a short email afterwards reflecting on the event.

COURSE SCHEDULE

UNIT I: STUDYING COMEDY QUEERLY

Why Care About Comedy?

Aug. 29

Screen: "New Faces of Comedy: Jes Tom" (2021); "The Least Relatable Moment in Sex Scenes: Sydnee Washington" (2020); "Comedy Central Stand-up Presents Joel Kim Booster" (2017); "Patti Harrison on Being Banned from Twitter for Impersonating Nilla Wafers" (*Jimmy Kimmel Live*, 2021); & "Wealth Hoarders" (S1, E3) & "Gay Pride!" (S2, E6) from *Ziwe* (2021-22)

Listen (on your own) to: Episode 126 of *Gender Reveal* podcast with Prof. Jules Gill-Peterson (mins 5:45-11:52 & 45:10-56:40 on transness & comedy carefully)

Sep. 1

Read: Kirsten Leng, "Comedy as a Practice of Care" (A); John Morreall, "Tragedy vs. Comedy: Is Heavy Better than Light?" & "Have a Good Laugh: The Positive Ethics of Humor" from *Comic Relief* (B); Linda Mizejewski, "Introduction" excerpts from *Pretty/Funny* (C); Raúl Pérez, "Racist Humor and the Cult(ure) of Whiteness" from *The Souls of White Jokes* (D); & Scott Dikkers, *How To Write Funny* excerpts

Classic Theories of Comedy

Sep. 5

Screen (on your own—Labor Day): Jake Noll, "Lincoln Lodge" (2021); Jake Noll (@jakersnoll), "Go see Stillwatah!!" TikTok (August 2, 2021); Robin Tran, "Coming Out to Your Non-English-Speaking Mom" (2022); River Butcher, "Another Kind of Dude" (2022); "Snatch Game" clip, *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, S7, E2 (2022); & Julio Torres, *My Favorite Shapes* (HBO, 2019)

Sep. 8

Read: Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* excerpts (A & B); Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* excerpts (C & D); Scott Dikkers, *How To Write Funny* excerpts, pt. 2; & Emily Flake, *That Was Awkward* excerpts

At 5pm: Zoom visit from cartoonist Emily Flake

Unruly Bodies & the Carnavalesque

Sep. 12 Screen: "What a Wonderful World" (S1, E1), "The Knockoffs" (S2, E4) & "Witches" (S4, E6) from *Broad City* (2014-19) & Beth Stelling, *Girl Daddy* (HBO, 2020)

On your own: "Allergic to Nuts," "Last Fuckable Day" & "Football Town Nights" sketches from *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-16) & Amber Rose, "Walk of No Shame" (2015)

Sep. 14 **At 4:30pm: Lauryl Tucker Higgins Talk (Extra Credit)**

Sep. 15 Read: Kathleen Rowe, "Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the Carnavalesque" from *The Unruly Woman*(A); Maggie Hennefeld, "Abject Feminism, Grotesque Comedy, & Apocalyptic Laughter on Inside Amy Schumer" (B & C); & Cynthia Willett & Julie Willett, "A Catharsis of Shame: The Belly Laugh and SlutWalk" from *Uproarious* (D)

UNIT II: UNFUNNY WOMEN: A HISTORY

Elaine May & Lily Tomlin

Sep. 19 **Paper #1 Due at 4pm via email**

Screen: Elaine May & Mike Nichols, "Teenagers" TV performance (1959) & "Dentist" TV performance (circa 1960); & Lily Tomlin, *Appearing Nitely* (1977) clip

Listen (as a class) to: Lily Tomlin, "Tell Miss Sweeney Goodbye" from *Onstage* (1977); "Telephone," "Adultery," "Mother and Son" from *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (1960); & "A Little More Gauze," "Interrupted Hour," "Merry Christmas, Doctor," "Physical," & "Nichols and May at Work" from *Mike Nichols & Elaine May Examine Doctors* (1961)

On your own: *The Last Laugh* (Pearlstein, 2016)

Sep. 22 Read: Linda Mizejewski & Victoria Sturtevant, "Introduction" from *Hysterica* (A); John Limon, "Analytic of the Ridiculous: Mike Nichols & Elaine May" from *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*

(B); Kyle Stevens, "Nothing Goes Unheard: Nichols and May, Improvisation, and the Skewing of Language" from *Mike Nichols* (C); & Jennifer Reed, "Sexual Outlaws: Queer in a Funny Way" (D)

At 4:30pm: Zoom visit from director Ferne Pearlstein

Moms Mabley & Wanda Sykes

Sep. 26 Screen: *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley* (2013) & *Wanda Sykes, I'ma Be Me* (2009)

Sep. 29 Read: Rebecca Krefting, "Twentieth-Century Stand-Up," from *All Joking Aside* (A); Bambi Haggins, "Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes: 'I'ma Be Me'" from *Hysterical* (B); & Linda Mizejewski, "'White People Are Looking At You!' Wanda Sykes's Black Looks" from *Pretty/Funny* (C & D)

Margaret Cho

Oct. 3 Screen (on own ahead of screening): Margaret Cho, *I'm the One that I Want* (2000)

Screen (as a class): Margaret Cho, *Beautiful* (2009)

Oct. 6 Read: Linda Mizejewski, "Margaret Cho Is Beautiful: A Comedy of Manifesto" from *Pretty/Funny* (A & B); Rachel C. Lee, "'Where's My Parade?': Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space" (C & D)

Oct. 7 **Night of Stand-up with Robin Tran**

Sitcom Women

Oct. 10 Screen (on your own—Fall break): "Thoroughly Unmilitant Mary" (S2, E8) & "The Lars Affair" (S4, E1) from *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-77); "Maude Meets Florida" (S1, E3), "The Grass Story" (S1, E12) & "Florida's Affair" (S2, E6) from *Maude* (1972-78); & "Twas the Nightmare Before Christmas" (S2, E11) & "72 hours" (S5, E19) from *The Golden Girls* (1985-92)

Oct. 13 Read: Brett Mills, "Sitcom and Representation" excerpts from *Television Sitcom* (A); Brett Mills, "Audiences" excerpt from *The Sitcom* (B); Kirsten Marthe Lentz,

“Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television” (C); & Eleanor Patterson, “*The Golden Girls Live: Residual Television Texts, Participatory Culture, and Queering TV Heritage Through Drag*” (D)

**UNIT III:
QUEERNESS IS NO
LAUGHING MATTER**

Oct. 20 Recommended Reading: Kirsten Leng, “Fumerism as Queer Feminist Activism: Humor and Rage in the Lesbian Avengers’ Visibility Politics”

At 4:30pm: Kirsten Leng, “The Lesbian Avengers and the Possibilities of Queer Feminist Humor” Higgins Talk

Comedy & Humor in the Gay 90s

Oct. 24 Screen: “The Outing” (S4, E17) from *Seinfeld* (1989-98); “The Matchmaker” (S2, E3) & “The Ski Lodge” (S5, E14) from *Frasier* (1993-2004); “Homo for the Holidays” (S2, E7) & “Girls, Interrupted” (S2, E20) from *Will & Grace* (1998-2006); & “Woman to Woman” (S3, E22) from *Living Single* (1993-98)

Oct. 27 Read: Brett Mills, “Sitcom and Performance” from *Television Sitcom* (A & B); Ron Becker, “‘We’re Not Gay!’ Heterosexuality and Gay-Themed Programming” from *Gay TV and Straight America* (C & D); Alfred Martin, “Introduction,” *The Generic Closet*

Black Gayness & the Black Cast Sitcom; Feminist & Queer Comedy Research Symposium

Oct. 31 Screen: “Labels” (S2, E6) from *Moesha* (1996-2001); “The Boy Has Style” (S2, E6) from *Are We There Yet?* (2010-21); “Pilot” (S1, E1) from *Good News* (1997-98); & “Looking for Now” (S1, E1) & “Looking for Uncut” (S1, E2) from *Looking* (2014-15) (to be discussed next week)

Nov. 3 Read: Alfred Martin, “Scripting the Generic Closet in the Writers’ Room” (A), “Comedy, Laughter, and the Generic Closet” (B& C), & “Black Queens Speak” (D) from *The Generic Closet*

At 2:50: Joined by Dr. Esther Jones for co-facilitated affinity group discussions of Dr. Martin's book

At 4:30: Joined by Dr. Maggie Henefeld, Dr. Kyle Stevens & Dr. Alfred Martin (class on Zoom this week)

A Little Dash of Gay Romance

Nov. 7

Paper #2 Due at 4pm via email

Screen: *Looking*, S1, E3-6 (2014) & (on your own—via Amazon Prime) *People Like Us*, S1 (2016)

Nov. 10

Read: Maria San Fillippo, "Radical Rom-Com: Not an Oxymoron" (A); Eve Ng, "Rom-com without Romonormativity, Gays without Homonormativity: Examining the People Like Us Web Series" (B & C); & Jack Cortvriend, "Stylistic Convergences Between British Film and American Television: Andrew Haigh's *Looking*" (D)

Research Week

Nov. 14

No screening; instead, **one-on-one proposal meetings**

Nov. 17

Read: Helen Sword, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* excerpts

Nov. 18

Capstone Proposal Due at 4pm via email

Research Week

Nov. 21

No screening; work on research presentation

Nov. 24

Thanksgiving Break

UNIT IV. TIME TO PUT ON A SHOW

Dec. 1

Final Presentations, Part I

Dec. 2

At 1:25pm: Rachel Corbman, "Women as a Force in Queer Historiography" in-person WGS Talk (Extra Credit)

Dec. 8

Final Presentations, Part II

Dec. 19

Final Project or Paper Due at 4pm via email

SCREENING CONTENT WARNING

Many of this course's screenings address homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and racism and do as much via comedy. Please speak to me at the start of the semester if you have any specific concerns. In my teaching experience as well as that of [colleagues in gender and sexuality studies and cinema and media studies](#), it has been nearly impossible for a professor to predict what will be triggering to individual students. Many triggers (such as names, colors, sounds, etc.), in their very nature, cannot be predicted. Trigger warnings do not distinguish between oppositional or critical representations of traumatizing experience and sensationalistic or gratuitous representations. Overreliance upon trigger warnings can sometimes censor important representations of challenging histories and experiences authored by and for queer, transgender, women, and/or BIPOC subjects. For these reasons, it is my policy that each individual student take responsibility for their own mental health needs and proactively research and clearly communicate any concerns at the start of the semester.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

College can be stressful. This stress can be exasperated by crises. If you suspect you might be experiencing excessive anxiety, depression or some other mental health concern, please visit Clark's Office of Counseling and Personal Growth. They are located at 114 Woodland Street and open Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm (closed 12-1pm for lunch). Their phone number is (508) 793-7678. Their website also has a great list of resources: <https://www.clarku.edu/offices/counseling/mental-health-toolbox/>.

ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

If you require accommodations in this course due to a disability or a personal circumstance that will affect your learning in this course, please contact me, so we can discuss the best ways to meet your needs. Any student who needs accommodations for disabilities should also register with the Office of Disability Services. For information, please contact accessibilityservices@clarku.edu or 508-798-4368.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic integrity is a basic value for all higher learning. Simply expressed, it requires that work presented must be wholly one's own and unique to that course. All direct quotations must be identified by source. Academic integrity can be violated in many ways: for example, by submitting someone else's paper as one's own; cheating on an exam; submitting one paper to more than one class; copying a computer program; altering data in an experiment; or quoting published material without proper citation of references or sources. Attempts to alter an official academic record will also be treated as violations of academic integrity.

To ensure academic integrity and safeguard students' rights, all suspected violations of academic integrity are reported to the College Board. Such reports must be carefully documented, and students accused of the infraction are notified of the charge. In the case of proven academic dishonesty, the student will receive a sanction, which may range from an F in the assignment or course to suspension or expulsion from the University.

The complete academic integrity policy is available with Academic Advising at <http://www.clarku.edu/offices/aac/integrity.cfm>

NOTICE: FACULTY MEMBERS ARE “RESPONSIBLE EMPLOYEES”

This notice is to inform you that the faculty member associated with this course is considered a “Responsible Employee” by Clark University. As such, I am required to report all alleged sexual offenses to the University’s Title IX Coordinator. The only exceptions to this reporting responsibility are the community members who have been designated and/or trained as “Confidential” Sources. This includes the professional staff in Clark’s Center for Counseling and Personal Growth and the medical providers at the Health Center, as well as other individuals listed at <http://bit.ly/2eUOGGx>

DISCLAIMER

As the professor, I reserve the right to make changes to any information contained in this syllabus at any time during the semester. Changes will be announced, and an updated version of the syllabus will be posted on Moodle and/or distributed to students.

This extends to the modality of any given class session. I reserve the right to move this class entirely online, should that be what’s wisest for my own health or that of this class.