

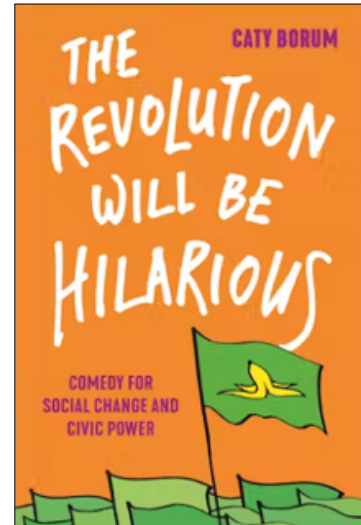
Caty Borum, **The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 262 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

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The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power begins by telling the story of how author Caty Borum, “a spirited child” and a natural comedian and troublemaker, found herself in front of legendary television producer Norman Lear for an unplanned half-hour meeting. This meeting led to a job interview and ultimately a decade-long stint working with one of the most influential producers in the history of American television comedy. Borum’s professional experience in comedy and her work with Lear certainly serve as the foreground for her research on the use of comedy to promote social change, right injustice, and bring power and visibility to those who have long been marginalized by society.



It is clear that Borum understands “the open creativity and deviant thinking required for comedy to interrogate complex ideas in provocative, memorable ways” (p. 5), and has built a career by mixing academic research and teaching with memorable and funny communication campaigns. A well-versed and grounded scholar of public communication, Borum documents throughout the book how changes in our media environment—from the growing influence of political satire programming to the rise of time-shifting streaming services like Netflix to the affordances of social media platforms like TikTok—help facilitate and encourage subversive engagement in politics. These platforms allow for a whole host of grassroots organizations to build the cultural power that can over time translate into civic power via the creative use of narrative and digital storytelling techniques to increase visibility. Borum has been an active participant in this recent media evolution, and her experience creating media and the lessons she has learned are an important part of the book.

The first half of *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious* focuses on the history of subversive comedy and the theoretical foundations underlying why it works as a message type and in turn a mechanism of social change. Borum’s prior research with Lauren Feldman comes into play here (Borum Chattoo, 2019; Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Feldman & Borum Chattoo, 2019) and helps ground the discussion in classic mass communication theory and research. Throughout the first half of the book, Borum brings in examples of subversive comedy from across the globe and focuses especially on comedy that arose during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Trump administration. Readers get to spend time with Randy Rainbow and Sarah Cooper, among others. In fact, Borum’s connections with the established world of comedy help enrich the book as a whole—from her ability to share insight from interviews and conversations with comedians and producers throughout the early chapters to anecdotes about her professional experience working with Lear and others.

In chapter 3, Borum shares a story about an unannounced visit Lear received from three members of the Black Panthers in 1974. Frustrated by the “garbage” they saw Lear promoting with *Good Times* (Lear, 1974–1979), his show about a Black family living in Chicago public housing, the Panthers pushed Lear to portray an affluent black family on television. The meeting, according to Borum, helped shape the character development of George Jefferson, who left working-class Queens and his neighbor Archie Bunker to move on up to “the high-rise opulence of New York’s Upper East Side” (p. 82). Borum notes that it was the Black Panthers’ advocacy that really shaped this moment of media progress—that and the open-minded approach of Lear: “And so it was that TV’s first pathbreaking comedy program about an upwardly mobile Black American family came to be: partially pushed, sparked, and enabled by activists who were determined to change destructive cultural reflections that kept them down” (p. 83).

Fast-forwarding from Lear and the Jeffersons ahead 50 years, Borum focuses more explicitly on the magic that can happen given the careful collaboration between comedians and activists in the second half of the book. Borum’s central thesis comes into even clearer focus. As readers, we begin to truly understand—through clear examples—why comedy and the collaboration between comedians and activists matters so much in the quest for social change, civic power, and combatting the inherent injustice that comes with marginalization and underrepresentation.

Chapter 4 focuses on the use of comedy to promote antiracism in the U.S. Deep South, narrowing in on work that Borum’s Center for Media & Social Impact undertook in New Orleans, Louisiana, with E Pluribus Unum (EPU), a racial justice nonprofit advocacy organization founded by Mitch Landrieu, the city’s former mayor. Assembling a team of comedians and issue advocates via Zoom thanks to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the collaboration produced the #RacismIsNoJoke social media campaign, a series of eight short-form comedy videos that were shared across social media outlets and featured notable comedians from the U.S. South, including Corey Forrester and Jay Jurden. While Borum and colleagues do not expect that these eight short comedic videos will “fix” the racism problem in the United States, they do assert that the videos will not only bring added visibility for the issue but build solidarity and traction for further antiracism advocacy work.

Borum shares the story of her group’s work in Oklahoma with members of the Osage Nation and other activists and comedians to increase the visibility of Native Americans in mainstream media culture (chapter 5), a group that has long felt invisible or captured only by stereotypical and dated portrayals. After a week-long effort at collaborative content creation, the group centered on which different creative ideas to try to bring forward for production, including *You’re Welcome, America!*, “a sardonic and silly talk show about the shared joy and resilience of Native and Black communities” (p. 147). Borum’s experience in production comes into play here and throughout the book (see chapter 7 in particular) as she discusses the importance of the pitch and the need to help diverse content creators break through and gain standing within a still-broadening yet very tight and insular Hollywood production community.

Chapter 6 turns our attention toward the climate crisis and its relationship with racial injustice, segregation, and redlining in cities like New Orleans, Louisiana, and Norfolk, Virginia. Bringing together entertainers from the Los Angeles-based Hip Hop Caucus and engaged members of a Norfolk, Virginia, community center, Borum helps foster a collaboration that leads to the creation and production of a

hybrid documentary/comedy film focused on the unique impact that climate change has on African American communities.

Trying to be an agent of change and promote greater diversity within the comedy world, Borum wraps up the book by sharing her efforts to create and promote the Yes, And . . . Laughter Lab (YALL), a venture designed to provide space for and promote the stories of more diverse comedy writers and performers, pairing comics with issue advocates and experts who focus on the social justice issues they are trying to address in their routines. Using her experience in Hollywood and her academic understanding of the influence of comedy and humor, Borum is seeking to make lasting change in ways that get more diverse comedians into pitch rooms and situated more deeply within the field of stand-up comedy and the larger world of Hollywood production.

It is clear from reading *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious* that Borum cares quite deeply about the power of civic organizations to drive social and political change and that her active, engaged scholarship is helping to promote a revolution that is both funny and impactful. This book is an important addition to political comedy, humor, and satire effects research and can serve as a useful tool in classrooms that focus on how to translate humor and entertainment into action, power, and constructive social change.

As Borum notes early on:

When activists choose to collaborate explicitly with comedians, they do so because they recognize that comedy's creative deviance can cut through cultural clutter, but also because it can entertain and invite feelings of play. This kind of light, they say, is desperately needed in issues that can be ideologically divisive or too complicated and difficult to engage publics beyond a painful stream of fatiguing outrage or wonky statistics. But perhaps most importantly . . . social-justice advocates with creative power understand that humanizing issues and inviting connection and solidarity with their fellow humans is imperative to reaching beyond a like-minded choir or falling onto the narrative trap of evoking pity. For them, comedy matters a great deal. (p. 17)

In *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious*, Borum shows us just what can happen when comedians and activists work together to promote social change.

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