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All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents by
Rebecca Krefting (review)

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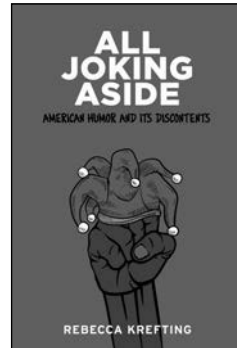
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All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents.

By Rebecca Krefting. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 346 pp.

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS C. MACLEOD JR.



Rebecca Krefting's elegantly written *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* spoke to me, schooled me, made me realize that I may not be as socially aware as I should be and thought I was. I always prided myself as being adequately tolerant, as communally conscious, as soulfully empathetic. But now I am not so sure. I now question myself, which is what I think Krefting was partially trying to accomplish in her text on what she calls "charged humor." Yes, I may be all of the above, but is what I am truly enough? Can I contribute more to the conversations associated with the issues surrounding what Krefting calls the "marginalized"? Seemingly I can, by becoming more familiar with the many stand-up comics who show an extreme amount of courage by performing sets that are self-conscious, have "specific intentions to provide unity and equality," and are creating "a safe and accepting space for people from all walks of life" (2).

Krefting begins *All Joking Aside* by stating that "charged humor relies on identification with struggles and issues associated with being a second-class citizen and rallies listeners around some focal point be that cultural, corporeal, or racial/ethnic similarities; this requires drawing from personal experience, if not first-hand than at least access to, understanding of, or empathy with those having these experiences" (5). She recognizes the social significance of the stand-up and his or her material, but Krefting also places emphasis on the audience, an active component of the entire comedic experience in that audience members need to be accepting of these comics who are building what she calls "cultural citizenship" (defined as an affirmation that marginalized groups exist and should have the same rights as those in power, according to both Krefting and the Latino Cultural Studies Working Group, the group that originated the term) (17–18). Acceptance, in this case, is making sure that charged comics are promoted or marketed properly, are not looked at as just products to be bought or consumed by the masses, and are given the appropriate amount of space and time to express themselves

in ways that could possibly change the political, social, cultural, and global landscape. Charged humor “both repels and attracts” and is disruptive to the power structures that perpetuate injustice and narrow-mindedness. This type of humor is different than safe, shock, character, and political humor (and modern-day minstrel comedy), forms of comedy Krefting thoroughly defines in early chapters.

Krefting contextualizes charged humor by profiling Dick Gregory, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, the Great Comedy Strike of 1979 (where comics sought out money for their sets and also asked for some form of standardization within the comedy club circuit), Lily Tomlin, George Carlin, and a slew of other legends who started out their careers attempting to be marketable, but eventually found their voices and were able to be voices for the “marginalized.” She also points out that contemporary comics like Margaret Cho, George Lopez, and Hari Kondabolu (to whom she devotes an entire chapter) unconsciously (or consciously) emulated their predecessors by satisfying consumer demands. But Krefting recognized a need for social change after the new millennium started, when “social rebellion” was beginning to “ebb,” and “people no longer craved comedy advocating for human rights, at least not in numbers great enough to impel comedy club managers or network executives to book comics performing mainly charged humor” (72). At these moments, Krefting is at her strongest. Although she is sometimes harsh on comics who are members of “marginalized” communities (examples include Muslim, Arab American, and Middle Eastern American; the differently abled; LGBTQ; African American/Black; Latino/a; and Asian communities) but do not speak up for their communities (such as Ellen DeGeneres), Krefting provides keen observations, sound critical analysis, and reliable extensive research on comics like Hari Kondabolu, Robin Tyler, and Micia Mosely—individuals who attempt to go against what she calls “the crisis of the ideal” to explore their marginality by “using the stage to call attention to the conditions of their otherness” (174). To provide analysis of stand-up comedy bits is certainly a daunting task; however, Krefting does an admirable job in pointing out why said bits could be considered charged.

All Joking Aside is not just scholarship; it is also charged scholarship. Krefting effectively discusses multiple “marginalized” communities, but she places most of her emphasis on women comics (her criticism of Christopher Hitchens’s article “Why Women Aren’t Funny” is spot-on) and the LGBTQ community, which she most identifies with. Krefting herself, as well as being

an assistant professor of American Studies at Skidmore College, is a charged stand-up comic who is part of the LGBTQ community, and many of the examples that she provides are connected with that community. That is not to say she marginalizes the marginalized (her writing about the great Jon Blue, a differently abled comic, is quite strong). But she could have incorporated shorter chapters using an individual from each of the communities she discusses in prior chapters. Also, Krefting's text is so very charged that she sometimes loses focus on the intended goal of individual chapters. For example, more passages of her interview with Robin Tyler would have been welcome. Krefting appropriately expresses her thoughts about the treatment of individuals within the LGBTQ community but does so in a way that on occasion drowns out the declarations of those she is trying to focus on.

Otherwise, *All Joking Aside* is quite powerful. As I said above, Krefting changed me; after reading her work, I realized that I knew about 85 to 90 percent of the male comics she mentioned, and only about 35 to 40 percent of the female comics. She taught me that not only are these wonderful comics not marketed enough, not studied enough, and not recognized enough for their talents, but also that I as viewer have an obligation to seek "marginalized" and charged comics out, so that I too can support individuals who are trying to make us laugh, make us think, and ultimately, make necessary changes to a system that oppresses, demeans, and exploits these communities.

SUNY Cobleskill

Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon through Critical Lenses.

Edited by Lawrence Howe, James E. Caron, and Benjamin Click. Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2013. 229 pp.

REVIEWED BY NELLY LAMBERT

Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon through Critical Lenses offers a retrospective of Charlie Chaplin's most discussed films and comments on the filmmaker's aims, employing a wide variety of philosophical and rhetorical theories. Approaching this book, I was not sure what a new collection of essays

