

Carleton College, Spring term 2019:

SOAN 222, Anthropology of Humor



Sir John Falstaff, by Edward von Grützner, 1921

**A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it.**

Love's Labor Lost, William Shakespeare

Professor Jerome Levi
Weitz 239A
Hours: T, Th 3-4, or by appointment

ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUMOR

Laughter, like crying, is found in all human societies, but we do not all laugh (or cry) at the same things. In this course we will discuss why some things are funny in some places and not in others, what forms humor may take (jokes, riddles, teasing, banter, clowning), and how humor is used within and between groups. We will take an anthropological look at such topics as joking relationships, sexual inequality in humor, ethnic humor, humor in religion and language, and evolutionary and biosocial aspects of laughter and smiling. We will consider several points of view, including cognitive, psychological, symbolic, and social structural.

- Format: Classes will consist largely of discussions of the readings, with some in-class reporting on selected, possibly even funny subjects. Assessment will be based on a midterm exam and a research paper written on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with the instructor. The course grade will be calculated on the midterm (35%) and paper (45%) grades, modified on the basis of class attendance, participation, and occasional assignments (20%), as noted below.
- Attend all class sessions, arriving on time;
- Do all readings before the class for which they are assigned (and be prepared to show that you have done it);
- Participate actively in discussions;
- Show respect for the ideas and comments of others.

Furthermore, I hope you will see me as a resource. Feel free to meet with me at any point during the term; I will be glad to discuss the course, the readings, your progress, and/or possible paper topics. Also, if you have any special needs, please do not hesitate to speak with me.

Some prior exposure to anthropology is desirable but not required. The main prerequisite for the course is a sense of humor. That said, however, this course is no laughing matter. The anthropology of humor is serious business.

A warning and caveat: the social scientific study of humor routinely requires the examination of material that makes use of ethnic slurs, vulgar language, sexual innuendo, and a host of other potentially offensive scenarios. Because the goal of this class is to undertake a critical examination of the scholarly literature on humor, we will be reading some of this literature and analyzing it from an anthropological perspective. Therefore, if you feel this is something you would be uncomfortable with, perhaps this course would not be appropriate for you.

Readings

All readings for the course are available on Moodle. There are four textbooks we will be using. The first three are available at the bookstore and the last is an e-book accessible through the library.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003 [1905].

Pollack, John. *The Pun Also Rises*. New York: Gotham Books, 2011.

Basso, Keith. *Portraits of "the Whiteman."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Berger, Peter. *Redeeming Laughter*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997 (e-book 2nd edition 2014, with different pagination).

Tues/Apr 2 Introduction: what is the anthropology of humor?

An Anthropologist Walks Into a Bar and Asks "Why is this joke funny?" Story on NPR, August 6, 2012 <http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/08/06/157592468/an-anthropologist-walks-into-a-bar-and-asks-why-is-this-joke-funny>

**I. THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS:
AN INEGRATIVE APPROACH**

Thur/Apr 4 Taking Humor Seriously: an overview

Berger, Peter "Prologue" and "The Comic Intrusion," pp. xiii-xvii and 3-14 in *Redeeming Laughter*

Pollack, John "Introduction" and "Cutting it Up: The Anatomy of a Pun," pp. xi-xxv and 1-30 in *The Pun Also Rises*

Film: "That's Not Funny (2014) <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/thats-not-funny/>

Tue/Apr 9 Humor and Social Structure: Joking Relationships (Part I)

Berger, Peter "Homo Ridiculus: Social Constructions of the Comic" Chapter 5, pp. 65-86 in *Redeeming Laughter*

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. "On Joking Relationships"

Kennedy, John G. "Bonds of Laughter among the Tarahumara Indians"
Coser, Rose Laub, "Some Social Functions of Laughter"

Thu/Apr 11 Humor and Social Structure: Joking Relationships (Part II)

Marcell Mauss, "Joking Relations." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(2): 317-334 (2013).

Douglas, Mary, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception"

Tue/Apr 16 Biosocial and Cognitive Perspectives (Part I)

Polimeni, Joseph and Jeffrey Reiss, "The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor."

Levine, Jacob, and Fredrick C. Redlich, "Failure to Understand Humor"

Gardner, Howard, "How the Split Brain Gets a Joke"

Jesse Bering, "The Rat That Laughed"

Recommended:

Ambrose, J. A. "The Development of the Smiling Response in Early Infancy"

Thu/Apr 18 Biosocial and Cognitive Perspectives (Part II)

Pollack, John, "Labs and Retrievers: How the Brain Fetches Meaning From Sound" pp. 31-53 in *The Pun Also Rises*

Greengross, Gil and Geoffrey Miller, "Humor ability reveals intelligence, predicts mating success, and is higher in males," *Intelligence* 39: 188-192 (2011).

Tue/Apr 23 Psychological and Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Berger, Peter "Homo Ridens: Physiology and Psychology" Chapter 4, pp. 45-64 in *Redeeming Laughter*

Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, selections

Recommended:

Abrams, R.D., and Alan Dundes, "On Elephantasy and Elephanticide"

Thu/Apr 25 Language and Humor

Beeman, William O., "Humor," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (1/2): 103-106 (1999).

Davis, Murray S., "Unstable Meanings"

Gossen, Gary H., "Verbal Dueling in Chamula"

Pollack, John, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (pp 55-154) in *The Pun Also Rises*

Recommended:

Sacks, Harvey, "An Analysis of the Course of a Joke's Telling in Conversation"

Apte, Mahadev L. "Humor and Language"

Tue/Apr 30

Ethnicity and Inter-group Processes

John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38 (3): 439-460 (1986).

Davies, Christie, "The Stupid and the Canny"

Dundes, Alan, "A Study of Ethnic Slurs: the Jew and the Polack in the United States"

Recommended:

Apte, Mahadev L., "Humor, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations"

Dundes, Alan and Robert A. Georges, "Some Minor Genres of Obscene Folklore"

Thu/May 2

Ritual Humor and Clowning

Bouissac, Paul, "Clown Performances as Metacultural Texts"

Sanner, Hans-Ulrich: "Another Homerun for the Black Sox": Humor and Creativity in Hopi Ritual Clown Songs," in Arnold Krupat (ed.): *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*. Washington and London 1993. Smithsonian Institution Press: pp 149-173.

Lewis, Thomas H., *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing*, Heyok'a: pp 140-152.

In class: Wright, Barton, *Clowns of the Hopi, Tradition Keepers and Delight Makers (visuals)*

Recommended:

Babcock, Barbara A., "Arrange Me Into Disorder: Fragments and Reflections on Ritual Clowning"

Victoria Bricker, *Ritual Humor in Highland Chiapas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973.

Tue/May 7

The Trickster in Folklore

Carroll, Michael "The Trickster as Selfish- Buffoon and Culture Hero." *Ethos* 12(2): 105-131 (1984).

Phyllis Fast, "Indigenous Dialectics at Grange Sales and in Traditional Tales"

Harris, Joel Chandler, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (selections)

Recommended:

Klapp, Orrin E., "The Fool as a Social Type"

Apte, Mahadev L. "The Trickster in Folklore"

II. EXPLORATIONS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HUMOR

Thu/May 9 **MIDTERM**

Tue/May 14 **Jewish Humor**

Berger, Peter "Interlude: Brief Reflections on Jewish Humor." Chapter 6, pp. 87-95 in *Redeeming Laughter*

Halkin, Hillel, "Why Jews Laugh at Themselves," *Commentary*, April 2006

Oring, Elliott "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor." *Western Folklore* 42 (4): 261-271 (1983).

Wisse, Ruth "Introduction: The Best Medicine" and "Conclusion: When Can I Stop Laughing," pp. 1-28 and 221-243 in *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Recommended:

Ben-Amos, Dan "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor." *Western Folklore* 32 (2): 112-131 (1973).

Telushkin, J., "Introduction: What is Jewish About Jewish Humor?," pp 15-26 in *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*

Novak, William, and Moshe Waldoks, "Introduction," pp. xiii-xxv in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*

Irving Kristol, "Is Jewish Humor Dead? The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Joke." *Commentary*, Nov. 1951.

Thu/May 16 **African American Humor**

Gordon, Dexter "Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression." *Journal of Black Studies* 29(2): 254-276 (1998).

Abrahams, Roger D., "Playing the Dozens"

Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, "Signifying"

Watkins, Mel, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Crying, and Signifying—the Underground Tradition of African American Humor That Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* ("Introduction" and "Prologue: Black Humor...What it is")

Tue/May 21 **Native American Humor**

Basso, Keith, *Portraits of "The Whiteman"*

Deloria, Vine, "Indian Humor"

Lindquist Mala, Cynthia "Very Good Medicine: Indigenous Humor and Laughter."
Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education 27(4), Summer 2016.
<https://tribalcollegejournal.org/very-good-medicine-indigenous-humor-and-laughter/>

Recommended:

Hughte, Phil, "A Zuni Artist Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing," (illustrations)

Thu/May 23

Latino and Mexican-American Humor

Haney, Peter C. "Bilingual Humor, Verbal Hygiene, and the Gendered Construction of Cultural Citizenship in Early Mexican American Comedy." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 13 (2): 163-188 (2003).

Peredes, Americo, "Folk Medicine and the Intercultural Jest"

Limon, Jose, "History, Chicano Joking, and the Varieties of Higher Education"
"Carne, carnales," and the Carnavalesque: Bakhtinian "batos," Disorder,
and Narrative Discourses"

Tue/May 28

Gender, Age, and Occupation

Mitchell, Carol A., "The Sexual Perspective in the Appreciation and Interpretation of Jokes"

Cohen, Ted, *Jokes*: pp. 69-86

Moore, Peter, "So this middle-aged white guy tells a joke..."

Brandes, Stanley, Jokes and the Male Identity"

Christie Davies, "American Jokes about Lawyers"

Thu/May 30

Presentations

Tue/Jun 4

Presentations, Final Papers Due