

## PARRHESIA, HUMOR, AND RESISTANCE

Chris A Kramer\*

### Abstract

This paper begins by taking seriously former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass' response in his *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* to systematic violence and oppression. He claims that direct argumentation is *not* the ideal mode of resistance to oppression: "At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed." I will focus on a few elements of this playful mode of resistance that conflict with the more straightforward strivings for abstract, universal, objective, convergent, absolute thinking that champions reason over emotion, logic over narrative, and science over lived experience. In contrast, the type of protest employed by people like Douglass can utilize aesthetics *and* logic, playfulness *and* seriousness, emotion, even anger, *and* reason. Douglass provides examples of humorous, sincere parrhesia, oscillating between the lexicon of the dominant sphere and the critical reflection from a trickster on the margins. This will require an analysis of Michel Foucault's conception of *parrhesia*: courageous truth-telling in the face of powerful people or institutions. It is a study of humor in the *parrhesiastes*, an element I think neglected by Foucault. I argue that the humorous parrhesiastes offers a mode of resistance which can subvert oppressive power structures that perpetuate injustice, revealing the fact that humor can be integral in courageous truth-telling.

**Key Words:** Foucault, Frederick Douglass, humor, oppression, parrhesia, racism

### 1. "Scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed"

Frederick Douglass was a slave, abolitionist, rhetorician, existentialist<sup>1</sup>, and subversive *parrhesiastes* who recognized the limits of straight-forward argumentation in the face of irrational "unreasoned"<sup>2</sup> oppression. In his *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* he attempts to open the eyes of the "lovers of ease" (1852: 8) who are celebrating the independence, freedom, and the all-around greatness of the nation. Douglass, ahead of his time, seems well aware of what might now be called first-country

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<sup>1</sup> See Gordon 2000: 61, and Yancy 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See Fanon 1967: 118, 123.

\* **Chris A. Kramer**, Philosophy, Santa Barbara City College, Santa Barbara CA, USA.  
[Cakramer1@pipeline.sbccc.edu](mailto:Cakramer1@pipeline.sbccc.edu)

exceptionalism biases<sup>3</sup> especially prominent during national holidays (1852: 12). His most scathing rhetoric critiques the blatant inconsistencies between American ideals *declared* in its founding documents, and the real-world lived experiences of *most* of its population for *most* of the country's existence:<sup>4</sup>

Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? that he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for Republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to be understood? How should I look today, in the presence of Americans, dividing, and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to freedom? ... To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding. —There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong *for him*... At a time like this, *scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed.* (Douglass 1852: 18-20, last italics added)

Douglass is advocating for a mode of consciousness-raising and resistance later championed by Michel Foucault—*parrhesia*. For Foucault, “parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity...in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people. In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (Foucault 1983: 5). One general sense of the term might be *free speech*, an irony that would not have been lost on

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<sup>3</sup> See Gendler 2010: 129; 2007: 81.

<sup>4</sup> ““For over 80% of U.S. history, its laws declared most of the world’s population to be ineligible for full American citizenship solely because of their race, original nationality, or gender”” (Mills 1998: 132).

Douglass, whose words could freely travel across the globe while Douglass the man remained subjugated in his own country.<sup>5</sup>

The parrhesiastes is bold and free with his words, very free in fact: “the parrhesiastes, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse” (Foucault 1983: 2; 2010: 67). The first part could lead us astray and incline us to include the likes of Donald Trump as a model of parrhesia--he will say *anything* that happens to be on his mind.<sup>6</sup> This would be a mistake: “the parrhesiastes acts on other people’s minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes” (Foucault 1983: 2). This is not typical of Trump.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, parrhesia ultimately “means ‘to tell the truth,’” and, as importantly, “Parrhesia is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor.” This is manifestly not the case with Trump’s constant verbal assaults on anyone who displeases him (it must not be forgotten, he currently holds *the* most powerful position in the world). Foucault continues: “The parrhesiastes is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The parrhesia comes from ‘below’, as it were, and is directed towards ‘above’” (Foucault 1983: 4-5; see also 2010: 52-56). In these ways, Douglass, akin to a “philosopher [who] criticizes a tyrant,” is an

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<sup>5</sup> See Douglass 1994: Chapter X; 1852: 17-18. At one point, Douglass was exiled and as an unintentional result, began a successful speaking tour in England. Interestingly, in Foucault’s etymological and historical account of parrhesia, only certain individuals could “play the game”: “someone who is deprived of parrhesia is in the same situation as a slave to the extent that he or she cannot take part in the political life of the city, nor play the ‘parrhesiastic game’” (Foucault 1983: 5). But nothing that Foucault writes here precludes someone like Douglass from being a parrhesiastes.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault clarifies that there “is a pejorative sense of the word not very far from ‘chattering’ and which consists in saying any or everything one has in mind without qualification” (Foucault 1983: 3).

<sup>7</sup> See almost any random tweet from Trump regarding his lack of concern for truth and reality; a form of speech that more closely resembles “‘ignorant outspokenness’” and one who “is strong only by his bold arrogance” and “‘putting [his] confidence in bluster’” (Foucault 1983: 22, 25; 2010: 64).

exemplar of the parrhesiastes<sup>8</sup> but with an additional element Foucault does not consider in his analysis: subversive humor.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the effectiveness of Douglass' rhetoric "from below" was his sense of humor. Toward the end of his last *Autobiography* Douglass notes that "I have been greatly helped to bear up under unfriendly conditions, too, by a constitutional tendency to see the funny side of things" (Douglass 1994: 470). His use of humor has a double effect: it acts as a buffer for him against the absurdities of the "peculiar institution", as slavery was colloquially referred to in the South,<sup>10</sup> but he also weaponizes

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<sup>8</sup> I believe this is so even as Foucault states on more than one occasion that there is "a connection between the lack of parrhesia and slavery" (Foucault 1983: 10). But he is referring to slavery in ancient Greece.

<sup>9</sup> The only references to humor or laughter are in passing, and in the first instance, it is the laughter of ridicule and superiority: the wise Athenian citizens "will laugh at the young man [Ion from Euripides play of the same name] who wishes to be regarded as one of the First Citizens of Athens" (Foucault 1983: 18). In the second, it appears to be a caution against the use of humor, or at least joking, in the wrong manner and situation: in this case "frankness is not parrhesia but athurostomia ["one who has a mouth without a door" or "an endless blabber"] since to joke about a king's disfigurement or a cook's profession has no noteworthy philosophical significance" (Foucault 1983: 25). Even though the subject of mirth is a powerful king, this example shows that not all "punching up" constitutes subversive parrhesia through humor. The third instance receives a bit more commentary, but again, it is not positive. It regards a "lampoon [that] takes the form of a paradoxical praise or eulogy" where "[t]he writer is supposed to be an Athenian democrat who focuses on some of the most obvious imperfections, shortcomings, blemishes, failures, etc., of Athenian democratic institutions and political life; and he praises these imperfections as if they were qualities with the most positive consequences. The text is without any real literary value since the writer is more aggressive than witty" (Foucault 1983: 30). He does not expand on why aggressiveness is a negative nor why wittiness might salvage the value of the lampoon, but I think it is a point worth focusing upon, as I will below with the discussion on the "provocative dialogue" (Foucault 1983: 46) of subversive humorous parrhesiastes who can be aggressively witty.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the use of humor as self-defense, see Watkins 1999, 27: 68 and compared with Jewish humor during the Holocaust, see Frankl 1984: 63.

it as a rhetorical tool to expose those same absurd inconsistencies of American idealistic expectations and reality. He directs his scathing irony against otherwise obvious incongruities that remain hidden among the slave owners who remain in bad faith.<sup>11</sup> The explicit stereotypes necessary to rationalize the subjugation of an entire population who were demarcated by morally irrelevant features such as skin tone, proclaimed that slaves are less than human, incapable of any intellectual endeavors, but at the same time a slave could be punished for breaking a law: “It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write.—When you can point to any such laws, in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave” (Douglass 1852: 18). An argument *could* be made here, of course, he has the elements of a *reductio ad absurdum* already present, but he remains consistent in his rhetorical strategy which avoids direct argumentation.

There are two senses of “funny” at play here, and they are interconnected for Douglass: *funny strange*, as in something’s not quite right, something is incongruous or dissonant that has been missed (and that should have been noticed well before now), and *funny ha-ha*, or the mirthful pleasure that accompanies humor.<sup>12</sup> But Douglass was adept at mingling the two in a fashion not unlike comedian Richard Pryor<sup>13</sup> a century later, whose conclusions doubled as punchlines. For example, in the following speech, Douglass examines the role of the Church in maintaining systematic prejudice: “Another young lady fell into a trance. When she awoke, she declared she had been to heaven. Her friends were all anxious to know what and whom she had seen there; so she told the whole story. But there was one good old lady whose curiosity went beyond that of all the others—and she inquired of the girl that had the vision, if she saw any black folks in heaven? After some hesitation, the reply was, ‘Oh! I didn’t go into the kitchen!’” (Douglass 2013: 2).<sup>14</sup> Mark Twain might pop into our heads as we read this, but it would be an angry Twain. Admittedly, and justifiably, Douglass’ humor was often

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<sup>11</sup> See Gordon 1999: 22-4; 2000: 122-5 on the self-deception necessary to sustain anti-black racism, for example.

<sup>12</sup> For more on *funny strange* and *funny ha-ha*, see Morreall 1987: 188–207 and Hurley et al. 2011: 27–34.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent analysis of contemporary parrhesia found in Richard Pryor’s *Bicentennial* performance, from a communications perspective, see Rossing 2014: 23-5.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Robert D’Alonzo (personal communication) for pointing me to this example.

coupled with anger and was not purely joyful or lighthearted, but such an emotion-laden attitude can be socio-politically effective *and* humorous simultaneously.

Historically, the parrhesiastes, while free with her words, required an openness or receptivity from her interlocutor, which is not always found, especially as she is likely subverting in some way the (unjust) power of the privileged: “the parrhesiastes, the one ‘who speaks the truth’ is not an entirely free man,<sup>15</sup> but a servant to the king—one who cannot use parrhesia if the king is not wise enough to enter into the parrhesiastic game and grant him permission to speak openly” (Foucault 1983: 11). The use of “game” is not meant to trivialize this relationship; rather it points to a collaborative element in parrhesia, and I would argue, something that is found in the subversive humorist’s interaction with her audience. The best setup for the parrhesiastic game is one in which “The sovereign, the ones [*sic*] who has power but lacks the truth, addresses himself to the one who has the truth but lacks power” (Foucault 1983: 11). There is a reciprocal relationship where both parties can benefit from the exchange. But a limitation here is that those with power and privilege are often unwilling to eschew their advantages, especially if the truth happens to counter their desired narratives, they appeal to in order to maintain the status quo.

This does not entail the parrhesiastic game, or what Foucault refers to as the “Parrhesiastic contract”, is impossible, but it can diminish the potency of the parrhesiastes’ words, especially if the power players in the game feel they have little to gain from hearing the truth. It is often remarked that seeing from the perspective of another is essential for a genuine ethic, for recognition, and of course, for at least the minimal understanding of another being. As Douglass states, and other subversive humorists presume, the perspective-shifting needed to see in this way will likely not come about through explicit argumentation, or straightforward bona-fide use of the oppressor’s language. As I will argue below, humor, even the scorching sort that has a clear target, is often intentionally ambiguous enough to critique the hegemonic center through the double (or multi-layered) meanings in humor. Humor and the concomitant humorous attitude, can be an additional rhetorical tool in the parrhesiastes’ arsenal that encourages openness among the ‘players’. To expand on a cliché, one can *speak truth to power* and amuse; one can highlight a serious moral incongruity through the lens of playful laughter;

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<sup>15</sup> It is almost always a man in the historical context, but that does not seem to be a necessary condition as such, lest we ignore the parrhesiastes who spoke up, and in some instances died, in their fight for women’s voting rights.

one can be funny without being frivolous; one can be a parrhesiastes and a humorist. Indeed, a humorous parrhesiastes who cultivates a desire to seek out and even enjoy the experience of dissonance, confusion, and doubt, all of which can ignite philosophical thinking, might be the ideal non-violent gadfly.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. The Benefits of Subversive Humor in Parrhesia: Simultaneously Inside and Out, Direct and Indirect, Serious and Playful**

The aesthetic, emotional, indirect, ironic approaches of Douglass, offer greater hopes of breaking a populace out of serious complacency than do more direct methods. He is exposing what should be (and is) already grasped at a basic level,<sup>17</sup> as he reminds us we all comprehend these ideals as we have “already declared” them. Creative, imaginative play with ideas found in thought experiment, fictional narratives, and humor, open up the possibility for expanding perspectives, allow us to manipulate otherwise abstract logical or moral states of affairs, but more importantly here, render concrete the lived experiences of others. Some humorists can effectively illuminate facets of our social world that would remain hidden in plain sight because, in terms of contemporary psychology, our cognitive biases discourage us from consciously seeing from the perspectives of marginalized people.<sup>18</sup>

Anthropologist Stephanie Koziski presents a compelling case that many comedians are like anthropologists who are effective in revealing the hidden features of social reality: “The comedian as

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<sup>16</sup> A positive account of ignorance and confusion can be found not only in humor studies, but in a philosophical attitude generally. This approach can be seen in the goading of the “non-violent gadfly” Socrates (see King 2001: 2). See especially Lear 2009: 290-4: “The point of Socratic irony is not simply to destroy pretenses but to inject a certain form of not knowing into polis life... it shows the difficulty of becoming human...the difficulty of getting the hang of a certain kind of playful, disrupting existence that is as affirming as it is negating...Socratic ignorance is thus an embrace of human open-endedness.” There is a point of tension between Socratic irony and parrhesia that I will address below.

<sup>17</sup> He is doing so in a way similar to that found in philosophical thought experiments in which our intuitions are readily at our disposal. For a comparison between thought experiments and humor see (Morreall 2009: 126-9; Veale 2015; Kramer 2016; forthcoming 2020).

<sup>18</sup> See Gendler 2007: 81, on “first-person exceptionalism, [which] is among the most wide-spread and pervasive of our tendencies towards bias.”

licensed spokesperson can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or *reluctant to openly acknowledge*” (Koziski 1984: 65, my emphasis). This humorous anthropologist “exaggerates or distorts his observations as a participant observer talking to people in his own society about the familiar cultural rules and behavior patterns in their and his own society. The audience may hear their own behavior described as if it is an alien culture in the sense that they knew that information all along but no one ever said it like that to them before” (Koziski 1984: 61). What grants the comedian such a wide, yet penetrating, perspective?

The comedian is a part of the society she critiques, but given the distance emotionally and cognitively afforded by a humorous attitude, she has a broader perspective. This playful openness is required in order to create and experience mirth, but, not coincidentally, it is also integral to creating, understanding, and enjoying the critical commentary of parrhesiastic humorists. Moreover, *subversive* humorists navigate in-between worlds (Lugones 2003: 200) with deep insight into both the dominant center and the subjugated borderlands. This unique social positionality coupled with the playful, creative, yet critical lens of a humorist, provides a platform for indirectly confronting an otherwise adversarial audience about unpleasant matters. The humorous parrhesiastes can raise consciousness about an unjust status quo in a way that does not discourage the beneficiaries of this system from self-reflection, even when these comedic reframings unearth errors in audiences’ beliefs or expose their complicity in oppression. How is this so?

There is a seemingly insurmountable dilemma for people who are marginalized through force, law, stereotype, even logic and language. If they use the same mechanisms as their oppressors in hopes of instilling change they often succeed only in buttressing the very system they wish to undermine. Laws are not constructed with them in mind (except when they are designed intentionally to exclude them), the very language implicitly and explicitly characterizes them as outside of the norm or as substandard, and if they respond in kind to their oppressors’ use of force, then they “fit” the stereotype of the angry, belligerent, aggressor.<sup>19</sup> Borrowing from Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*. On the other hand, should the oppressed endeavor to resist and change the system wholly from without, only from the borderlands, assuming a different set of laws, tools,

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<sup>19</sup> Consider Douglass’ courageous confrontation with the slave-breaker Covey (Douglass 1994: 57, 66-7).



and languages, they are ignored, (willfully?) misunderstood, and they end up sustaining the negative stereotypes depicting them (and forcing them to remain) as outsiders, foreign, and Other.

The subversive humor of the parrhesiastes offers a middle path. For example, Douglass does not rely upon a “private” slave language, untranslatable by slave-owners or the general white populace.<sup>20</sup> He wants to be able to use the language and moral sentiments found in the Bible, Shakespeare, Enlightenment philosophy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc., which are also embedded in the voices of many in the dominant sphere. The slave owners were wont to cite the Bible as justification for their system of oppression. It was the same Bible from which Douglass learned how to read, and, like Martin Luther King Jr. after him, he appealed to it as a higher law in contrast to the unjust laws of the state. Douglass, a fervent Christian for the majority of his life, does not repudiate his faith, but nor does he exonerate it. Through his multivalent irony, he was able to navigate between these two poles, critique the inconsistencies of the self-proclaimed Christians who supported slavery,<sup>21</sup> while at the same time, he remained deeply ensconced within the ethical language of Christianity.

Subversive humorists, like those on the margins of society, are both inside and outside simultaneously, and Douglass embodies this in/out ambiguity as he recognizes his own freedom that he sees as protected under the Constitution and universally prescribed in the same Bible slave-owners

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<sup>20</sup> Such tactics of resistance did prove useful as a psychological buffer to some extent (see Jenkins 1994: 183): “The performers didn’t realize that some of the minstrel show dances, like the cakewalk, looked silly because the slaves had invented them to parody the pretensions of their masters. This led to the ironic situation of whites dressed as blacks mocking black dances originally created by blacks to parody the dances of high-society white folk,” a fact of which the white folks were not apprised.

<sup>21</sup> An interesting parallel can be found with Kierkegaard’s often humorous criticisms of the hypocrisy and ignorance of Christendom: “‘Among all Christians, is there a Christian?’ is a meaningful statement. ‘Among all the ducks, is there a duck?’” is not (quoted in Lear 2009: 270-1). An ironic reading opens up this interpretation: only people can fail to meet their own ideals and exist in bad faith. A version of this can be found with a humorous parrhesiastes Foucault does consider--Diogenes: “In his search for human beings, as he walked through the streets of Athens, carrying a lighted lamp in broad daylight, he did not find any: scoundrels and creatures-less-than-human, yes; but human beings, no” (Navia 1996: 82). Foucault offers other examples like this, see (Foucault 1983: 49), for example, but he never comments on the *humor* of Diogenes. This is a significant oversight.

revere. But at the same time, in W.E.B. Dubois' sense of double consciousness, he understands that he does not belong: "it is the birthday of *your* National Independence, and of *your* political freedom ... This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony" (Douglass 1852: 4, 15). His moral claim was direct and forceful. But, as will be shown below, the mode of presentation, while surely powerful, could be indirect and even playful at the same time.

Humor and irony are typically viewed as indirect forms of speech intending only to cause people to laugh.<sup>22</sup> If we construe humor and irony merely as rhetorical tools, then such tropes would be set in opposition to Foucauldian parrhesia that requires direct frankness and minimal rhetorical manipulations. But the message in subversive humor can be direct, perhaps even *in your face* (Foucault 2010: 54), while the mode of presentation is indirect, non-bona-fide, purposefully ambiguous communication. How can this be and why does it benefit the parrhesiastes?

Direct, bona-fide communicative acts have traditionally been used by protestors against a perceived injustice. In these cases the intent and meaning of the language is unambiguous, practically engaged, straightforward, and serious. In other words, one strictly adheres to the typical rules of language, logic, and even the society that oppresses. This is to rely upon the "master's tools." Subversive humor violates these rules but without falling into frivolity and without the loss of meaningful communication in an effort to achieve a goal. Focusing on language, consider the fact that humor violates most of H.P. Grice's rules of conversational logic, in particular his Cooperative Principle: "Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate

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<sup>22</sup> According to John Morreall, joking and amusement, *non-bona-fide* or insincere uses of language, conflicts with any practical concern, including the successful transmission of information. This is because while in play mode, "[a]ll that counts is whether your words amuse me, and it doesn't much matter how that is done" (Morreall 2009: 36). Morrell refers to the "comic vision of life." Within this attitude "... we can engage in non-bona fide communication and activity...When we are serious, we are usually in a practical frame of mind in which we want to achieve some goal. We are working toward something, and *anything playful would be a distraction*" (Morreall 1999: 33, my italics). See also (Raskin and Attardo 1994: 65): "Truth is irrelevant to joke-telling." These views ignore the efficacy of subversive humor.

evidence; avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); be orderly” (Grice 1975: 45-6; see also Morreall 1983: 79-82). However, violating or “flaunting” these rules of conversation does not lead to a lack of meaning or even loss of cooperation between wit and audience. With subversive humor, playfulness fosters greater cooperation than might exist without it, even when such playfulness can be used to expose errors in others’ thinking. The subversive humorist is playfully and surprisingly violating the rules, but the audience will still be able to find and/or make meaning out of the wit’s purposeful and playful employment of incongruity, absurdity, misuse of language, role-reversal, or hyperbolic analogy, for example.<sup>23</sup>

Through the use of humor, parrhesiastes like Douglass can openly critique an unjust system, toying with the rules that have been contingently (as opposed to absolutely/necessarily) constructed, revealing that they are not inviolable: “As Douglass learned, [strictly] playing by the rules can be a futile exercise that perpetuates powerlessness. Through the sublimation of his rage, Douglass articulated a political-philosophical critique of slave plantation politics. Douglass exposed the material and psychic modes of domination so that they could be challenged and overthrown” (Sokoloff 2014: 14). I will return to his rage below, but here we see Douglass taking on the role of the trickster, but in a positive, powerful sense evoked by Maria Lugones: “When in one ‘world I animate, for example, that ‘world’s’ caricature of the person I am in the other ‘world.’ I can have both images of myself, and to the extent that it can materialize and animate both images at the same time, I can become an ambiguous being. This is very much a part of trickery and foolery” (Lugones 2003: 91-2).<sup>24</sup> The subversive humorist embraces ambiguity, confusion, and even tension, all of which are more closely connected to reality than a presumed logic of purity, necessity, and absolutes, the common view of the social world from those “on top.” Humor, a near universally desirable emotion, has its own rules

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<sup>23</sup> “When flouting a maxim, the speaker/hearer dyad can ‘recoup’ the violation by honoring another maxim...the hearer can reconstruct an intended meaning on the basis of the assumption that the speaker is committed to communicating some meaning...” (Raskin and Attardo 1994: 32). For the subversive humorist, “some meaning” will involve socio-political-ethical content. For more on the collaborative nature of humor see Veale 2004, and Kramer 2020.

<sup>24</sup> See also Boskin and Dorinson (1985: 85-6) on the “wise fool” exposing the pretense of the self-righteous.

(Raskin and Attardo 1994: 32-5) that permit a meaningful exchange of ideas even when the medium and the message of the subversive violate the standard rules of the dominant sphere.

The humor contract<sup>25</sup> provides a game within a game, where one straddles both sets of rules at potential peril, but a risk mitigated by the desire of her privileged interlocutors to play the humor game.<sup>26</sup> We know that we have entered the humor contract when we can ascertain the meaning of a wit's words as humor given that the alternative might be to interpret it as nonsense, patently false (Raskin and Attardo 1994: 36, 38), or otherwise violating basic rules of conversation. The humorist invokes available data that comes packaged in frames or scripts which are elicited by clever use of hints within the set-up of a joke or narrative, but they are done so specifically with the intention to deceive, fool, or misdirect, our rule-driven, heuristic expectations. In many cases, these tricks are invoked in order to shed light on an already well-known state of affairs in such a way that one must reevaluate a given set of presuppositions.

Here, humor relies upon background information that is triggered by the subtle invocation of heuristics within the setup of a potentially humorous situation. When the audience senses this, they adopt a different perspective, one that is more open and amenable to what might appear offensive, combative, or accusatory outside of the humor contract. Borrowing from Sorensen, "Humor changes the situation because however serious the message is, it has a hint of 'Don't take me seriously,' and 'I'm not dangerous'" (2008: 171); but this is only a hint. Morreall says something similar: "We often introduce jokes with play signals such as, 'Have you heard the one about...'" and we use the present instead of the past tense to indicate that what we are saying is not a report of a real event" (Morreall 2009: 105), and we use such obvious hyperbole that few would take them as direct assertions. But, simply noting that we are in play mode, humorist and audience alike, does not entail that an actual message purposely and sincerely proffered is no longer present.

To return to Foucault, there are rules to the parrhesiastic contract, and one is protected to some extent by becoming a party to this contract: "The 'contract' is intended to limit the risk he takes in speaking" (Foucault 1983: 11). But adding playful, non-sacralized rule-following allows for a seeming

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<sup>25</sup> For another account of the connection between humor and a parrhesiastic contract, see Rossing's analysis of Richard Pryor (2014: 25-9).

<sup>26</sup> On the addictive nature of humor, see Hurley et al. 2011: 1, 26, 62, 81-2, 253, 290, 294; Weisfeld 2006: 3).

paradox of participation in a game, while being free to play by variations of the rules, or even amend them as one goes, oscillating back and forth between games. The subversive parrhesiastic humorist manifests an ambiguous state of being direct/indirect, serious/playful, using the bona-fide language of those who subjugate them and the non-bona-fide language of the humorist. Being adept at these social oscillations cultivates epistemic openness, an essential condition for a parrhesiastes.

In note 9 above, I noted the few cases where Foucault briefly considers laughter or humor in relation to parrhesia. It is the discussion of “lamprooning” that I wish to investigate more deeply than did Foucault. Referencing aristocratic critiques of democracy, he quotes Isocrates who “concludes that because it is not even possible to be heard in Athens if one does not parrot the demos’ will, there is democracy—which is a good thing—but the only parrhesiastic or outspoken speakers left who have an audience are ‘reckless orators’ and ‘comic poets’” (Foucault 1983: 32). This glossing over of the comic misses a potentially efficacious parrhesiastic element. When Douglass publicly criticizes his oppressors through caricature, he is certainly not a ‘reckless orator,’<sup>27</sup> although his words require courage as he could have been punished, possibly killed, as a result of pronouncing them, and he definitely does not “parrot the demos’ will.” He is clearly interested in telling the truth, but it is the way he goes about it that is of interest here.<sup>28</sup>

In a speech to the Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society in 1841, Douglass lampoons the traditional power relationships between the southern preacher and the slave, here reversing the roles: “Oh, consider the wonderful goodness of God! Look at your hard, horny hands, your strong muscular frames, and see how mercifully he has adapted you to the duties you are to fulfill! While to your masters, who have slender frames and long delicate fingers, he has given brilliant intellects, that they may do the thinking, while you do the working” (Douglass 2013: 3). Douglass is mocking the social roles established and maintained by the demos at the time in a courageous but not reckless manner. There is irony and humor in his tone, as he subverts the very language used by his oppressors, turning it against them. Douglass is not merely demonstrating a point (Foucault 2010: 53), nor employing a rhetorical trick divorced from a genuine concern for truth in an attempt to persuade, nor is his

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<sup>27</sup> See Sokoloff 2014: 1-6 on the courage needed for Douglass to publicly express any emotionality, much less rage.

<sup>28</sup> “So, we can say that parrhesia is a way of telling the truth, but what defines it is not the content of the truth as such” (Foucault 2010: 52).

performance intended to instruct in a purely pedagogical sense (Foucault 2010: 53-4); his instruction is not filling his audience's heads with data that frees them from their erstwhile exculpating ignorance-recall, they have "already declared" universal equality.

It is also not ironic in the Socratic sense in which we might really not know what the truth-teller's perspective is: "nothing is more distant than parrhesia from the well-known Socratic, or Platonic-Socratic irony ... In parrhesia however, as if it were a veritable anti-irony, the person who tells the truth throws the truth in the face of his interlocutor, a truth which is so violent, so abrupt, and said in such a peremptory and definitive way that the person facing him can only fall silent, or choke with fury, or *change to a different register*" (Foucault 2010: 54, my emphasis). It is quite clear what Douglass' perspective is. His irony is not concealing, but revealing. We comprehend his meaning even as he violates, on a one-dimensional or superficial reading, Gricean rules such as "do not say what you believe to be false." On a direct, purely literal and logical interpretation, Douglass is stating that which he believes to be false (as everyone listening to him already knows). But this same audience, and readers today, recognize the intended humor in his performance which expands our possibilities for meaning-making with Douglass. We collaborate with the parrhesiastic wit, while we enjoy the rhetorical construction which reveals the absurd injustices of the slave-holding system. He is sincerely resisting an injustice through a non-bona-fide playful mode of presentation.

Finally, Douglass is not simply engaged in a form of debate with an audience intending to *win* a competition in the agonistic sense of play found in typical games (Foucault 2010: 55). The subversive humorist places audiences, those in power directly and the third-party observers for whom the subversive sometimes speaks, into a playful attitude. This is an additional component in contention with Foucault's conception that I suggest belongs to contemporary parrhesiastes. Humorous rather than agonistic play is far more likely to lead to "change to a different register" than more direct methods. While Foucault asserts that parrhesia is not merely a debate with winners and losers, he maintains the bellicose sense of battle: "In parrhesia, is there not an agonistic structure between two characters confronting and struggling with each other over the truth? In a sense I think we are much closer to the value of parrhesia when we emphasize its agonistic structure" (Foucault 2010: 55). The sense of play involved with subversive humor is that which is described by Lugones: "We may not have rules, and when we do have them, there are no rules that are to us *sacred*. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things" (Lugones 2003: 96). On the other hand, "An agonistic sense of playfulness is one in which competence is central. You'd better know the rules of the game. In

agonistic play, there is risk, there is uncertainty, but the uncertainty is about who is going to win and who is going to lose. There are rules that inspire hostility” (Lugones 2003: 95). Agonistic play leads to the killing of other worlds, not truth-seeking travel.

But Lugones’ sense of a playful attitude is not wholly contrary to Foucault’s parrhesiastic attitude: “what makes it parrhesia is that the introduction, the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. Parrhesia does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk” (Foucault 2010: 62). There is still risk with subversive humor because of the act of opening oneself to others who are in positions of power in the hopes of cracking open their epistemic closure: “Playful ‘world’-travel is thus not assimilable to the middle-class leisurely journey nor the colonial or imperialist journeys. None of these involve risking one’s ground. These forms of displacement may well be compatible with agonistic playfulness, but they are incompatible with the attitude of play that is an openness to surprise and that inclines us to ‘world’- travel in the direction of deep coalition” (Lugones 2003: 98). This playful attitude fosters an openness to ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty, all of which involve a level of indeterminate risk: “If it is ambiguous it is threatening because it is creative, changing, defiant of norms meant to subdue it” (Lugones 2003: 144). The threat, albeit diminished by humorous play, is worth the risk.

The subversive humorist confronts an audience with all of the elements of the parrhesiastes regarding truth-telling, but with less likelihood of a violent response considered by Foucault. Douglass has demonstrated through the humorous performance, that he is a human who can think, who is more than the inconsistent stereotypes portray. His lampooning reversals are more than mere performances intending to get a laugh; they are also distinct from straightforward argument or protest speech meant to call out members of his audience and society at large. They are examples of humorous, sincere parrhesia, oscillating between the lexicon of the dominant sphere and the critical reflection from a trickster on the margins.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Douglass’ example of role reversals, irony, and his ambiguous in/out nature is analogous in many relevant ways to Foucault’s example of Cynic parrhesia in the subversive words and deeds of Diogenes--words and deeds that are *funny* and subversive. Diogenes has been portrayed as “vastly irritable yet suffocatingly funny, magnetic yet repulsive, a regal vagabond who was somehow in charge of the truth” (Navia 1996: 83), but Foucault does not make this connection, instead he focuses only on

At the heart of so much humor is ambiguity, and it is this muddiness, confusion, speaking from multiple perspectives simultaneously, or at least requiring a very quick oscillation back and forth between contrasting frames, that enables one with less power to speak truth. There is sincerity and ideological authenticity that is expressed, not concealed, through a humorous or playful mode of presenting a truth. The parrhesiastes says what she believes is the truth forthrightly, according to Foucault, and at times this truth-telling is practically impossible without concomitant emotions, including anger. But with subversive humor, even rage can be directly present, a traditionally acceptable emotion only for the dominant class, and only males within that group. Anger of this sort expressed by anyone on the margins is deemed rash, even crazy. I will conclude with an analysis of two putatively inconsistent, yet socially efficacious, emotions found in a contemporary parrhesiastes: anger and humor.

### **3. Parrhesia and Angry Humor: Justified Fury Can Still be Funny**

It is odd to connect humor with the outrages of oppression. Why mirth over madness when “Oppression makes a wise man mad” (Douglass 1852: 7)? Douglass chooses both--the funny and the fury. He is mad, but it is not a rage that undermines his reason; in fact, it acts as an emotional motivating force that fosters a laser-like focus on his goals: “Rage gave Douglass the flexibility to strategically move between the poles of the pacifism/insurrection opposition as the specific political situation required” (Sokoloff:2014: 6). He is able to control the rage, while not stifling it. I would argue his justified rage is counterbalanced by his humorous attitude that kept it from ever “morph[ing] into impulse driven violent rage” (Sokoloff 2014: 6). Sokoloff does not make this connection, although he is aware of the overlapping emotions: “His rage is visible in the intense sarcasm, irony, mockery, invective, and mimicry in his speeches and autobiographical writings” (Sokoloff 2014: 5). We see it in the ironic language where he willfully engages in a performative contradiction, or at the very least, paralipsis: “O! had I the ability [he does], and could I reach the nation’s ear [he did], I would, to day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke [he did]. For it

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his iconoclastic nature (Foucault 1983: 46). The humor embedded in Diogenes’ rhetorical and embodied performances has been missed or ignored by Foucault and others. Diogenes’ parrhesiastic rhetoric that critiques the various “types of faulty and self-deluding styles of life” (Foucault 1983: 48) cannot be separated from his humor.



is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced” (Douglass 1852: 20). He did all of this, and in the very speech in which he claimed he could not.

He does not present a typical argument as he came to realize the inefficacy of that mode of resistance, not because of the weakness of argument as such, but because of his audience then (and sadly, now as well): “Performing rage outraged the audience and overcame the ineffectual character of rational approaches to challenging racist common sense. Of course, abolitionists were willing to argue. African-Americans could argue against slavery as much as they wanted but no one was there to listen. The ocular dimension intensified affect and worked to transform racist common sense” (Sokoloff 2014: 6; see also Rossing 2014: 28). But Sokoloff does not inform us as to how Douglass, a former slave, is able to embody this otherwise forbidden emotion in the public (dominant) sphere.<sup>30</sup> When a member of an oppressed group is angry, it is interpreted by the dominant center as rage, and rage, unless expressed by the right folks such as a man in power, is perceived as a dangerous character flaw: “Rage is equated by dominators with hysteria or insanity...” [However] In becoming angry, subordinates signal that they take themselves seriously; they believe they have the capacity as well as the right to be judges of those around them” (Lugones 2003: 107). Douglass embodies this potent and directed rage, expressed through the playful mechanisms of humor.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rage is an “outlaw emotion.” “Outlaw emotions are distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values” (Lugones 2003: 104, quoting Alison Jaggar). This has been the case for most of the history of Western philosophy. There are exceptions of course, one of them being Aristotle and his contention that anger in particular can be a useful passion for the virtuous person. But there are caveats to this claim: “anyone can get angry--that is easy ... but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1109a4).

<sup>31</sup> Former President Obama rarely expressed his anger publicly for fear of falling into the “angry black man” stereotype. It is not coincidental that the few times he successfully performed his rage was when he was accompanied by his “anger translator” Luther, played by comedian Keegan-Michael Key at the 2015 White House Correspondents Dinner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkAK9QRe4ds>.

Direct and scorching anger can be illuminating for a parrhesiastes and his audience, as seen with Douglass already. The parrhesiastic contract can be held intact in the face of such direct anger because the justified emotion is expressed *indirectly* through the playful, yet serious, humorous mode of communication. This mode of expression is multiply beneficial to the parrhesiastes inhabiting the borderlands of society as it permits them access to and from the hegemonic center. They are adept, largely as a matter of survival (Lugones 2003: 88), in understanding the normalized language that subtly constrains oppressed people through stereotype and cliché. Such language is so common that it hardly reaches one's consciousness when used, and yet can be extremely effective at sustaining an unjust system. This is so even when the language appears to be complimentary toward an individual who has (unexpectedly) accomplished something.

Consider the experiences of racial oppression by the successful black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, and thus someone seen as an exception to the rule, as described by Lewis Gordon: "We see here the logic of rule and exception, where the system could be maintained in spite of individual progress: regarding an achieved black person as an exception to a rule of black inferiority only maintains the rule. The logic is preserved through an inversion with whites: a white person's failure is treated as an exception to the rule of white superiority" (Gordon 2011: 21). I appeal to comedian Chris Rock to make the point more explicit:

Colin Powell can't be president ... whenever Colin Powell's on the news white people always give him the same compliments, 'How do you feel about Colin Powell?' 'He speaks so well', 'he's so well spoken', 'he speaks so well', 'I mean, he really speaks well', 'he speaks so well'. Like that's a compliment! Speaks so well's not a compliment; speaks so well's some shit you say about retarded people that can talk. What do you mean he speaks so well?...He's a fucking educated man, how the fuck do you expect him to sound? You dirty motherfuckers, what're you talking about? 'Speaks so well', What voice were you looking to come out of his mouth? What the fuck did you expect him to sound like? 'I'm gonna drop me abomb ta-day, I be pres-o-dent', get the fuck out of here. (Quoted in Weaver 2010, 40)

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Accessed 6/6/19. This is an act, but Obama's true feelings, at least regarding climate change and the lack of political will to do anything about it, are real.

This is funny. It is also serious, and Rock is visibly outraged, but this rage is intertwined and revealed, not canceled out, through a playful parrhesiastic performance. Rock is attacking “subtle white racist attitudes to black vernacular and linguistic competence”, as sociologist Simon Weaver puts it,<sup>32</sup> through mimicking comments directed at Colin Powell. He is exposing the stereotypes wielded, often unconsciously and maybe even with the best of intentions, against black speech; namely, that it is not the norm, it is not expected to fit into the dominant discourse. Colin Powell can *only* be seen as an “articulate” exception to the rule of black ignorance; a rule that is sustained by the subtle “compliment”, because he is viewed as an anomaly.

Rock reveals that it is more complex than that, and does so somewhat controversially.<sup>33</sup> In the performance, he amusingly juxtaposes the language of well-meaning, but condescending whites, with the well-meaning, yet condescending language people often use to describe the unexpected linguistic capacities of an intellectually disabled person.<sup>34</sup> Rock shows whites how they themselves see blacks,

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to note in relation to worries of misinterpreting subversive humor in a racist or stereotypical fashion, that Weaver claims that “a racist reading would need to distance itself completely from Rock’s preferred meaning, perhaps by concentrating on the final line of the quote, which impersonates the stereotypical depiction of Powell” (Weaver 2010: 40-1). But in the larger context the “outright mockery of white racist attitudes” reduces the likelihood of that interpretation.

<sup>33</sup> Intersectionally speaking, Rock does possess social and economic privilege over many of those in his audience, which problematizes this example, but only a bit. Such power does not insulate him from threats on his life based upon what he states publicly, though the threats are far fewer than a more straightforward, if existentially first-person narrative, from George Yancy from his pieces in the NY Times. See here <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/> for his work and, if you dare, read the thousands of accompanying comments, many laced with racist, violence-provoking responses.

<sup>34</sup> Rock’s use of “retarded” might have been replaced with something else less offensive, and maintained both the point and the humor, although, it is not obvious what substitutions might have worked. Perhaps making the comparison to “2 year-old that can talk” would do. This example also reveals the complexities of privilege and oppression; while Rock is a member of an oppressed group, he, like Richard Pryor before him, is prone to use oppressive language against others who have less

even as the whites fail to recognize that this is the frame through which they define blacks—as mentally deficient and childlike. Prior to this grilling by Rock, the privileged whites could remain complacent as their system-justifying stereotypes are still “accurate”—we can’t be racist if we are saying something that is positive *and* true—Colin Powell *is* articulate. But in Grice’s vernacular, the implicature, at least understood by black people and hopefully white audiences after this performance, is that “so well-spoken” is patronizing rather than uplifting when attributed to a “fucking educated man” who might potentially run for the most powerful office in the world.

Rock is making salient a very common experience of black people that, when taken individually, appears harmless, but when constantly confronted with such condescending comments, the cumulative effects contribute to oppression. He is parrhesiastically revealing that the problem is with white *willful* ignorance, not black ignorance as such. But if this is a case of implicit stereotyping that slips out against the person’s explicit desires, and one has consciously professed good intentions, e.g., then how can Rock’s abusive language be justified? His fury appears disproportionate to the verbal infraction. However, he is not calling out individuals in the crowd for ridicule,<sup>35</sup> presuming some degree of superiority over them. He is addressing very serious matters from a playful attitude, and he remains within this mode and the audience recognizes this, which places them in a similar attitude. This is seen in his hyperbolic denunciation of those who use such putative compliments. The incongruity between the claim by whites that is ostensibly merely a *faux pas*, and the “dirty motherfucker” rebuttal to the infraction can be interpreted as Rock leaving the playful realm of creative and imaginative construction, and even perpetuating a negative stereotype of “the angry black man.” Or, what I think is much more likely, it can be treated as a performance in which he means what he says, he is morally and epistemically justified in saying it, and the anger *is* in fact a proportionate response to the ubiquitous oppressive stereotypes against black people. It is true, in one sense, he is being obviously hyperbolic, exaggerating for the sake of humor, intending to amuse the audience. The

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power than he does. A charitable interpretation of this performance would be to read his use of the inappropriate term as part of the general attack of stereotypes. But the ambiguity here reveals a worry with using humor as subversion.

<sup>35</sup> However, in some cases even this is permitted and enjoyed by those very audience members who have been “lucky” enough to have seats up front, in the shooting range of the comedian. This is especially so if it is a known insult comic.

seemingly extreme nature of the insult in response to the innocuous condescension shocks the audience in a way direct argument would not—it shows them that it is not innocuous after all—and really, they *already* know this.<sup>36</sup> This is serious, angry humor.

There is unmistakable rage in Rock's performance, but also in the speeches of Douglass, and even the social critiques embodied in the words and conduct of Diogenes; each of these exemplify the truth-telling and risk-taking (in differing degrees) of a parrhesiastes. The anger is direct, their beliefs are clear, even as they violate the linguistic, logical, and social, conventions. Audiences “get” their point while they enjoy the performances. Coupled with this anger, not covered by it, is humor.<sup>37</sup> Even in the face of explicit and maddening subjugation, Douglass is capable of maintaining composure through the distance a humorous attitude offers. This playful attitude does not fully disengage him from reality, as if he could merely laugh off the oppression; on the contrary, it cultivates an open, critical, and creative mode of seeing that exposes disgusting truths, often implicating his audiences. In more direct confrontational acts of resistance, those who are exposed are less likely to even listen, much less be convinced, by the subversives' message.

I suspect Foucault does not consider humor as an element of parrhesia due to the indirection and the ostensibly merely rhetorical nature of a lot of humor. But Douglass' Diogenes' and Rock's humor cannot be dismissed as simple oratorical tropes intending only to evoke delight. This would be analogous to diminishing Gandhi's fasting, one of his non-violent means of protest against British oppression, as little more dieting. Moreover, the use of humor in these cases is not just a means to

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<sup>36</sup> When there is a possible bona-fide, non-humorous rendering that would either imply nonsense or an incredibly surprising viewpoint from the wit (that Douglass really does think he is inferior to slaveholders, e.g.), audiences are more inclined to give a playful, humorous, non-bona-fide reading, but one that still has a subversive message. The audience “is allowed to construct” the meaning collaboratively, as the ambiguity is not over-specified and they are not forced to a single, convergent idea (Veale 2004).

<sup>37</sup> It is not clear that one is furious and *then* finds humor in the absurdities of slavery, or arbitrary power structures, or the subtle linguistic oppression embedded in language and culture, or *vice versa*, or that the anger and humor are simultaneous. Alan Roberts argues, albeit briefly, that in satire, e.g., one can be serious and playful, but not simultaneously (2019: 105). This is an interesting and important area of study, but my arguments here do not rest on resolving these issues.

convey information in a pleasant fashion to avoid upsetting the complacency of the listeners. The clever play with language, logic, and the ambiguities and absurdities of a given social reality is integral in perceiving the moral wrongs to begin with, not just an effective mode of expanding the perception of interlocutors. This form of humor is inextricably linked to their parrhesiastic truth-telling, not an add-on tool interchangeable with some other equally effective mechanism. Their humorous, playful attitude offers a form of seeing reality that is more incisive and accurate than the mode of perceiving predominantly found in the serious, epistemically closed, rule-following people in positions of power. This is the sense in which humor can be integral in courageous truth-telling.

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