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### **Book Review:** *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power*

By Caty Borum

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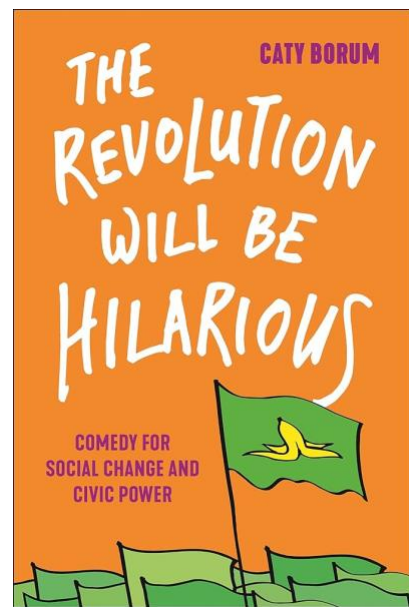
*Reviewed by Amelia Wade, Appalachian State University*

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Borum, C. (2023). *The revolution will be hilarious: Comedy for social change and civic power*. NYU Press.

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Caty Borum's *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power* demonstrates deep insight and years of dedication to comedy's use as a tool to further social justice movements. With a wide range of research concerning historical and present-day social movements throughout the United States, Borum's optimistic yet analytical approach to difficult discussions of civic power and social identity makes compelling arguments for the use of comedy as a strategy to subvert cultural norms and encourage participatory culture. Borum further explores the idea of comedy as a social practice through exploration of the relationship between historical ideas, creative deviance,<sup>1</sup> and their outward effects on social justice movements—weaving her own personal experience within various social justice comedy productions throughout. Borum has also co-authored the book *A Comedian and an Activist Walk*



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<sup>1</sup> Borum discusses creative deviance throughout the book to underscore comedy's use as a tool for activism and social movements, noting, "The goals may be immediate change or a gradual cultural shift, but the creative expression is meant to capture attention and disrupt" (Borum, 2023, pp. 32-33).

*into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*, and co-founded the Yes, And...Laughter Lab, a social-justice focused comedy organization that works with major media distributors to find creative outlets for social deviance.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a different aspect of comedy's usage as a societal tool and presents readers with several distinct U.S. cultures—Native cultures across the country, redneck culture of the southeast, and Black culture in Norfolk, Virginia, which was hard hit by the effects of climate change. However, Borum does not focus on these cultures individually. Woven throughout the text is a story focusing on many distinctly different ideas of life in the United States, held together by one clear commonality: the ability to laugh.

*The Revolution Will Be Hilarious* is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of U.S. life impacted by comedy. However, as a whole, the book revolves around three core beliefs. First, comedy is the most widely accepted form of social deviance. Chapter One starts strong, throwing the reader headfirst into Borum's encounters with comedy as a political tool. The chapter highlights comedy's utility in swaying large-scale national elections in support of social justice movements through hilarious, over-the-top television marketing, as well as smaller scale viewer involvement that slowly infiltrates culture itself, helping "audiences to see and experience people in non-othering ways" (Borum, 2023, p. 42). This strategy effectively serves to slowly alter the status quo among many communities in the United States.

Second, the book suggests that comedy as a form of social deviance can be utilized to support social justice movements. Borum seeks to discuss a tale of two United States within the book—on one side, we are presented with communities living the cultural experiences Borum discusses (e.g., the Standing Rock Sioux who protested the Dakota Pipeline and the impoverished Black populations fighting climate disaster in Norfolk, Virginia). Borum discusses these highly specific struggles with an underlying current of common U.S. issues of police brutality, climate change, ignorance, and racism. Borum asserts that, historically, marginalized groups of people in the United States, especially Native and Black communities, have long entrenched comedy within everyday life, and especially within support of social movements. Borum highlights various aspects of diasporic life in the United States, including Native and Black traditions, and the common thread of comedy as the crux of the social justice movement especially to express new ideas and be heard in the internet age. In Chapter Four, Borum speaks to the power of comedy to support the movement against anti-Black racism in the south—noting unconventional collaboration between comedians across cultural lines. Borum seeks to display both the juxtaposition between the two comedians, and also the juxtaposition between the increasingly politicized nature of the U.S. professional media system against the backdrop of grassroots comedy organizations working alongside social justice organizations to promote an optimistic view of change.

The other side of Borum's book, however, remains cautiously optimistic of a more dire situation. While her tone remains hopeful, Borum also offers small glimpses of a far crueler world, leading readers to the understanding that, "Surely there are grounds for a dystopic lens on a bleak future. Much is broken" (Borum, 2023, p. 210). While the media system in the United

States remains reliant on a “largely unregulated system of people and relationships” (Borum, 2023, p. 58), Borum remains firm that “comedians...often say what journalists—in theory, bedrock guardians of democracy—can’t or won’t” (Borum, 2023, p. 43). Comedians tell stories, sometimes their own, of tales dangerous to tell in the United States. Comedians make people not only listen, but also reflect on their personal background.

Lastly, the book mentions the power of togetherness—subtly but powerfully. Throughout, Borum explores the idea of a so-called “Co-creation protocol” (Borum, 2023, p.105) in which comedy for social change is always used in conjunction with individuals and organizations involved in furthering social issues outside of comedy. Co-creation is thus a tool, as is comedy itself. In every section of the book, Borum seeks to elevate the causes of communities she works with and offers research to show hope in these communities, even when there is little to show. Borum not only writes about specific cases in which comedic activism within these communities has historically worked, but also has the experience to demonstrate it.

Borum’s Book *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious* is an endeavor of a decade’s worth of activism and comedy research. It is also a striking work of positivity in a bleak-minded, media-oriented world, thus laying groundwork for continued research into different U.S. communities not explored within the text, such as Asian diasporic communities and Hispanic communities. The text also provides an important space for readers’ self-reflection to consider their own support for comedy and activism and to reflect upon how comedy has shaped their respective communities. With such an interdisciplinary perspective, Borum has authored an incredible resource for media professionals, social justice organizations, and public interest communicators alike.