WHAT’S SO FUNNY?
What’s So Funny?

A SYMPOSIUM ON HUMOR

Shared laughter confers an array of positive emotions—not just pleasure, but connection, acceptance, even pride. But beyond the circle of laughter, humor can wound through exclusion and exaggeration or by revealing hard truths. Humor demands precise calibration. Jokes can disparage marginalized groups or speak truth to power. This semester, our symposium asks how humor creates and fragments communities. What role does it play in disrupting, sustaining, and displaying power and identities rooted in race and gender? What larger cultural, social, and political roles does humor play? In short, what can we learn when we take jokes, comedy, and laughter seriously?
Now That’s Funny

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ABOUT HUMOR

Consider the easy and spontaneous laughter fueled by a joke among friends.

How does it differ from the polite laughter that punctuates a job interview or the nervous laughter that frequently follows an inappropriate or offensive joke?

Exploring what is and is not funny reveals complex matters of power, respect, and intimacy. When was the last time you had a good laugh? What was so funny? What role does humor play in your relationships? Join us as we take up these questions in a community conversation facilitated by Jennifer Plante (Writing Center) and Amy Richter (Higgins School of Humanities).

Thursday, January 26 @ 7pm
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities and Difficult Dialogues
The Science of Laughter

How and why do humans laugh?

Neuroscientist Sophie Scott (University College London) wanted to know more about laughter so she turned her attention and research toward investigating the positive emotions often ignored in her discipline. While she was at it, she took on the additional challenge of becoming a standup comedian. In this talk, Scott will discuss the sometimes surprising science and evolution of laughter—an emotion with its roots in play and social bonding. What do brain studies reveal about laughter? What happens when laughter goes wrong?

Wednesday, February 1 @ 7pm
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities and the Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology
And yet the power of this unparalleled communication tool remains underutilized. In this talk, cartoonists James Sturm and Caleb Brown will look beyond graphic novels and iconic characters to emphasize cartooning’s ability to communicate complex information quickly and effectively, share powerful and precise visual narratives, and engage readers of all ages, nationalities, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Sturm, cofounder of The Center for Cartoon Studies, will curate an accompanying exhibit on “applied cartooning.” The selected images will highlight the ways the medium itself is being used to innovate and problem-solve in medicine, business, education, and other fields.

Tuesday, February 7 @ 4pm
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities, Difficult Dialogues, and the Media, Culture and the Arts Program
AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL CULTURE SERIES

Dark Humor

AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGE

Since the early 20th century, black artists have frequently been called to “represent” in racial terms—to produce reverent, positive images of blackness in order to counteract the experience of slavery and racism.

By using dark humor—satire, visual puns, farce, absurdity, kitsch, and the bizarre—present-day black artists shake off this call. Scholar and curator Tiffany E. Barber will draw upon her recent exhibition, *Dark Humor: African American Art from the University of Delaware*, to consider the significance of humor in contemporary art. In this talk, she will discuss how black artists, such as Camille Billops, David Hammons, Barkley Hendricks, and Peter Williams, employ subversive humor to question the currency of cultural and racial stereotypes.
Light in the Dark  
A TALK ON WRITING AND HUMOR

Is it possible to fake your own death in the 21st century?

With six figures of student loan debt, author Elizabeth Greenwood was tempted to find out. She set off on a foray into the world of death fraud, where for $30,000 a consultant can make you disappear, possibly forever. Along the way, she considered the role of humor in illuminating and exploring our darkest impulses. Reading from her recent book *Playing Dead: A Journey Through the World of Death Fraud* (2016), Greenwood will introduce us to men and women desperate enough to lose their identities—and their families—to begin again. What drives our all-too-human desire to escape the lives we lead?

A book signing will follow. Copies of Greenwood’s book will be on sale at the event.

Thursday, February 23 @ 7pm  
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities and the Writing Center
BALLS

IT TAKES SOME TO GET SOME

For Chris Edwards, a former advertising creative director, changing his gender from female to male took balls…and a damn good sense of humor.

How did Edwards find the courage to come out at a company board meeting? To endure twenty-eight painful and extensive surgeries? To show up at his ten-year high school reunion? During a reading from his funny and poignant memoir BALLS: It Takes Some to Get Some (2016), Edwards will share how humor helped him re-brand himself and gain acceptance from his family, friends, and colleagues at a time when the word “transgender” was almost non-existent.

A book signing will follow. Copies of Edwards’ book will be on sale at the event.
The Truth is Funny

AN IMPROVISATION WORKSHOP

“The truth is funny. Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention.”

The words of actor Del Close have inspired countless improvisational comics. In this workshop, Dan Balel (Theatre Arts) and Gino Dilorio (Theatre Arts) will lead us in improvisation exercises and games to develop trust, reveal truths, and generate laughs.

Wednesday, March 15 @ 7pm
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities and the Theatre Arts Program
THE LAST LAUGH
A FILM SCREENING AND DISCUSSION

Ferne Pearlstein’s feature documentary proceeds from the premise that the Holocaust would seem to be an absolutely off-limits topic for comedy.

But is it? History shows that even the victims of the Nazi concentration camps used humor as a means of survival and resistance. Still, any hint of comedy in connection with this horror risks diminishing the suffering of millions. So where is the line? If we make the Holocaust off limits, what are the implications for other controversial subjects—9/11, AIDS, racism—in a society that prizes freedom of speech?

THE LAST LAUGH weaves together interviews with influential comedians and thinkers (including Mel Brooks, Sarah Silverman, Joan Rivers, Louis C.K., Chris Rock, Abraham Foxman, and Sha-lom Auslander) with an intimate portrait of Auschwitz survivor Renee Firestone and rare footage of cabarets in concentration camps.

Valerie Sperling (Holocaust and Genocide Studies/Political Science) and Amy Richter (History) will facilitate a conversation following the film.
Brother Jonathan Runs for President

AMERICAN HUMOR, VERNACULAR VALUES, AND THE RISE OF TRUMP

Challenges to America’s most sacred myths fuel the traditions of vernacular humor, which asserts faith in ordinary Americans and mistrust of elites.

Spoof presidential campaigns by ostensibly ordinary citizens—heirs of Brother Jonathan, folklore’s quintessential American—have mocked the ideological contradictions of presidential campaigns whose vernacular values nonetheless yield elite results. Professor Judith Yaross Lee (Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University) will consider how nearly two hundred years of spoof campaigns in cartoon, video, newspaper features, and other formats highlight values and visions always at stake in the presidential race, but especially in the candidacy of Donald Trump.

Tuesday, March 28 @ 7pm
Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by the Higgins School of Humanities, the Department of History, and the Bland Fund of the Department of Political Science
NOW THAT'S FUNNY

THE SCIENCE OF LAUGHTER

CARTOONING

DARK HUMOR AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGE

LIGHT IN THE DARK

BALLS

THE TRUTH IS FUNNY

THE LAST LAUGH

BROTHER JONATHAN RUNS FOR PRESIDENT
Thursday, March 16 @ 4:30pm

Higgins Lounge at Dana Commons

Co-sponsored by Early Modernists Unite, the Higgins School of Humanities, and the Department of History

ROOTS OF EVERYTHING SERIES

The Effect of Guns on Early Modern England

In the United States, much of the current debate around gun control focuses on the Second Amendment.

But struggles between government efforts to regulate gun ownership and public gun culture date back to 16th and 17th-century England. When the English government tried to limit possession and use of guns to wealthy subjects, the policy was met with outrage and willful disobedience. In this talk, historian Lois Schwoerer (George Washington University) will examine the impact of gun ownership and regulation on both the government and private subject of early modern England. Clark University professor Mark Miller (Political Science/Law and Society) will offer commentary.

The Roots of Everything is a lecture series sponsored by Early Modernists Unite (EMU)—a faculty collaborative bringing together scholars of medieval and early modern Europe and America—in conjunction with the Higgins School of Humanities. The series highlights various aspects of modern existence originating in the early modern world and teases out connections between past and present.
The Higgins School of Humanities affirms the centrality of the arts and humanities to our lives and the values of a liberal arts education. It supports teaching and research through its grant programs and sponsors public events and campus initiatives, enhancing the intellectual and cultural life of the Clark community.

All events are free and open to the public. All information is subject to change.

To support the Higgins School: Visit clarkconnect.clarku.edu/make-a-gift. Please select designation “Other” and direct your contributions to the Higgins School of Humanities.