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Oppression, Subversive Humor, and Unstable Politics

Author Pre-Print.

Please cite as Marvin, Amy. "Oppression, Subversive Humor, and Unstable Politics." *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook* 4, no. 1 (2023): 163-186. <https://doi.org/10.1515/phhumyb-2023-0007>

Abstract: This essay argues that humor can be used as an unstable weapon against oppressive language and concepts. Drawing from radical feminist Marilyn Frye, I discuss the difficulty of challenging systematic oppression from within and explore the capabilities of humor for this task. This requires expanding Cynthia Willett's and Julie Willett's approach to fumerism beyond affect to fully examine the work of humor in manipulating language, concepts, and imagery. For this expansion, I bring in research on feminist linguistics alongside other philosophers of political humor to consider the connection between humor and world-making. I then link this with feminist world-breaking through Monique Wittig's analysis of war machines and Trojan horses against heteropatriarchal language. Finally, I draw out the instability of humor as a war machine by investigating a bit where comedian Patti Harrison disguised herself as an official corporate brand platform to challenge the compulsory commodification of LGBTQ rights.

Keywords: Feminist philosophy; social and political philosophy; Feminist humor; oppression; philosophy of language

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1 Introduction: Laughing at Reality

A major insight across much of feminist philosophy is that oppression is often framed as an inevitable and apolitical feature of society. In *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye argues that oppression is often difficult to see as a larger structure that imposes specific patterns of domination (Frye 1983, 5). Because specific moments are often framed as unrelated to larger structures of oppression, analyzing oppression requires an attention to its systematic details. Her main example is of a man opening a door for a woman. Taken as just one isolated event, it could be dismissed as a neutral and apolitical situation. Someone might even assert that it is important for humans to be kind to others in general, so everyone should hold a door open for everyone else. Frye, however, connects patterns of men holding open doors for women with a larger symbolic meaning under systematic oppression that women are incapable and dependent (6).

Frye's example may initially seem innocuous if we miss the larger context of oppression at work. If the reader does not find the door example compelling, consider some additional individual events that may be misconstrued as innocuous and apolitical. A man tells a woman that he hopes she will have many "brown-eyed children" with her partner. A woman asks a man a question and then he directs his answer towards another man at the table. A chef hires a woman as a prep cook after she applied to be a line cook so he will not have to alter his behavior on the clock. Oppression does the work of pressing, restricting movement and agency while creating double binds (2). Without an awareness of systematic oppression, we risk seeing mushrooms sprout up and mistaking them for individual entities while missing the underlying mycelium network. If you don't like having fungi, the metaphor that Frye famously uses for this dynamic is that of a birdcage: focusing on one bar rather than the system of bars would make it seem like the bird was not caged (4). The work of feminist philosophers is in part to call attention to the larger context of oppression

within which this work of pressing is conducted, unifying the isolated incidents into a political whole.

In addition to the issue of depoliticizing individual events and missing larger contexts of oppression, Frye argues that oppression is constitutive of reality. Frye is critical of oppression and considers change to be possible, so this does not entail that reality exclusively takes the permanent shape of whatever oppression has constructed for us. Instead, Frye argues that the effects of structural oppression are often presented as neutral reality rather than a contestable social and political imposition. This focus shares an affinity with recent research on “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007) and could potentially be classified under this genre, but it stretches farther by holistically considering connections between knowledge, language, institutions, perception, emotions, and the construction of reality. For Frye our perception of the world is often shaped by systematic oppression, including sexism (Frye 1983, 29). She asserts that sexism even shapes our experience of bodies, writing,

Socialization molds our bodies; enculturation forms our skeletons, our musculature, our central nervous systems. By the time we are gendered adults, masculinity and femininity are "biological." They are structural and material features of how our bodies are. (1983, 37)

Frye is not claiming that culture is the substrate upon which human bones grow. Rather, it is culture that shapes how the gendered body is interpreted through perception. In this passage Frye is unpacking the effect of systematic oppression on perception and the resulting “reality” of gender. Publishing in the early 1980s, Frye remarks that due to the simultaneously obscured and pervasive reach of systematic oppression her lesbian existence has been marked as unreal, failing to cohere with the imposed conceptual scheme (155). When life as a lesbian is framed as unnatural by oppression, being a lesbian is defined as a way of living that cannot be real. In Frye’s own words,

systematic oppression shapes reality by casting anything that escapes its orbit “as *naturally* impossible as well as *logically* impossible” (158–59; her italics). Oppression must bracket out ways of living that lie outside its framework of reality as part of the work of pressing in some to the benefit of others.

Because of the imposition of systematic oppression upon reality, including language, a related conceptual order, and the mechanics of institutions, Frye argues that it can be especially difficult to find the language and concepts through which to challenge oppression. Mocking the penchant for philosophers to prioritize crystallized definitions over exploration and complexity, Frye describes the complex practice in her work of naming the construction of reality and articulating her own life even as it has been framed as unreal. She explains,

This inquiry, about what is not encompassed by a conceptual scheme, presents problems which arise because the scheme in question is, at least in the large, the inquirer's own scheme. The resources for the inquiry are, in the main, drawn from the very scheme whose limits we are already looking beyond in order to conceive the project. This undertaking therefore engages me in a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness—dancing about a region of cognitive gaps and negative semantic spaces, kept aloft only by the rhythm and momentum of my own motion, trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist and to map the tensions which create them. The danger is of falling into incoherence. But conceptual schemes have saving complexities such that their structures and substructures imitate and reflect each other and one thus can locate holes and gaps indirectly which cannot, in the nature of the thing, be directly named. (1983, 154)

Frye describes a tricky practice of attempting to draw from a conceptual scheme within which she does not exist to challenge that very scheme. Lesbian existence as it is lived beyond patriarchal reality marks for Frye an occluded space from which the conceptual scheme of reality itself can be challenged. The naturalization and depoliticization of patriarchy under the guise of reality can lead to its own undoing when existence is claimed beyond and against its totalizing grasp. Finding the words for this task is difficult because the existing conceptual order of systematic oppression

must be used as a scaffold to weaken and crack it open within its own terms. The task could also backfire: challenging a conceptual order on its own terms could accept too many of those terms and further entrench its picture of reality. Another way this task could backfire is moving too far outside an existing conceptual order and its language such that one's purposive grasp on meaning-making is lost.

Though there is a long history of humor getting passed over in philosophy as trivial, it is worth considering in the context of Frye's work on oppression because it opens up language, concepts, and emotions for play. Feminist theorists have often expressed an ambivalence about humor. On one hand, humor can reinforce patriarchy and silence women's voices (Bergmann 1986; hooks 1992, 102–3; MacKinnon 1979, 52). Simultaneously, feminist have argued that laughter can become a means of breaking silence and finding one's own language (Cixous 1976, 888; Irigaray 1985, 163). It is thus important for feminist philosophers and theorists to consider not only the use of humor as a mechanism of oppression but also the work that humor can do for a feminist politics of resistance and liberation. In what ways can we consider humor to be a practice of resistance against oppression and its imposition on reality, as described by Frye? How do the difficulties of recruiting language and concepts against oppression complicate the impact of subversive humor?

In what follows, I argue that subversive humor is an important practice for the work of exposing and recontextualizing the false construction of reality through oppression. Following Frye, I conclude that practices of subversive humor are frequently unstable and risky due to the difficulty of taking up and recasting the terms of oppression to challenge oppression. First, I situate my analysis of humor alongside current philosophical research on subversive humor. I focus primarily on the fumerism of Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, unpacking their approach to oppression and resistance. I then expand this approach by bringing it into conversation with

theories and philosophies of subversive humor that focus on the recontextualization of language, concepts, and imagery. This expanded practice is connected with the work of Monique Wittig to consider subversive humor as a war machine against oppression, its language, and its concepts. Finally, I refer to the humor work of Patti Harrison to explain how taking up subversive humor as a war machine can lead to unstable political effects. The goal of this essay is thus to bring together existing subversive humor research against oppression while also calling attention to the risks of humor's work.

2 The Affective Roar in *Uproarious*

In 2019 Cynthia Willett and Julia Willett published *Uproarious*, a groundbreaking text in feminist philosophy of humor. In what follows I will unpack their understanding of oppression and the kind of resistance that feminist humor offers, concluding that their shift towards affective politics can be expanded through further consideration of the relationship between humor, wordplay, and meaning.

When considering oppression, the Willetts take up a systematic approach. On one level, the Willetts are interested in oppressive norms that operate “through the micropractices, engrained habits, cultural stereotypes, and implicit biases of everyday life” (Willett and Willett 2019, 36). More broadly, they primarily focus on oppression as it is spread through “biosocial clouds” that silence, diminish agency, and generate negative affects such as fear directed towards oppressed groups (24, 49). The field of “biosocial” affects is understood as “transpersonal” (50), capable of being carried across social groups rather than an individualized understanding of emotion. Additionally, oppression works through both isolation and forging unequal divides between social groups, which the Willetts describe as “a twisted tribal logic” (60).

To explain resistance against this oppression, Willett and Willett primarily draw from Audre Lorde's emphasis on the erotic as connected with self-realization and love in all its creative forms rather than strictly with the sexual (33–34). When practiced with *eros*, humor is capable of both shocking sedimented social norms and redirecting affects such as anger into more empowering social affects such as joy (34). In turn, undoing such norms can become a subversive practice of truth-telling, compared with the famous *reductio ad absurdum* arguments wielded by Cynic philosophers (39–40).

Reengineering relief theories of humor and their connection with laughter, Willett and Willett explain the destabilizing force of laughter as connected with emotion, affect, *eros*, and the body. Critiquing philosophers who associate humor purely with the intellect, the Willetts emphasize that subversive humor can emanate from the body. They write that in this context, “Logic-oriented philosophers and cognitive psychologists reduce too much of life to a mental puzzle for the sheer satisfaction of solving it” (100–1). They further explain, “In contrast to mental catharsis, subversive humor may reorient an affective and emotional comportment with others and instigate real change in the biosocial climate” (110). Humor invokes embodied emotions described as “primal forces” (110). Specifically, some practices of humor are analogized with a “homeopathic medicine” that inoculates against insults through self-irony (113). Other practices of humor involve a directly oppositional “allopathic catharsis” achieved through ridicule (113–14). If the social is understood as an affective network, then humor does important work of destabilizing and rechanneling affects within this dynamic system.

The affective life of humor can forge solidarity across differences to influence social change. Humor and laughter can spread social waves of affect that work to destabilize and reconfigure the existing “social climate” (52). Willett and Willett focus on empathy, which can

work in tandem with ridicule to cleave through social hierarchies and divides. Empathy plus ridicule leads to the comedic roast, a practice that Willett and Willett find especially compelling (133). Emphasizing the empathetic capabilities of humor is key for their overarching claim that overcoming “tribalism” and divisiveness is required for collective resistance (130).

Taken together, we can consider Willetts' argument for feminist humor as subversive humor through the following summary. We must intervene in theories of humor by attending to the importance of the body and affect in practices of subversive humor. Fumerism subverts by disrupting oppressive norms and affects by channeling its own affects through *eros*. For example, shame and anger can be rechanneled through embodied affective “belly laughs” that shock us out of sedimented norms. By spreading anti-oppressive affects across social groups, humor can forge solidarity across divides to challenge habituated affective networks of oppression while building collective resistance. In contrast to the silencing and isolating effects of oppression, humor galvanizes the solidarity required for social change through its affective and connective force.

The connections that Willett and Willett make between humor and resistance are compelling. First, it is important to consider the affective and social dimensions of humor. Second, their analysis is helpful for explaining the specific practices of comedians they consider throughout the book. This analysis is also important for feminist philosophers who are interested in the relationship between humor, performance, and social change. Returning to Frye, the Willetts demonstrate a key affective subversion that humor offers against the totalizing aims of oppression. Taking up subversive humor through *eros* can shockingly disrupt systematic oppression at the level of transpersonal emotions, casting out affective waves such as empathy that can in turn forge collective resistance. Frye shares an interest in affect and specifically anger in the context of oppression, since this can bring women together and expand the range of intelligible anger beyond

what is permitted under patriarchy (Frye 1983, 92). An affective focus is especially important because of Frye's emphasis on the difficulty of challenging a system of oppression through its own concepts. Willett and Willett indicate a means through which systematic oppression can potentially be challenged without taking up the terms of oppression, engaged at the level of collective affect rather than a skewed patriarchal conceptual order.

However, if we are addressing the use of humor against structural oppression it is worthwhile to consider the full range of its potential disruptions. For example, the Willetts spend some time discussing a stand-up comedy narrative by Wanda Sykes that recasts patriarchal norms shaming and blaming women for sexual assault. Specifically, Sykes imagines what life would be like if she was able to detach and leave her genitalia at home (Willett and Willett 2019, 31). The Willetts conclude, "Humor may not stop the crime of rape, but it does joyfully and hilariously erotize women's own sources of power through shared laughter" (32). They consider part of this "erotizing" activity to involve Sykes's frequent use of "pussy" in the context of her joke. The Willetts stress that through this imaginative redeployment Sykes "gives back power to the pussy," suggesting that this may involve a subversion of existing language and concepts in addition to disrupted habits, norms, and affects (32). Further on in the book they open a paragraph describing former President Donald Trump as a "pussy-grabber in chief," juxtaposed at the end of the paragraph with the ability "for feminism to reclaim the erotic politics of laughter as the pussy grabs back to talk some truth to power" (39). Again, this seems to indicate a redeployed language and conceptual network in the context of a specific word, but by focusing primarily on *eros* and affect this aspect of disruption is left largely unremarked upon throughout the book. Norms may be undone and truths told through this process, but it would be helpful to add more texture to the simultaneous play of language and concepts. Returning to Frye once again, it is important to

consider how language and a related conceptual order is constructed through systems of oppression. It is also important to consider how this can be challenged when undertaking a feminist project against oppression. In the following section, I will attempt to draw this resistance out in more detail by considering the potential of subversive humor to recontextualize language and meaning.

3 Language, Affect, and World-Making

In addition to affect, feminist humor scholars have considered the ability of humor to take up, disrupt, and recontextualize existing discourses, images, and situations. Already a philosopher might object to my list above as slippery and vague, so I will begin by first drawing out some key interventions in feminist linguistics work on humor. One of the most popular approaches to the study of jokes has been through their relation to schemas, frames, and scripts (Martin 2007, 86-87). These consist of organized "knowledge structures" that provide "a dynamic mental representation" allowing the formation of mental maps for the world (85). In 1977 Roger Schank and Robert Abelson defined a script as the organization of "sequences of events in a particular context" into an organized structure that acts as "an interconnected whole" for various situations (Schank & Abelson 1977, 41), providing stereotyped clusters of information that can be understood by humans. In humor linguistics research these scripts frequently consist of cognitive language structures and tend to decenter an in-depth extralinguistic consideration, informing Salvatore Attardo's and Victor Raskin's general theory of verbal humor (Raskin and Attardo 1991, 307-9, 326). It could thus seem that I should focus on language specifically rather than its connection with images and conceptual orders and situations, as I do.

However, the work of feminist humor scholars Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman does not restrict scripts and frames to language alone, since internalized cognitive structures can form the

background of both linguistic and extralinguistic understanding through “mental spaces.” Such an expansion beyond verbal humor is not so surprising, since theories of scripts include internalized expectations about sequences of events within situations, thus potentially including habits and norms as well. Mental spaces include not only partial representations of entities and their relations, but also specific discourse scenarios, conceptual constructs, and cultural information (Bing and Scheibman 2014, 15). Bing and Scheibman argue that their shift in focus from linguistic frames to mental spaces enables them to think more broadly about humor as a practice that also engages with imagery, situations, and narrative sequences, including those found in more complicated visual humor such as comics, cartoons, and subversive art (16).

Drawing from Seana Coulson’s research on conceptual blending, Bing and Scheibman argue that humor creates emergent mental spaces. Sharing an affinity with the Willetts, these emergent mental spaces are also spaces of engagement rather than disengagement since their creation cannot be reduced to trivialized non-bona fide meaning (14–15). Instead, such blending is generative of new ways of thinking and new practices. They explain, “In blended spaces elements from different areas of social and cultural knowledge are integrated to form one emergent cognitive structure, which then has the potential to contribute to subsequent reasoning and interpretation” (15–16). Because these blended spaces draw from existing internalized information, they are adept at reframing an existing situation or stereotype against its own purposes to propose an alternative point of view (13). Focusing on feminist practices of humor, Bing and Scheibman argue that by creating emergent blended spaces, humor creates “genuine domains of mental exploration” (16). These emergent spaces can propose novel possibilities, including new possible worlds (19). Such humor is subversive or feminist when it recontextualizes the status quo,

challenges its status as an unchangeable feature of the world, and opens up possibilities for reconsidering the situation (29).

The expansion that Bing and Scheibman offer to humor theory is evident in the expansive range of subversive humorous practice they consider in their work. One example they discuss is the suggestion of “calling in queer to work” as a response to the pathologization of queer desire, shifting the psychological classification of “deviant” and “disordered” sexualities into the more absurd context of using this as an excuse to receive paid leave from the workplace (18). Though actually calling in queer to work may not be so effective, in its humorous mode the juxtaposition offered by this prank conceptually blends persisting cultural pathologization with unintended consequences that LGBTQ workers could take advantage of this to avoid a workplace that depends on their labor. The joke thus undermines the concept that being queer is a form of illness by pointing out that practically it is not treated as such, and if it was then this would have undesired consequences for the structure of society. This humor works at the level of concepts and language may adopt some of the terms of anti-LGBTQ oppression, but it does so in order to recontextualize them and undermine them from within an existing conceptual scheme. It thus seems to play a part in the ability of humor to “renew, recharge, and revitalize” alongside the social emotions focused on by the Willetts (Willett and Willett 2019, 119).

As another example, Bing and Scheibman discuss a chart by the Guerilla Girls art activist group that reconfigures the homeland terror alert system introduced by the Bush administration, replacing each threat level with concerns about rising sexism and imperialism (Bing and Scheibman 2014, 25).

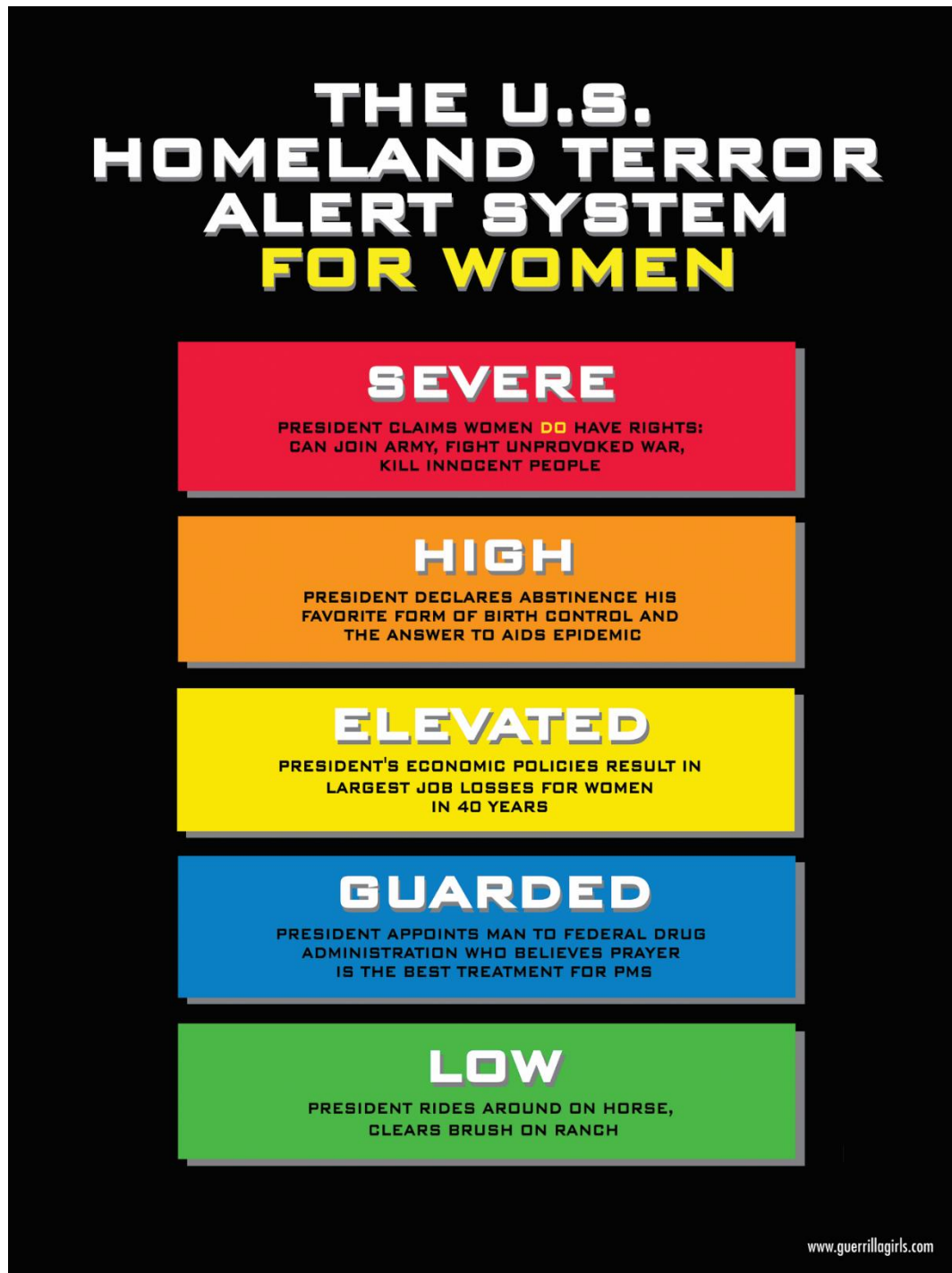


Fig. 1. *The Women's Terror Alert*. Guerrilla Girls, Women's Terror Alert, 2003.

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If we consider the specific humor directed at the homeland terror alert system, the model presented by Bing and Scheibman creates a space of transformed meaning by blending a warning system based on threats to citizens with rising anti-feminist threats, obstructions to women's rights, and co-optations of feminist messages to fuel violent racist imperialism. Through this process of conceptual blending, an emergent space has been created that is no longer carrying the previous W. Bush administration's propaganda of anti-Muslim fear but instead foregrounding the administration as a significant threat to women around the world. Though this emergent space borrows from the existing structure of the image to the extent that it would not have been possible without the Bush Administration and its threat scale, the Guerilla Girls' reconfiguration creates a novel subversion of the original image's intentions. The meaning of "terror" has shifted away from propaganda about imminent threats to national security as projected by the W. Bush administration to instead challenge his administration as the source of threats and violence.

Returning to the Willetts, who emphasize the ability of stand-up comedians to disperse Islamophobic fear, the Guerilla Girls are doing both this work and the work of challenging the institutionalized imagery that serves as a vessel for this fear. It is helpful in this context to bring in Liz Sills's research on subversive humor, since she argues that humor can bring people together against Islamophobic propaganda across a range of emotional responses (Sills 2017, 170–71). Sills argues that in this context humor involves an interplay between emotion and argumentation, concluding, "It is an argument, one that uses the happy affective payoff and enticement of laughter to deconstruct the stereotyping...and other denouncements of Islam as a primarily violent, fundamentalist spirituality" (172). Sills concludes, "Humor brings power – ...this power can be a direct counterpoint to other emotions and thus make it a lucrative component of any discussion in the public sphere" (173). Additionally, Jennifer Marra Henrigillis considers subversive humor to

be an important weapon against dangerous political myths, challenging epistemic vices while also cultivating the empathy of openness as “the vulnerability necessary to understand the other” (Marra 2018, 168). Since the Willetts state that the “belly laugh” caused by humor “connects the body and mind,” more explicitly discussing the linguistic, conceptual, and epistemic work of humor does not seem to be at odds with their account of fumerism (Willett and Willett 2019, 118).

By considering Bing and Scheibman’s work, we can revisit the Willetts’ engagement with the affect of “pussy grabs back” at the level of linguistic disruption and its relationship with meaning. Administrations change, but feminists continued to practice political and public forms of humorous recontextualization during the 2017–2021 Trump administration. In addition to Trump’s racist and enthusiastically ignorant approach to governance, his actions also worked to bolster systematic oppression against women through both policies (cf. the reinstatement of the global gag rule) and persistent sexist comments. Famously, Trump’s virulent and casual sexism was brought out into the open after a 2005 recording from the set of *Access Hollywood* was leaked. In the tape Trump bragged about the sexual assault of a woman, recounting that he “moved on her very heavily” while bragging to another man, “Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything” (Trump 2016). After the transcript of Trump’s conversation was leaked, feminists online and graffiti artists in the street immediately began recontextualizing Trump’s now-infamous sexist statement by centering “pussy” in a different light, creating the rallying cry “PUSSY GRABS BACK” (Puglise 2016).



Fig. 3. “PUSSY GRABS BACK” graffiti on sidewalk, Blair Ave. and 4th Ave., Eugene, OR. 2017.

Photo taken by the author.

Though there were more additional political outcries about Trump’s leaked statement, and many feminists engaged in direct argumentation and collective protest, the emergent space created through the “PUSSY GRABS BACK” slogan challenges Trump by infusing the word “pussy” with a capacity for resistance. It takes up Trump’s emphasis on “pussy” and points to the visceral sexism of his support for rape culture. It then recontextualizes this through an association between “pussy” and agency to inspire collective feminist action against Trump. Returning to Frye, though Trump solely was able to conceive of “pussy” through a perception of passivity and violation, protestors were able to instead think through the gaps of this flawed vision. Bringing in the Willetts’ emphasis on *eros* with Bing and Scheibman, the emergent space of “pussy grabs back” granted the

word an empowering meaning from the lens of a different possible world not captured by Trump's vile understanding of "reality."

As with the Willetts' focus on affective rechanneling, disrupting language through humor can become a public rallying cry. Trump won the election despite the use of "PUSSY GRABS BACK" to encourage voting against Trump, but the reappropriation of "pussy" maintained its power. During the record-setting Women's March on Washington and across the globe on January 21st, one of the most iconic symbols of the mass protests was the "pussy hat." As a work of playful humor, the pussy hat blended Trump's "pussy" comment, the recontextualization of it through "PUSSY GRABS BACK," and headgear as part of protesting a heightened attack against women's autonomy through threatened access to abortion, contraception, and health services. The humorous recontextualization and transformation of Trump's slogan was thus, like the Guerilla Girl's "Homeland Terror Alert System for Women," an intervention at the level of existing concepts and language even as it refused directly countering Trump through polite debate and straightforward, measured discourse.

I bring up humorous play with language, concepts, imagery, and situations not to refute the Willetts, but instead to join their effort of recuperating the role of affects and emotions in practices of political humor. In this context it is helpful to turn to Chris Kramer, another important philosopher of subversive humor. Like Willett and Willett, Kramer argues against philosophers who associated humor with a disengaged intellect and instead approaches humor as an engaged political practice (Kramer 2020, 158–59). Drawing from Antonio Damasio, a theorist discussed positively by the Willetts in other contexts, Kramer argues that humor cannot be clearly separated from its emotional dimensions. Emotions play a key role, for example, in the motivations that humor provides us "to think (and rethink)" through uncertain and complex situations (160).

Sharing an affinity with the Willetts, Kramer argues that subversive stand-up comedy can harness emotions to enter a cooperative mode of play through which audiences are more open to challenge (160). Sharing an affinity with Bing and Scheibman, Kramer is interested in the imaginative ability for humor to entertain different possible worlds, which he links to “worldmaking” practices (172). Kramer’s philosophy of subversive humor thus indicates the Willetts’ affective approach is not mutually exclusive with an approach that considers humor as a play of language and cognitive structures (168). Subversive humor, it seems, can galvanize cooperation in both resistance and research.

I could attempt to fully map out the connection between humor, language, concepts, meaning, situations, and affect here but this seems more appropriate for a separate essay. Instead, there is one more difficulty that I find crucial to acknowledge if we consider subversive humor as a field of linguistic, affective, and cognitive play with the “reality” or propaganda or fear imposed by systematic oppression. The Willetts’ descriptions of resistance, perhaps in the spirit of *eros* that they channel in their own writing practice, at times comes across to me as too optimistic or calculative of success. They are careful to avoid hubris, explaining, “Humor offers not a cure-all but a chance for a change...” (119). In what follows, I will take this caveat further by focusing on the instability and scattered effects of subversive humor in practice.

4 Subversive Humor as War Machine

Beyond Bing and Scheibman, considering the emergent political spaces made possible through humor is directly relevant to longstanding work in feminist philosophy. In this section I turn towards Monique Wittig as a philosopher who connects oppression, disruptions in language, and resistance. Doing so will allow me to draw out the instability of humor as we must contend with

the tricky dynamics introduced through Frye at the beginning of this essay and now through Wittig. How do we take up language and concepts to break them? What can go wrong with this process? Linking Wittig's consideration of a "war machine" enacted against existing discourse will help unpack this practice as both promising and difficult.

Wittig argues that the world as constructed by heteropatriarchy solidifies its dominance through the imposition of discourse that secures a select few as universalized in contrast to particularized others (46). In this context, Wittig asserts that language cannot be treated as separate from subjugation, as it serves a dominant conceptual order reinforced by a "body of discourses" (Wittig 1992, 2–5). Through these discourses, sex is asserted as natural rather than socially constructed to embed heterosexism in the structure of society and subjugate women to men through marriage. A universalized ideology of heterosexuality is thus baked into the category of sex and its associated language (5–6). Wittig stresses this category is totalitarian, enforced through laws and violence (8). Because of this interplay, patriarchal heterosexual ideology is best understood not as involving a realm of "Irreal Ideals" but instead as enacting material oppression and violence upon its subjects (25). Wittig writes, "These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms" (25). To speak otherwise is to incur punishment, to the extent that Wittig emphasizes, "...outlaw and mad are the names for those who refuse to go by the rules and conventions, as well as for those who refuse to or cannot speak a common language" (40).

Wittig refers to the totalizing system of discourses that enforces subjugation under racist heteropatriarchy as the straight mind (26). The straight mind universalizes itself into "history, social reality, culture, language, and all the subjective phenomenon" and is unable to think outside of its conceptual order (27–28). Escaping this universalization requires a revolution at the level of

language, concepts, and institutions that will challenge the connection between society, heterosexism, and patriarchal impositions of sexual difference (30–32). Only after the world has been refashioned, including dominant language, concepts, and institutions, can the subjugated class of women truly be liberated.

For this purpose, Wittig introduces what she calls a "war machine," explained as a practice of language that disrupts the discursive order imposed by patriarchy. She compares the war machine to the figure of the Trojan horse. The wooden statue was initially welcomed within the gates because the Trojans recognized its form, but it then led to ruin once inside the gates (29). When considering an existing body of literature, the task of a writer is "either to reproduce existing forms or to create new ones," with language serving as a "raw material" for this purpose (70). Sharing a compatibility with the Willetts's approach, words can be divested of their typical meaning and re-fashioned to impress a shock upon the listener due to the generation of new associations, dispositions, arrangements, and separate uses of words (72). Under Wittig's framework, these ripples within language have material effects upon the world because language is part of the material assemblage from which the world is constructed. This refashioning of words is thus also a refashioning of worlds and their possibilities, simultaneously world-breaking and world-making. As Linda Zerilli emphasizes, such a refashioning does not entail a world without gender/sex or sexuality, but instead challenges their imposed meaning as historical, contingent, and reinterpretable (Zerilli 2005, 72). Additionally, this is not a world without bodies, as Wittig centers new ways of understanding the body beyond the terms of patriarchy in her novel *Les Guérillères* (Wittig 2007, 72).

Returning to the discussion that opened this essay, Wittig's approach to structural domination under patriarchy has affinities with Frye's. Though she more explicitly emphasizes the

role of language and discursive regimes, she is similarly interested in the dynamic through which patriarchy is established as politically neutral within a dominant conceptual scheme that erases diverging ways of living. Through her focus on a “war machine” in language Wittig is similarly interested in the difficult work of challenging patriarchy when it has imposed the language within which we are habituated to speak, the conceptual resources through which we are habituated to think, and the institutions that make our lives livable or unlivable.

Wittig’s figure of the “war machine” dwells on the connection between destabilizing language and remaking the world. The material link between word and world causes the disruption and refashioning of words to have material effects upon existing social structures, to the extent that disrupting and reworking language may function as a “war machine” upon the established order. While these war machines may be more blatant, some practices of language disruption like the “Trojan Horse” are initially introduced covertly as a familiar formation but then revealed as overtly revolutionary and shocking. The seeds of revolution can thus be sown by contesting the existing paradigms of the straight mind through language to blast it apart from within. This practice shares an affinity with Frye’s method of scaffolding, attempting to develop a critique that is intelligible without also reifying patriarchal arrangements.

Wittig’s politics of the “war machine” and the “Trojan horse” has a potentially complicated relationship with humor. Instead of turning against reason, Wittig argues specifically against uses of reason that tether its scope to patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. Wittig is critical of attempts by the oppressed to claim unreason and consequently embark on “*la nef des fous* [the ship of fools / the mad]” or join the carnival (Wittig 1992, 56–57). However, Wittig’s novel *Les Guérillères* is full of laughter, indicating its importance to her vision. “*Les rire*” and “*elles rient*” are frequent in the text, featured in the opening reference to “THE CRIES THE LAUGHS THE MOVEMENTS”

(Wittig 2007, 5). Laughter is used in guerilla warfare alongside bared teeth (97), laughter proliferates when the statues of the old paradigm are toppled (92), and laughter is named as a privilege that must be wrested from the men and relearned (124). This indicates that laughter plays an important place in Wittig's vision, so she may not have objected to the use of humor when taken up as a war machine instead of a retreat.

Considered in relation to Wittig's Trojan horse, humor as described by Bing and Scheibman can indicate a promising affinity between humor and resistance to domination. Zerilli explains,

The two insights that shape Wittig's approach to changing the heterosexual contract, then, are first, a radical work must remain recognizable in the ordinary language it would disrupt; and second, the work must do more than represent, with recognizable concepts, arguments, and the like, the minority point of view. If the Trojan Horse is not recognizable as a horse, it will not be taken into the city. If it is too recognizable— not too strange, that is—it will not function as a war machine. (Zerilli 2005, 78–79)

Though Wittig typically focuses on literature as a source of war machines, her description of a war machine upon language fits well with the subversive potential of humor and the line that it must walk between recognition and challenge. Sharing an affinity with Frye's efforts to exist beyond the totalizing scheme of patriarchy, Wittig exposes the failure of patriarchal discourse to capture everything, referring to unfilled "intervals" and "gaps" and discontinuations (Wittig 2007, 114). Although it may not be enough on its own, humor can be a helpful practice for working from the gaps in language and harnessing them to political effect. It is also a practice that can fail in many ways against intentions due to the difficulty of setting up a war machine within language and concepts.

5 Patti Harrison and Unstable Subversive Humor

In what follows, I will consider a practice of humor that messes with language and a related conceptual order through an act of subversion. I then draw out the unstable effects resulting from this process. Referring back to the Willetts, I argue that this example cannot be fully explained within their theory of fumerism, even as I also do not take this to be a refutation of that theory. I then link these lessons back to the “pussy” humor from earlier to emphasize latent instabilities in “pussy grabs back.” The examples I discuss are smaller in scope than Wittig’s vision of a total revolution in language, thought, and world. However, Wittig is attentive to smaller Trojan horses and war machines, praising Marcel Proust’s act of working gay experience into the lives of his characters unnoticed (Wittig 1992, 74). Hence it is likewise permissible to investigate smaller practices of humor through Wittig’s approach rather than a singular laugh that shatters the entire world.

I aim to show that even if humor permits a recontextualization of language and conceptual orders, this comes with many risks. First, subversive humor risks reinforcing the materials of “reality” that are taken up for conceptual blending. Second, humor may move so far outside established intelligibility that the blend it offers fails to take hold. Third, opening an emergent space of ambiguity and possible worlds through play may not result in settled effects that clearly track with intentions. Fourth, rechanneling affect for collective politics may simultaneously result in division and alienation. When you play enough with reality, sometimes reality plays with you. It is best for us to acknowledge this when we engage in subversive humor rather than hope for the best if we are serious about taking up humor in political world-making and world-breaking projects.

On February 25th, 2021, an updated version of the Equality Act including sexual orientation and gender identity passed in the US House of Representatives that would legislate

against some forms of anti-LGBTQ public discrimination (US Congress 2021). Although as of writing this essay the bill has stalled in the Senate, at the time the passage of the bill in the House received significant US media attention and gestures of support throughout the country. One unexpected statement of support came from the official Oreo cookie social media account on Twitter, which posted an explicitly pro-trans statement: “Trans people exist.” In response, the official Twitter account for Nilla Wafers, another cookie company owned by Nabisco, added, “Trans people not only exist, but are valued and loved by Nilla Wafers” (Wheeler 2021). Through these statements of support the political moment of LGBTQ rights became a commercial moment that enabled a brand to advertise itself as welcoming and hence consumable by all.

Shortly after Oreo Cookie’s statement of support for trans existence, a Nilla Wafers account of a different sort took to the social media stage to join in LGBTQ-related announcements. Prior to updates in late 2022, Twitter would mark accounts with a blue checkmark if they were notable and verified as an authentic account. This meant that if an account was already verified, its user could swap their name with another while still having the verified symbol next to it. Through this method users could make it appear that they were officially someone who they were not. Comedian Patti Harrison was able to use this approach to make herself appear like the verified Nilla Wafers account and make brand-related pronouncements that appeared to be official.

Patti Harrison began her work as “Nilla Wafers by Nabisco” by announcing that the musical artist Sia had taken over the account, ending with the statement, “There are only two genders.” This is a common counter statement against trans rights, sometimes also deployed for the purpose of amusement or gloating. Harrison’s version of the Nilla Wafers brand began with a bland celebrity endorsement that transferred into a statement opposing Oreo Cookie’s endorsement

of trans existence. Nilla Wafers suddenly became the inverse of the Oreo Cookies account, denouncing instead of pronouncing with a shock to onlookers who were not yet aware of the prank.

Harrison did not stop here. She had Nilla Wafers focus its next attack on bisexual people, announcing, “If you are bisexual, we do not want your business.” Directly opposing the Oreo Cookie account, Nilla Wafers also proclaimed that “TRANS WOMEN ARE MEN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (her exclamation points). Understandably, many people who saw that this Nilla Wafers account was verified grew distressed about Nabisco’s cookies officially spouting anti-LGBTQ statements. Many people in the know that Patti Harrison was practicing humor, in contrast, expressed amusement about her corporate cookie-focused subversion.

After introducing several anti-LGBTQ statements, Harrison’s Nilla Wafers account began taking up the style of accountability language often deployed by corporations when criticism from the public reaches critical mass. Nilla Wafers explained,

Our transphobia and biphobia today were unacceptable, and we are deeply sorry. Sia (the singer) was running our account today, and the opinions expressed by her do not match the values of our brand. We are pansexual.

The last statement that the brand itself is pansexual was further bolstered with, “To clarify; We, the brand Nilla Wafers, are pansexual.” Not much longer after these tweets Harrison was permanently banned from Twitter for account impersonation (Wright 2021).

Harrison’s style of humor in this context and others is potentially confusing and off-putting. Why would a trans woman comedian pretend to be the official spokesperson of a cookie and then purposefully broadcast transphobic and biphobic statements? Why would she then choose to have the account apologize and pretend to be pansexual in response to the resulting controversy? More explanation is required to establish that this humor reaches beyond prank-based shock value alone.

Returning to Willett and Willett, who share an interest in pranks (Willett and Willett 2021, 438–43), Harrison’s humor also requires an explanation that is either beyond or expands fumerism. One claim the Willetts could make is that Harrison’s humor here is the “homeopathic” approach found in self-irony, inoculating oneself against hurtful sayings by taking them up in smaller doses. Harrison’s humor could also be interpreted as a more direct “allopathic” response since it is directly ridiculing a brand and tarnishing its image. However, in addition to the difficulty of positioning this humor on either side, Harrison’s humor creates a challenge for an *eros*-centered approach to humor. Harrison is taking up language in a way that is rote, robotic, and without empathy, mimicking linguistic patterns of corporate speech. Furthermore, her humor is distinctly without an empathetic approach by attempting to alienate onlookers from both the brand and its speech to the extent that some people were left offended and confused. Perhaps those who were in on the joke were brought together through “belly laughs” about it, but it distinctly divided them from people who were not. Harrison let responses remain scattered and open.

In her own words, Harrison’s humor was inspired by a disdain for social media and the kinds of interactions that it fosters. She was also critiquing the ways that corporations tokenize and commodify LGBTQ rights to profit from a progressive image. In an interview from the year before her Nilla Wafers prank, Harrison explained that though she is a feminist, she also has significant critiques of mainstream feminism, its deemphasis of race, and its rampant commercialization. When giving an example of her weariness of “white feminist institutions,” Harrison imagined examples such as Nestea saying “Yas queen” and the juxtaposition between products such as Nestea and messages about women’s rights (Harrison 2020). In an interview a year later Harrison described her specific style of comedy as a practice of performing a person with a bad point of view who lacks self-awareness and does not know when to stop. She explained,

I have a hard time describing myself as a standup comedian because I don't feel like I'm doing stand up jokes more than I am acting like a person who has a bad point of view. That's always been really funny to me—someone who really stridently believes that they're right when they're so wrong in, like, the worst way. Not only do they believe that they're right, but they believe that everyone thinks that they're right, and are comfortable with that. (Harrison 2021)

Combining Harrison's interest in carrying through a bad point of view and her disdain for the commercialization of progressive movements helps clarify why she would choose to spin the Nilla Wafers account in such an extreme direction. By making Nilla Wafers into such an extreme character, she is universalizing and spreading the alienation she feels when an edible Nabisco commodity decides to become a spokesperson for feminism, trans rights, and other progressive causes.

The specific way that Harrison practiced her humor fits well with Wittig's vision of a war machine operating as a Trojan horse in language, especially if we are attentive to broader relationships between manipulations of language and manipulations of meaning as linked by humor scholars such as Bing and Scheibman. Since Wittig is interested in challenging existing deployments of gender in language, it may be unclear how Harrison's Nilla Wafers joke could be related. Harrison's humor, however, is taking up corporate styles of language to challenge the mediation of gender through corporate and brand approval. She imagines and recreates an entire absurd narrative of a brand broadcasting its stances on gender and sexuality, being forced to hollowly apologize, and then taking up a bizarre display of its own co-opted identity. Harrison is thus tearing apart the participation of brands in gender and sexuality politics.

Under capitalism, corporations and the language of public relations mediate the meaning of gender and sexuality, influencing what should be permitted or not permitted. For a gender or sexuality to be validated, even tenuously, it must accord with a corporate setting or some other

means of commodification. This is operative in the “calling in queer to work” example above from Bing and Scheibman since it juxtaposes the demand that LGBT people earn their keep at work with the double bind of society labeling LGBT people as pathological. The demand that progressive movements be validated by corporations has also been exploited by numerous conspiracy theories, such as the paranoid propaganda that corporate entities are conspiring together to impose an LGBT agenda.

The license corporations take to decree that she exists is thus revealed by Harrison’s humor to not be an isolated moment for celebration, but instead a perpetuation of systematic oppression by the bourgeoisie against trans people. Trans lives are real if corporations decide trans lives are real. Trans lives are also not real if corporations decide they are not real. Such a dynamic must be challenged according to Frye’s critique of “reality” even when it momentarily hangs the sign of “Trans Acceptance” over the lingering sign of “Trans Panic.” Although the situation may develop in unexpected ways, consider the (as of this writing) recent retraction of the M&Ms characters. M&Ms were associated with feminism and LGBT rights resulting in a backlash that threatened their universally friendly public image. In response, Mars addressed the controversy and withdrew their brand characters, likely to be reintroduced as part of a later stunt (Victor 2023). Harrison’s Nilla Wafers-based humor took up this mediation of gender and sexuality through corporations and brands to critique it on its own terms. She spoke in the language of branding and public relations within an architecture of Twitter verification that could be mistaken as authentically corporate to expose this bad point of view. Such an exposure is philosophically robust, sharing an affinity with recent work critiquing the co-optation of identity politics (see Táíwò 2022).

Harrison practices this humor in other areas, such as on her podcast *A Woman’s Smile* with co-host Lorelei Ramirez. The podcast features Harrison and Ramirez taking up the catatonic voice

and language of commercialized feminist neoliberalism, grounded in a consistent essentialist focus on “the gentle and kind nature of a woman's smile.” Alternating between episodes showcasing varying topics such as women’s empowerment and state war crimes, Harrison and Ramirez frequently break through their cliché characters by introducing more bizarre topics of conversation, awkward pauses, insults, surreal echoes, and repetition. Like the text-based Nilla Wafers humor, Harrison is in this context interested in undermining the link between feminism and shallow branding through her humor work with Ramirez (Harrison and Ramirez, 2021).

It is important to reveal that oppression is unstable and contingent, but this work of exposure can itself have unstable effects. Such a practice of undermining language through language and its associated conceptual order is frequently unstable even when practitioners approach humor with the best of intentions. First, Patti Harrison’s Nilla Wafers humor did strike some as an example of the brand denouncing them and wishing them harm, regardless of the challenge that it offered to corporate language. Second, due to the possibility of misinterpretation, the Nilla Wafers humor could have potentially been seen as a source of support by those who interpreted it as an anti-LGBTQ platform that aligned with their interests. Third, the joke may have been seen as funny by some simply due to its transgression against what is considered appropriate corporate speech rather than as a challenge to the grip of this corporate speech upon gender and sexuality. Fourth, although she approached her humor with this intention, Harrison was banned from a platform for sharing humor through her practice of sharing humor and has not been unbanned since the stunt. In other words, subversive humor can lead to lasting exile. Fifth, the ongoing impact of the joke is unclear in both affect and effect. It could have made the wrong people feel good, the right people feel bad, and it did not aim for empathy. It does not seem that her humor has changed the existing corporate situation, and her challenging style may have made

her critique difficult to catch by many even though it received some mainstream attention. Finally, it is difficult to take up a comedian as an example for a general subversive practice since they are people and could practice humor in ways that philosophers did not expect based on an analysis of some specific jokes (cf. Roseanne).

All these features point towards a continued instability borne by subversive political humor. When language, concepts, and affects are recontextualized and rechanneled, the chips do not always fall where we hope or intend. It is thus important when practicing such humor to consider the various ways that it could be taken up, recontextualized, and rechanneled in turn. There may even be a value, as Harrison demonstrates, to leaving these effects open and complex even as this comes with some risk. A “playful acceptance of ambiguity, dynamism, incongruity, and ‘ontological confusion’” may require taking some political chances (Kramer 2020, 157).

We can even connect the unstable practice of humor taken up by Harrison to practices of humor that do not intend to be unstable, such as the “pussy” humor considered earlier in this essay. Though it may have seemed to reforge “pussy” from Trump’s interpretation into a platform for collective resistance, it was also potentially alienating through a use of “pussy” that could collapse into patriarchal gender essentialism and the exclusion of both women of color and trans women (Malcolm et al. 2020, 13). Even if unintended, such alienation was not a misinterpretation of the humor involved, but instead an understanding of its potential broader implications. Practitioners of *eros*-laden humor may think they are engaged in empathy across differences when they are not, with the assumption of collectivity itself becoming a source of unanticipated division. We would be well-advised to follow Frye in thinking through the complexity of resisting oppression by refashioning its terms, whether these be linguistic, conceptual, affective, institutional, or their interdigitation.

6 Conclusion: Humorous Instability in all its Dimensions

This essay has considered the use of humor as a weapon against systematic oppression while emphasizing the risks and instabilities involved in its subversive practice of world-making. Inspired by Frye's description of working through her experience, I chose to be expansive and exploratory rather than fully map out every corner that I introduced. Consequently, there is more to consider in the scope of this project.

The first task is to work out connections between the affective, conceptual, and linguistic dimensions of subversive humor, if these are to even be separated so cleanly. Though I brought together several philosophers of subversive humor on this topic to suggest a connection, it does not seem so obvious that these philosophers would agree on the details of how emotions, affects, and epistemic or linguistic dimensions of humor interact. Although I was tempted to simply copy-paste one of my drafts on Damasio in here as an appeal to convenient authority, these connections deserve additional collective conversations. There are many options for connecting the affective and cognitive dimensions of humor and I am not so worried about the details as long as they are connected. It is worth experimenting with different approaches to body-minds and mapping out their advantages and disadvantages for theories of humor.

Additionally, the relationship between humor and instability has earned further consideration. Is subversive humor always unstable because it playfully challenges the status quo? Are some practices of subversive humor more unstable than others, and if so, why? What are the different ways that subversive humor can fail and what are some of the implications of this failure? I am especially interested in accounts of humor's interpersonal failure that do not hastily equate failed humor with unethical humor or a collapse back into non-humor status. Combined with the

questions above, to what extent can instability cascade across multiple dimensions of subversive humor? Answering such questions will be difficult, but this complexity is what makes studying humor so continuously engaging.²

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² I thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and motivating comments, Lydia Amir, Steven Gimbel, Bonnie Mann, and (as always) Isobel Bess.

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