

BELMONT UNIVERSITY

PRESENTS

22nd Humanities Symposium

HUMOR

and

HUMANITY

September 25th-29th 2023

Introduction

Humans are funny creatures. The oft-used definition that comedy is tragedy plus time reflects how we use humor as a coping mechanism. A good percentage of all social media posts incorporate humor, and are more likely to go viral if they do. Humor can be a critique, a release, an escape, a displacement, sometimes a weapon, and it requires a high level of intellectual engagement to create and to understand. Comedy not only enriches our lives but is a social act as well, since “a shared joke is a shared world” (Matthew Bevis). bell hooks argued that “Humor is essential to the integrative balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community.” This social act can also be political. George Orwell once commented that “every joke is a tiny revolution.” Humor can deflate as well as defang the powerful and dictatorial, point out our foibles and provide a corrective to our follies. In addition to building communities, it can also tear them apart when used to belittle and disparage in ways that are hurtful. In short, humor embodies all that is good and bad about human nature.

The 22nd Humanities Symposium invites an exploration of the ways we use humor in all the many aspects of our lives as we seek to reflect, enjoy, and better understand this quality of human nature.

2023 Humanities Symposium Committee:

Dr. Francesca Muccini and Dr. Carla McDonough, Co-chairs
Dr. Mary Cunningham

With special thanks for their continued support and assistance: Dr. Bryce Sullivan, Karen Bennett, and Amy Hardy, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

FEATURED SPEAKERS



Dr. Lauren Olin is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Olin's research is located squarely in the philosophy of cognitive science, though many of the questions she engages may readily be called ethical or epistemological. Her current interests involve both theoretical and empirical research on patterns of evaluative judgment, psychopathology, and epistemic dispositions. She has authored or co-authored papers for journals such as *Philosophical Studies*, *Synthese*, *Transcultural Psychiatry*, and *Philosophy Compass*. Lauren earned her BA in Philosophy from McGill University in Montreal, and her MA and PhD from the *Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology* program at Washington University in St. Louis. Her recent work in humor includes articles about “The Moral Psychology of Humor” in the *Oxford Handbook of Moral Psychology*, “Hard Truths and Dangerous Jokes” in *Philosophy and David Chapelle*, and “Killing It” in *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook*.



Dr. Charles Ives is Lecturer at the University of Washington, where he holds appointments in both the Philosophy Department and the College of Education. His research for the last decade has focused on the ethical and political aspects of Platonic physics. Ives is the author of *Socrates' Request and the Educational Narrative of the Timaeus* (Lexington, 2017), and at the moment, he is wrapping up work on his second book *Platonic Physics: Philosophy, Politics, and the Study of Nature* (forthcoming). Ives has also recently ventured into the field of poetics and is currently working on a novella that seeks to characterize the epistemological experience of a dichotomous world constituted by the serious and the comic.



Dr. Fred L. Gardaphé is the Distinguished Professor of English and Italian American Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. He directs the Italian American Studies Program at Queens College and works at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute. Previously he helped to create the Italian American Studies program at Stony Brook University which he directed from 1998-2008. He co-directs the Italian Diaspora Studies Summer Seminar at Roma Tre University. He is at work on a memoir and a play based on his life. His latest book, *Over the Edge: Humor and Irony in Italian American Culture*, will be published by Penn State University Press next year.



Luke Watson is an improv comedian and Co-Founder of Third Coast Comedy Club in Nashville, TN. In addition to performing, Watson also teaches improvisation and is passionate about sharing the benefits of improv off-stage in everyday life. He is also the Co-Founder of the local non-profit, Unscripted, which heals, empowers, and connects the community through improv.



Benjamin B. Schwartz is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at Vanderbilt University. His work on literature, humor, and pedagogy can be found in *Studies in American Humor*, *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, *English Journal*, *Urban Education*, and *Journal of Negro Education*. In addition to teaching and presenting on American humor to learners of all ages from 2017 to present, Ben has performed at Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York City and appears regularly at Tenx9 Nashville.

Monday, September 25th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

10AM: Monteverde Lecture: “It’s Complicated: Comedy and Humor as Tools for Coping, Community, and Critique”

Dr. Carla McDonough, Department of English

Humor is one of the simplest acts we naturally perform, yet one of our most complex tools for social engagement. Humor thus reveals many sides to human behavior. This session introduces approaches you can expect to hear throughout the week, offering both an introduction to the symposium and an overview of the complexities of humor. Drawing on theories from philosophers and comedians—and pulling from research into humor on stage and screen—this session hopes to convey the flexibility of mind that humor requires.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

11AM: “On Lying and Joking”

Dr. Lauren Olin, University of Missouri St. Louis, Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Most philosophers agree that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between lying and joking, but many comedians are also celebrated as truth-tellers. Following Bernard Williams, philosophers tend to conceptualize lying as a thick notion, such that to call an action a lie is to both describe the action, and to evaluate it negatively. The ways that comedians lie and otherwise misrepresent the truth, however, suggests that the question of whether an action counts as a lie must be treated separately from questions about the action’s moral value. In contexts where it’s difficult to call attention to social ills and biases, the lies comedians tell can function to promote advances in cultural self-awareness that mere assertions, and factual reports, do not. This talk makes this case by appealing to recent real-world examples, then argues that it has implications for theories of lying, for theories of testimony, and for questions about the ethics and aesthetics of humor.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

Monday, September 25th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

1PM: “Unexpected Arguments: Laughter, Affect, and Rhetoric”

Jason Lovvorn, Department of English

Have you ever laughed along with a friend without knowing why you were laughing? Laughter can be contagious and can materialize out of thin air. Sometimes we’re impulsively laughing before we’ve thought about the why or the how, but such moments may eventually move us toward thought or even action. This presentation brings together acts of laughter, notions of affect theory, and elements of rhetoric. While laughter and rhetoric are likely familiar categories, affect theory, according to Nathaniel Sutanto, involves “how precognitive feelings, impressions, and influences direct our behavior and attune our intuitions in particular directions.” In this vein, if we examine moments of unexpected laughter, we often find embedded rhetorical moments—persuasions rooted in emotion. With such ideas in mind, we will explore together the connections that exist between humor, emotion, our own bodies, and argumentation. We may even laugh!

Emotional Well-Being Convo

3PM: “The Talk You Are about to Hear”

Thomas Sturgill, College of Art

This session offers a talk about the intersection of Art and Humor while demonstrating how being funny can serve as a framework for artistic practice and messaging. Humor can shape our emotions and perceptions, and artists utilize it to encourage critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world. This discussion is in conjunction with the current art exhibit at the Lieu Center for the Arts on Belmont’s campus, Aug 21– Sep 29, 2023.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

5PM: Foreign Language Film Screening

Dr. Mitchell McCoy, Department of Foreign Languages

The film *Cantinflas* released in 2014 is an ambitious biopic that relates the story of Mexican comedian, actor, and filmmaker Mario Moreno Reyes. He became an international star known by his stage name *Cantinflas* in the Spanish speaking world during the 20th century. Evoking laughter and taking Hollywood by storm, *Cantinflas* achieved accolades well beyond his beloved home country of Mexico. Directed by Sebastián del Amo the film stars Oscar Jaenada as *Cantinflas*.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

Tuesday, September 26th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

- 10AM:** **“The Feeling of Knowledge: An Empirical Poetics of Reality”**
Dr. Charles Ives, University of Washington, Philosophy Department and the
College of Education

It seems to be something of a standard position to think that the pursuit of knowledge should be one of absolutely straight-faced seriousness, though I don't often see this stated explicitly. Instead, we are more likely to see the negative claim—those pursuing knowledge would be wise to stay away from humor. Apparently, there is nothing hilarious about knowing, and joking around is no way to get to the truth about all things. That knowledge is quite serious is something I will defend, but I think we should also, at the very least, consider the possibility of comic knowledge—the possibility that contact with reality could be funny and that reality itself is silly.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

- 11AM:** **“Building a Feminist Barbie”**
Dr. Margaret Tully, Department of Communication

Between its viral marketing campaign, popular soundtrack, and star-studded cast, *Barbie* was the movie of the summer. But before Margot Robbie and Greta Gerwig took over, many celebrity feminists struggled to craft a Barbie movie they deemed “feminist enough.” Since the release of the film, critics and fans have debated Barbie's place in contemporary feminism. In this presentation, we will examine how Barbie juggles comedy and feminism, how it reinforces and challenges traditional gender roles, and how Ken steals the movie for himself.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

- 1PM:** **“Punch-lines and Gestures: The Japanese Comic Tradition of Rakugo”**
Dr. Christopher Born, Department of Foreign Languages

Can humor translate? What's funny to a Japanese audience? Can we be in on these jokes too? In this talk, Chris Born explores the Japanese comedic art of rakugo, where a single, seated storyteller, bedecked in a kimono uses gestures, voice changes, a towel, and a folding fan to tell comic stories with a twist at the end. Having its origins in the Edo (1600-1868) period, Rakugo is considered to be one of earliest forms of contemporary comedy. Enjoying examples in Japanese and English, we will learn how Japanese rakugo artists have been entertaining audiences for centuries, having a laugh or two along the way!

Cultural Well-Being Convo

Tuesday, September 26th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

- 3:30PM:** **Humor in Creative Writing: In the Classroom and on the Page**
Dr. Jennifer Buentello, Dr. Cara Dees, Dr. Gary McDowell, Department of English

Three of the English Department's Creative Writing Faculty will discuss the challenges and value of writing comedic pieces and of using humor in writing, both in regard to their own work and to the teaching of creative writing. Join us to hear their discussion.

Cultural Well-Being Convo



Wednesday, September 27th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
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Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

10AM: "What's So Funny? Italians in American Humor"

Dr. Fred Gardaphé, Queens College, City University of New York, Distinguished Professor of English and Italian American Studies

From early immigrant theater to television shows such as *The Sopranos*, humor has been a regular, if reticent, factor in the assimilation of Italian immigrants into U.S. American culture. Long before Americans were laughing with Italians, they were laughing at them. Like all new immigrants, Italians would be the targets of American humor: first out of the fear of their difference, then out of the familiarity with their peculiarities. Some scholars have attributed this to the idea that making fun of a minority is part of the process by which that minority is incorporated into the identity mosaic of the United States. This talk surveys the contributions of Italian Americans to U.S. American humor in theater, literature, television, and stand-up comedy and offers explanations as to why Italian Americans have not developed a public tradition of humor that rivals those of other racial and ethnic groups.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

11AM: "Leveling up Humanity: How Improv Makes Better Humans"

Luke Watson, Comedian/Co-Founder, Third Coast Comedy Club, Nashville

We're all improvisers. Whether or not we've ever jammed with a jazz band, evoked laughs in an improv comedy show, or rapped free-style, you're an improviser. Life is unscripted and takes unexpected turns. Life is improvised. Sharpening the skills and using the building blocks of improv makes us humans better humans. In this interactive presentation, audiences will explore how the tools of improv and the spirit of "yes, and" can make you a better listener, more collaborative, and strengthen your comfort with failure.

Social Well-Being Convo

2PM: "Comedic Offense"

Shawn Knight, Department of Theatre and Dance

For thousands of years, theatre has relied on both drama and comedy to engage, entertain, and critique, and what passes as comedy has changed frequently with changing tastes and social expectations. Recently, creators of the highly successful Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*, used the pandemic shut down to listen to their artists of color and rewrite portions of their show to address concerns of racial insensitivity within their comedy. How is comedy currently changing with increased emphasis on equity and diversity, as once-accepted topics for humor are no longer? Based on research and first-hand experiences, this session will consider key shifts in comedy and the current challenges and opportunities for comedic entertainments.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

3PM: "Fun Times with The Follies"

Austin DePlantis and the Student Fall Follies

Join Belmont University's beloved sketch comedy group for a deep dive into their comedic process! There'll be improv, sketches, and who knows maybe some of YOU will get to take part in the fun. We hope to see you there!

Cultural Well-Being Convo



Thursday, September 28th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

11AM: "Teaching Funny: Humor and Teaching in African American Literature"

Benjamin B. Schwartz, Vanderbilt University, Philosophy Department

Can the classroom be a space for humor? And if so, can humor in the classroom be a force for good? In stories about successful African American teachers, humor often falls by the wayside. Nonetheless, humor has been an essential part of how many African American teachers have worked to combat racism and help students to achieve their transformative potential. This presentation will explore ideas around humor and teaching in literature by African American teacher-authors such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ralph Ellison, Frances E.W. Harper, and bell hooks in order to better understand how humor functions as a pedagogical tool that helps minoritized teachers and students to survive, thrive, and fight injustice in the classroom.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

1PM: "Jane Austen: Comic"

Dr. Douglas Murray, Department of English

Jane Austen grew up amid a rich tradition of comic verse, outrageous visual satire and stage comedy (she acted in her family's amateur theatricals). After a quick survey of the major theories of humor (Hobbes's "sudden glory," Bergson's automaton theory, Freud's release of repression, and the incongruity theory), we will look at selected moments from Austen's novels and youthful fiction.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

2PM: "Comedy and the Value of Non-Truth"

Dr. Mary Cunningham, Philosophy Department

The talk has to do with academia's obsession with the truth and the appropriate place of non-truth in our lives. While there are urgent and present dangers in the growing anti-intellectual movement (especially the increased popularity of conspiracy theories), the presenter will argue a case for the essential and enriching value of a different kind of non-truth: comedy. According to the presenter, we miss out on crucial parts of the well-rounded life that a liberal education promises when our search for the truth causes us to lose our sense of humor.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

Thursday, September 28th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

4:30PM: *The Show You Are About to See*

Thomas Sturgill and Rocky Horton

Reception + Gallery Talk: 4:30-6pm; talk begins at 5:00PM

This session will be held in Gallery 121 at the Leu Center for the Visual Arts.

This exhibition showcases a diverse set of works exploring the relationship between humor and art, through sculpture, video, painting, and photographic media. The exhibit challenges viewers to consider the possibility of humor being both silly and intelligent, while demonstrating how being funny can serve as a framework for artistic practice and messaging. Join us as we delve into how humor can shape our emotions and perceptions, and how artists utilize it to encourage critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world.

Cultural Well-Being Convo



Friday, September 29th

All sessions will take place in the Janet Ayers Academic Center,
Room 4094, unless stated otherwise.

10AM: **Philologoi, "(Why) Do We Value Humor?"**

A philosophical discussion led by Dr. Mary Cunningham

"Philologoi" roughly translates to "lovers of rational discourse." At Belmont, the Philologoi is a group that meets every Friday morning for philosophical discussion. In this special meeting of the Philologoi, attendees will discuss and explore the question "(why) do we value humor?" No prior reading is required to participate in this conversation, only a willingness to listen and discuss.

Intellectual Well-Being Convo

12PM: **Readings by winners of the Student Creative Writing contest**

Each year in connection with the Humanities Symposium, Belmont students are invited to submit poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction to the Sandra Hutchins Writing Competition. Writers of the top selections are invited to read portions of their submissions.

Cultural Well-Being Convo

2PM: **"Individuality and Shakespeare"**

Dr. Jayme Yeo and Dr. Marcia McDonald, English Department

How does comedy open possibilities for individuality or flourishing? Join two fearless Shakespeare scholars and two excellent actors from the Nashville Shakespeare Festival in exploring questions of comedy, individualism, and social belonging. In this interactive session, the actors will run two short scenes from the current NSF production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, one featuring the beloved mismatched lovers Beatrice and Benedick, and the other, the linguistically dexterous Master Constable Dogberry. Together, we will consider how comic language offers (or shuts down) possibilities of gender equity, sexual fluidity, neurodiversity, linguistic freedom, and more even as it lays the groundwork for community and social renewal in Shakespeare's day and ours.

Cultural Well-Being Convo



HUMOR

and

HUMANITY

Thank you for participating!

We hope you will join us next year for the 23rd Annual Humanities Symposium!

The members of the 2023 Humanities Symposium Committee would like to extend their heartfelt appreciation to the many Belmont faculty, students, and staff who made the symposium possible. Special thanks go to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences for his financial support, the Office of Events Services for its assistance in reserving and equipping presentation space; Karen Bennett, Amy Hardy and Laurel Stowe. for assistance in managing many of the day-to-day concerns for this event.

And to all of our wonderful featured speakers, we feel deeply indebted and appreciative.

Graphic design by Blythe Colvin, @busyblythe