In this innovative book, David E. Low examines the multifaceted role of humor in critical literacy studies. Talking about how teachers and students negotiate understandings of humor and social critique vis-à-vis school-based critical literacy curriculums, the book co-examines teachers’ and students’ understandings of humor and critique in schools.

Critical literacy centers discussions on power and social roles but often overlooks how students use transgressive humor as a means to interrogate power. Through examples of classroom interactions and anecdotes, Low analyzes the role of humor in classroom settings to uncover how humor interplays with critical inquiry, sensemaking, and nonsense-making. Articulated across the fields of literacy studies and humor studies, the book uses ethnographic data from three Central California high schools to establish linkages and dissonances between critical literacy education and adolescents’ joking practices. Adopting the dialectic of *punching up* and *punching down* as a conceptual framework, the book argues that developing more nuanced understandings of transgressive humor presents educators with opportunities to cultivate deeper critical literacy pedagogies and that doing so is a matter of social justice.

Essential for scholars and students in literacy education, this book adds to the scholarship on critical literacy by exploring the subversive power of humor in the classroom.

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TRANSGRESSIVE HUMOR IN CLASSROOMS

Punching Up, Punching Down, and Critical Literacy Practices

David E. Low
This book is dedicated to my family, without whom, yada yada yada.
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It is not often that I get to read work in the area of critical literacy that is as original and refreshing as *Transgressive Humor in Classrooms: Punching Up, Punching Down, and Critical Literacy Practices*. Since I first began working with critical literacy, I have known that students from marginalised communities engage with it differently. Their felt understanding of disempowerment is visceral and they get what is at stake. Yet it never occurred to me to investigate how critically literate they already were. David Low starts from the assumption that students have no difficulty in problematising the worlds they inhabit and that they are capable of taking action.

Feminist, new materialist, posthumanist, and decolonial theories explain marginalisation in relation to the binaries that flow from Western dualist philosophy. The binary oppositions of subject/object, mind/body, and culture/nature have produced hierarchies of difference in which humans who are not male, white, educated, straight, able-bodied adults are considered to be not fully human (for example, women, people of colour, gay and transgender people, formerly colonised Indigenous people, and children). Binary thinking creates systematically linked positive terms (mind, man, white, etc.) and their negative or denigrated others (body, woman, Black, etc.). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call the positive terms in binary logic *majoritarian* because they become the standard measures, the norms, against which others are judged to be lacking. Marginalisation is built into the system and more so for people whose intersectional identities are all minoritarian.

Despite the fact that the game is rigged against them (Táíwò, 2022), many nondominant youth (those on the wrong side of the power-producing binaries) refuse to capitulate. They take Haraway’s (2016) injunction to ‘stay with the trouble’ seriously. Low shows how students use ‘subversive
humour as a tool for naming social injustice, and in ridiculing it, working to dismantle it’ (Chapter 1). By analysing different examples of such humour, Low invites us to see these students as gremlins rather than as class clowns. Where class clowns indiscriminately mock teachers, classmates, school work, and classroom procedures as a form of passive resistance, gremlins use humour purposefully to transform oppressive systems of power. This active resistance is what Low calls ‘punching up.’

Low argues convincingly that this is critical literacy in action, and he makes the case for teachers to take seriously the critique that underlies transgressive humour and to value the insight/s it offers. He makes himself vulnerable, by giving an example of how humour directed at him helped him notice his own practice of selecting students to speak in his classroom. In doing so, Low makes it easier for readers to think about the challenge that student humour poses to their pedagogical practices and to value the possibilities for learning and change that they invite. Low says that as a white educator of students of colour, he needed to take his students’ irreverence to heart, and quoting Hesford (1999), to ‘be open to unlearning certain historical perspectives, institutional and personal’ (p. xxxiii). Low (Chapter 1) believes that ‘educators must learn to listen to students who are not afraid to punch up, even if it’s at us.’ From my experience of teaching critical literacy, students become more critical of us as they become more aware of how power works. That is the price and the reward of teaching critical literacy. It is a consequence of encouraging ‘students to fight the power while simultaneously being the power, as emblems of academic authority’ (Low, Chapter 5).

Low’s many examples of humour that punches up are carefully contextualised and analysed in relation to interviews with students and their teachers. This enables him to get at the histories, the injustices, the outrage, and the trauma that drives students’ transgressive humour. The analysis is deepened by his empathy, his intelligent use of humour theory, and references to the practice of social justice comedians who, like the students, use humour for social critique. From Monet’s bleak joke about only having asthma attacks on Tuesdays because that is the one day of the week that the school has a nurse, to Santino’s jab at his Russian teacher who told the class they were all going to fail, to Boogerboy’s cheeky summary of Antigone and his incisive critique of white terrorism, policing, and capitalism, we see the disruptive force of transgressive humour (see Chapter 4). The stories hit one in the gut. I found myself deeply affected by Boogerboy’s aspiration to be a trans surgeon able to perform gender-affirming surgery for trans people. Filled with a desire to help others, he nevertheless had to deploy humour for self-survival in an anti-trans world.

Not all transgressive humour is used to affect a more just social dispensation. For Low, it is just as important to examine humour that is used
maliciously to laugh at others. This contemptuous humour serves to maintain the sense of superiority of those who have power, and it is directed at people already constructed as not fully human by Western binary logic. It is often racist, sexist, ableist, ageist, colonialist, queerphobic, transphobic, antisemitic, and Islamophobic. The humour of the ‘powerful laughing at the powerless’ (Critchley, 2002) is what Low calls ‘punching down.’ To consider punching down and its harmful effects, Low uses an incident at Sykes High School where a meme of a white student wearing a makeshift Ku Klux Klan hood was shared on social media, as a case study. It enables him to explore the dehumanising effects of supremacism humour, to show the system-wide nature of such humour; to discuss what district-wide protests can achieve; and to propose constructive actions that schools might take (as opposed to actions that simply render such humour less visible).

While individuals who use humour to hurt people should be held accountable, Low shows that racist humour is endemic and that the Institution needs to change the conditions of possibility that enable hateful humour. By focusing his discussion of this case at the level of the Institution rather than just the individual perpetrators, Low recognises that this is a systems-level issue (Táíwò, 2022). It requires us to imagine how schools and other institutions of society might work proactively to change their institutional culture so that people can laugh together – with one another, rather than at one another. Low offers us a carefully considered framework for institutional reckoning.

This is a book about humour, written with humour, that needs to be taken seriously. The writing is compelling and Low’s wit abounds but is never simplistic. Humour is thoroughly theorised not just in the ‘doubly obligatory chapter’ (with ‘obligatory’ poking fun at academia) but throughout, where data is used to clarify theory and theory to make sense of data. It makes a case for the importance of students’ transgressive humour and their irreverent stance towards authority and for us to pay attention. Low’s gremlins are working to change the world to make it safer, more just, more inclusive, and more joyful.

The fact that etymologists can’t agree on the derivation of the word ‘gremlin’ makes it a plus in Low’s book. And, as he reminds us, with a twinkle in his eye, this is his book, so gremlins it is. All I can say in conclusion is, ‘Viva the gremlins! Viva!’

Hilary Janks, Professor Emerita
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa,
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References

When I walked onto the campus of Pryor High School\(^1\) on that already hot May afternoon, I expected the day to unfold like many others throughout my data collection period. By that point, I had spent nine months getting to know Carina Villegas’s students in fifth- and sixth-period English, observing their interactions with her and one another, and interviewing many of them about the role of humor in their school- and home-based literacy lives. I had also been working with teachers and students at two other Central California high schools, dubbed here Carlin and Sykes.

Up to that point, my data collection had been eye-opening. Students and teachers at all three schools had a lot to say about humor, its perceived relationship to social change, and the appropriate speakers and audiences for it. I had taken to thinking of transgressive humor through the lens of *punching up*, or comedy that takes aim at powerful people and institutions from below, rupturing established power structures. In many ways this jived with – and in other ways complicated – my understanding of critical literacy, a decades-old (and still vital) framework for making sense of, and questioning, the sociopolitical systems that structure our lives. How were youth using humor as a tool for critical sensemaking and to transgress boundaries deemed impregnable by the status quos of schooling?

That afternoon, as I entered Ms. Villegas’s classroom, she told me that the day before there had been another racist incident at Sykes High School across town. A white student had been photographed posing in Sykes’s weight room with a garment twisted into the shape of a Ku Klux Klan hood over his head. Several other students could be seen behind him, holding up the hood. Superimposed above the photograph was the text “I SAID WOOOWWW.” Taken with a cell phone camera, the image was shared and
reposted on social media, quickly gaining local virality. “Again, with this shit at Sykes,” said Ms. Villegas. “They haven’t recovered from the blackface scandal a few years ago.” Alongside my ongoing theorizing of punching up marched its malign twin, punching down, or comedy that mocks and dehumanizes those whose identities make them vulnerable to systemic identity oppression and other forms of marginalization. Punching down is transgressive, too, in that it transgresses the bounds of dignity and decency.

My mind went to Cheryl Morris, an English teacher and Black Student Union (BSU) faculty sponsor at Sykes – the school with the highest Black student enrollment in the district – who was participating in my study. Ms. Morris’s first year at Sykes, and first as a teacher, had been during the blackface debacle three years earlier; her then-freshmen students were preparing to walk at graduation with its white perpetrator in a few weeks. What was Ms. Morris going through now? What (re)traumatizations were her students experiencing? I would soon find out. But first, back to Pryor, where students were staging a protest to stand in unity with their peers at Sykes.

On Instagram, Pryor High School’s BSU account posted:

We are walking out in solidarity with Sykes High School’s Black Student Union as it begins to disrupt numerous instances of anti-Black racism on their campus. We also recognize our shared experience. We see this as a moment of reckoning for our school and district to acknowledge and repair the harm caused to Black students. This is a moment to see and hear what it feels like to be a BLACK STUDENT IN [THE DISTRICT].

And then, as promised, the students walked out en masse. (They had seen and shared the Instagram post on their phones.) There were specific demands for accountability, social-emotional support, and funding to create a student board on racial justice. The district’s white superintendent stated his intention to visit Pryor High School and was told by its BSU leadership, “We need time to organize. Come back in the afternoon.” By the afternoon, during fifth period, several hundred students congregated around Pryor’s BSU leaders, holding signs reading “WE STAND WITH SYKES” and “ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.”

In unison, hundreds of students dropped to a knee. Following a long moment of silence, a Pryor BSU student leader recounted four known racist incidents that had occurred just that year at Sykes High School. She explained that these incidents “haven’t only affected the Sykes student body, but all of us.” She emphasized words and phrases like “dehumanizing,” “zero tolerance for racist terrorism,” and “acknowledge that racist incidents impact our mental health.” Pryor’s protest ended with a call-and-response recitation of Assata Shakur’s mantra:
It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains.

Following the protest, a group of several hundred students marched to the district office to formally restate their demands. As one Pryor student and BSU member articulated, “It shouldn’t be on students to take charge, educate, call out racism, and enforce policies … However, we will hold you accountable.”

Reached for comment later, a white coach at Sykes defended the white student photographed in makeshift Klansman attire, saying that there were no racial overtones to the image. The student “was doing a ninja dance, whatever that is.” It was all just a joke. A harmless joke. Boys will be boys, right?

Some of the boys were expelled. The next year, to finally address its ongoing culture of anti-Black racism, Sykes implemented a new policy banning the use of cell phones on campus.

Stop me if you’ve heard this one.²

Notes
1 Throughout the book, names of schools and individual people are pseudonyms. All participants provided assent and/or consent to be included in this research, which received full approval from both district- and university-based Institutional Review Boards.
2 Chapter 6 will return to and further examine the narrative introduced in the Prologue.
1

THE GREMLIN’S WORK IN THE WORLD

Jacob was a student in my English Language Arts (ELA) class during his sophomore and junior years, at the beginning of my career as an educator. I was a young white male teacher, 23 or 24, educating teenagers in a brown brick classroom at a robustly mixed-race high school in Tucson, Arizona. My students were primarily, though not exclusively, Latiné/x and white. I learned valuable lessons from all of them.

One critical thing my students taught me about was injustice. I learned from those who experienced injustice firsthand and from those who did not, and whose responses to injustice varied widely. I taught in Tucson during the years leading up to the state’s formal legislative attacks on immigrants (SB 1070) and Ethnic Studies programs (HB 2281). I taught during the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, which at the time felt categorically nasty and divisive. (How quaint in retrospect.) I taught during the alarming rise of the phrase “no homo,” a reaffirmation of hetero hypermasculinity that reflected mid-aughts American culture (Brown, 2011). I taught during the national ramp-up of standardized testing – cruel and misguided if I’m feeling generous, built on a foundation of eugenicist scientism and bourgeois self-interest if I’m feeling honest (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Stoskopf, 2002) – and the attendant district-level predictor tests that abounded from seemingly every curricular crack. Rarely did a month pass in which my teaching wasn’t halted by some inane mechanism meant to tell the district brass where students were on their journeys to all being above average.

My students taught me what it means to resist and disrupt inequitable systems, and one of the ways they did that was with humor that punched up at the politicians and district-level administrators pulling strings from their seats of power and privilege. Walking out of class, marching on downtown