Book Review


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This collection of well-researched articles ostentatiously displays the political dimensions of humor and laughter, which are performed through participatory culture and user-generated content on social media in the Global South. The data analyzed by the contributors represent the inventiveness of netizens in using humorous motifs to capture the dissatisfying political and cultural realities of their countries. Writing about Nigeria, Adesina (2013:148) reminds us that humor in the Global South “possesses the epistemic capacity of knowing or making aware” of quotidian realities. He also points out that humor is used for laughing at the political elites and at the predicament the elites create for the citizenry. As the editor of the anthology argues, it is from the perspective of laughing at that the contributors “show how humor in the social media age is creatively used to humorously navigate or ridicule life, society, and politics of the day” in the Global South. There is, therefore, a conscious evocation of the Global South in terms of contributors, locale of data, and research findings. Indeed, each chapter situates public joking on online platforms as a symbolic and strategic way of unsettling political structures in Brazil and the African countries covered by the contributors.

The anthology offers a rigorous review of related literature on critical functions of humor. All the contributors provide in-depth analysis and attempt new methodological insights on how humor counts as a frame for understanding the political leanings of the users, and of the targets. Considering that it is aimed at contributing a Global South voice to humor scholarship, this book could potentially appeal to a broad range of scholars and students in humor studies across the humanities and social sciences. In terms of contents, it is divided into three parts: Social Media Humor, Commentary, and Confronting Power; Humor and The Everyday; and Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Politics. The impression I was left with after reading the editor's introductory chapter was that the authors wanted to contribute a Non-Western approach grounded in Africanist perspectives to humor studies.

Part I opens with a chapter titled The Aesthetics of Laughing at Power in an African Cyberspace. Its authors attempt to link online political satire in Zimbabwe with the African folkloric tradition, where cultural performances are appropriated as symbols of resistance. The second chapter also examines the use of satire to ridicule the
unfulfilled promise of political and economic novelty in the post-Mugabe Zimbabwe political era, dubbed the “New Dispensation”. It is another descriptive analysis of satire in an African country. The third contribution turns to a different genre as it adopts a critical discourse analysis framework to investigate Zapiro’s cartoon on the Marikana massacre and the attendant commentaries that follow it on Facebook. The chapter illustrates the discursive frames and ideological inclinations in the Facebook commentaries that responded to Zapiro’s construction of subjectivities in the cartoon. The fourth contribution in Part I, which is the fifth in the volume, takes the readers back to Zimbabwe, while the sixth chapter of the book compares the social media laughter in Zimbabwe with Malawi. Chapter five of the anthology is a reception analysis of Emmerson Mnangagwa’s speeches, the president of Zimbabwe, which the populace perceived to be comical. Chapter six focuses on political trolls against officials of the state. It is worth pointing out that, by focusing on the audience and reception analysis, chapters four and five are significant contributions as they draw attention to the impact of public joking on those who receive the texts.

Part II of the book continues in the same line of examining humor as a subversion of hierarchies and political power in southern African countries. Its first two chapters are on Zimbabwe. While its last two take the reader to other Global South countries, Nigeria and Brazil. The chapter by Garhe Osiebe sees celebrity activism in Nigeria as a prank on everyday citizens, since the Yabism culture of the emerging online content creators—Instagram skit makers—is performed as a means for seeking political patronage from state officials (Yabism is from Nigerian Pidgin; in a literal sense, it means talking down someone from the position of superiority or punching up in the manner of political satire Nwankwo (2021)). The following chapter by Diego Hoefel on the blend of comedy and horror in Brazilian allegories points to the (con)textual as well as the aesthetic significance of the convergence of mockery and fear, and of the experiences of the states of amusement and horror in graphic violent films. As the author argues, merging comedy with horror in cultural production points to the culture wars of a society. In my view, this chapter points the readers to a new direction in research on performance humor, especially in texts where the boundaries are deliberately blurred in order to generate more than a comedic effect on the recipients. For such cultural productions, we will need to probe the intention of the text producer beyond aesthetic and textual dimensions.

The last part of the book is made up of five contributions that examine how humorous texts in online spaces foreground identity issues in the sociocultural and political contexts of their productions. Shepherd Mpofu’s chapter offers an elucidating perspective on what underlines disparagement humor in his analysis of racial punchlines on Twitter. I find the analysis of shaming through punchlines the most interesting. However, it would have been more insightful for Mpofu to include, in the analytical framework, what traditional African philosophy says about disparaging
humor. Chapter twelve, which is the second one in Part III analyses a vlogger's satirical performances on racial stereotypes in South-Africa. A fascinating dimension is how the performer of the satire appropriates irony in her satire. The irony is seen in the nomenclature she adopts for her performed identity, Coconut Kelz, which is a derogatory label for Black South Africans who distance themselves from their racial identity so as to enjoy the privileges of whiteness. The next contribution is on how a transvestite character uses social media to perform trans identity. While the chapter offers insights on how Brazilian queer personalities deconstruct gender identity in order to affirm their own gender affinity, it makes very little contribution to humor research. Likewise, Chapter 14 has more to say about the nexus of ethnicity, national identity, and nationalism in football fandom than on laughter or humor. However, it exemplifies how humor is deployed to resist dominant ethnic cultures in national spaces. The last contribution of the book is Chapter fifteen. It is on how humor portrays ethnic identity in the Zimbabwean political landscape. The chapter highlights hybridity as a strategy deployed by an open theatre group in South Africa, Omkhula Arts, whose theatrical messages are focused on Zimbabwe. Hybridity in their theatrical performances is contextualized through language mixing, which the group rhetorically deploys as a strategy for creating an alternative public space where politicians like Robert Mugabe are ridiculed.

It is important that Global South scholars generate conceptual frameworks and formulate methodologies for probing their contexts in their writings (for example Nwankwo’s 2021 thesis on yabbing and wording). Given the editor’s introduction, one easily assumes that the contributions are geared towards generating conceptual frameworks and methodologies for probing humor in the geo-cultural terrains of the Global South. Of course, it is easy to deduce that the authors analyzed the utilitarian dimension of humor in the sociocultural and political contexts of the few countries they covered. They use micro-textual instances of humor and comedy performances to elucidate the cultures and the locales they focused on. Reading the editor’s introduction framed me to search for the “Global South perspective” in the volume. However, it appears to me that I have been led down a garden path, as the anthology presents “Perspectives from the Global South”, as boldly inscribed in the sub-title. In a number of ways, some of the contributors attempt to strike a balance between Western/European theories and works by African scholars, but their frameworks primarily remain non-Global South. Another pun, perhaps unintended, is that the coverage of the Global South is skewed towards only one country—in the fifteen-chapter book, ten are on Zimbabwe! The remaining five chapters focused on three countries—two chapters on each of Brazil and South Africa and one on Nigeria.

The book is a reader-friendly text. Readers are provided with updated summaries on critical approaches to humor through each of the contributors’ wide-ranging reviews on the sociology of humor. Besides, the fact that the work touches on
race, gender, ethnicity, national identity, and the political landscape of postcolonial nations covered in the collection makes it a useful resource for many scholars in diverse disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, communication, gender, and media studies.

References
