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### **Book Review:** *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*

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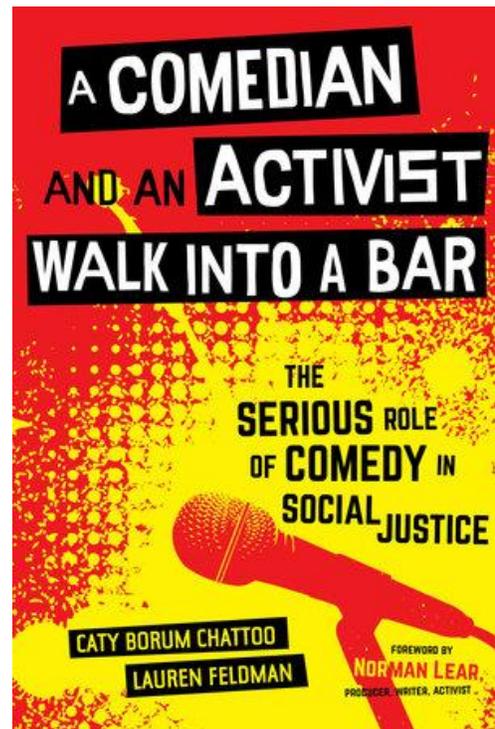
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*A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* offers a compelling and innovative account of the critical role mediated comedy plays in U.S. society today. As co-authors Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman argue, filmed comedic performance (ranging from standup to sketch) should not be viewed as simply escapist leisure, but can serve as a powerful form of social commentary, critique, and advocacy. To be sure, comedy for film and television has long been a riveting subject of historical inquiry, as have screen pioneers of the comedy arts such as the Marx Brothers, Lucille Ball, and Richard Pryor. However, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* focuses on our contemporary media landscape and explicitly comedy geared toward a progressive social purpose. Borum Chattoo and Feldman's fascinating project builds on the research of scholars Henry Jenkins, Bambi Haggins, and Amber Day, while also enriching the broader field of civic media, which examines how



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legacy cultural forms and emerging technologies make democratic politics more equitable and participatory.

Importantly, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* makes three incisive contributions to the disciplines of communication, cultural sociology, film studies, and media industry studies. First, it provides a persuasive frame for understanding the social justice work of an emerging cadre of feature-length films, shorts, series, and specials within our streaming environment. Second, it gives voice to comedy writers, producers, and performers' textured reflections on their craft as well as what they see as opportunities and challenges in their respective professions. Third, it analyzes with precision and depth the various forms of progressive change mediated comedy can engender. *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* ultimately elevates the stakes surrounding the crucial place of comedy in civil society and the importance of political discourse in comedic performance.

Each of the book's seven chapters examines a different dimension of the comedy-social justice relationship. Chapter One sketches the cultural context of its recent rise to prominence. Over the last 15 years, the intersection of social movements (Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Me Too), technological innovations, and seismic shifts in the entertainment industries has led to a flourishing of critical comedy across cable stations such as Comedy Central, commercial streamers such as Netflix, video sharing and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and online hubs such as Funny or Die and College Humor. In Chapter Two, Borum Chattoo and Feldman turn their attention to viewer engagement, highlighting what comedy can achieve. They make legible comedy's capacity to increase attention to pressing crises, lower resistance to persuasion, dismantle social barriers, and facilitate everyday discussion about topical issues (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, pp. 41-55). Examples from disparate areas of our media culture help to illustrate comedy's sphere of influence; for example, Tina Fey's biting impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* and John Oliver's segment on the magnitude of net neutrality on *Last Week Tonight*.

Chapter Three concentrates more on the media objects themselves, providing a taxonomy of five central genres, each with distinct stylistic conventions and a form of address. These genres are not totally new but have been reimagined or reinvigorated in recent years. Satirical news (e.g., *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*) delivers a kind of rapid response to the news cycle. Sitcoms (e.g., *Black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Modern Family*) revise what have frequently been white-washed and heteronormative story constructs, spotlighting instead the lives of immigrants, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Stand-up (e.g., Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*) features comedians sharing barbed insights about a wide breadth of topical issues through the intimate presentation of their on-stage personae. Sketch (e.g., *Saturday Night Live*, *Key & Peele*) uses scripted ensemble performance to comment on current events and cultural debates. Lastly, documentary (e.g., *The Problem with Apu*, *United Shades of America*) functions as a meta genre, interweaving aspects of different formats into a coherent narrative, often with a guiding rhetorical claim. Essential to the social justice charge of these different genres, as Borum Chattoo and Feldman note, is the effort to ensure that grassroots calls for

inclusion translate to a diversity of talent and subject matter not only on screen, but also behind the camera in a below- and above-the-line capacity.

The next two chapters explore subject-centered case studies, including how comedy can combat the climate crisis and reframe narratives of poverty. For the former, Borum Chattoo and Feldman pair textual analysis of programming that sounds the alarm for global warming and critiques climate change denialism, with an original survey study of over 800 viewers' responses to climate-themed news and comedy shorts. Combining these critical studies and social science approaches yields a more nuanced understanding of comedy's rhetorical craft as well as its resonance with a cross-section of viewers. For the latter subject, Borum Chattoo and Feldman investigate comedy that takes aim at exploitive poverty porn TV, providing alternative ways to engage with socioeconomic inequities within and beyond the United States. A key example is Hasan Minhaj's *Stand Up Planet* (2014), a project where Borum Chattoo herself served as producer. Through interviews with local standup comics, the multi-part documentary project educates viewers about the crisis of sanitation management in India along with struggles to reduce the spread of HIV in South Africa. Minhaj's on-the-ground interactions offer a compassionate lens through which to better recognize how structural failures and discrimination impact underserved communities.

Chapter Six features the voices of comedy professionals themselves, drawn from 17 original interviews conducted for this book. It was refreshing to see the perspectives of these individuals, so often excerpted as mere sound bites in mainstream media, receive expansive treatment. Borum Chattoo and Feldman note the shared investment among their interviewees in "punching up, not down," which involves taking swings at those in power (and especially individuals who abuse it) rather than diminishing those who are oppressed or marginalized (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, p. 147). Particularly moving were the sentiments of African American comedian Franchesca Ramsey, who discusses both how she has had to fight racism within the profession as well as strategies for leveraging social media to heighten her visibility, build a following, and gain a foothold in the industry. Comedians are also quick to say that although they have certainly enjoyed seizing recent opportunities to speak truth to power, the for-profit pursuits of corporate studios pose an inveterate challenge. Nato Green comments, "The nature of capitalist entertainment is to make money—it's not to end racism or promote social equity or solve the world's problems" (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, p. 140). In turn, comedians must navigate pressures to meet the desires of risk-averse companies who are always worried about their bottom line.

With its focus on urgent collaborations among comedians, media outlets, and progressive organizations, Chapter Seven is one of the most valuable sections of the book. These collaborations involve social movement participants or individuals with subject area expertise contributing to a film or TV show. For a more co-creative effort, social organizers partner with entertainment professionals on a project directly connected to a campaign or cause. As Borum Chattoo and Feldman assert, productive partnerships require common goals and mutual respect, not simply air-dropping a message into a sitcom or flashing the face of a celebrity on screen to

drive interest in a pressing issue. A poignant case study in this chapter centers on sexual assault survivor Amanda Nguyen's organization Rise joining forces with the sketch comedy studio Funny or Die. Their film, *Even Supervillains Think Our Sexual Assault Laws Are Insane* (2016), put pressure on Barack Obama to sign the Survivors' Bill of Rights Act in 2016 along with individual legislatures to adopt local versions of the federal policy.

The concluding chapter looks toward the future, commenting how the Open Society Foundations, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and The Center for Media and Social Impact (where Borum Chattoo serves as the executive director) pursue crucial research to better understand comedy as a vehicle for social justice and imagine new forms of collaborative cultural production. Borum Chattoo and Feldman also contend that these organizations, together with grassroots efforts and support from industry allies, must devise new ways to make Hollywood more inclusive (pushing the big studios beyond talk and tokenism), especially in the executive ranks.

With its robust array of case studies and savvy interdisciplinary methodology, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* lays the groundwork for future research. One area of inquiry could involve media outlets that provide a direct challenge to commercial companies. What platforms might offer comedy professionals more freedom with their craft or social message? Might alternative models include a solid base of public funding or an artist-led co-op structure? Additionally, employing a comparative framework could help to position comedy within a broader cultural sphere. What are the points of similarity and difference between comedy and other socially engaged genres such as horror and sci-fi? Also, how might we research the weaponization of humor that aims to demean, discredit, or marginalize?

*A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* will no doubt be a touchstone for such pursuits. To this end, the book will be of great interest to students and scholars, as well as those who work for nonprofits, the policy sector, and the media industries.