

## **AWP 2023 Event Outline**

### **Event Title:**

Laughter in the Time of Suffering: Writing Humor from the Margins

### **Event Description:**

How can humor create transformative and generative spaces to explore otherwise painful and traumatic experiences? How can laughter act as a way to self-protect, to productively channel rage and to confront exterior forces such as homophobia, transphobia, familial violence, racism, and sexism? We'll discuss how we use humor, satire, and absurdity with intentionality and inclusivity to face the page, focusing on humor's transgressive potential as a political mode of subversion, healing, and justice.

### **Event Category:**

Multiple Literary Genres Craft Panel

### **Event Organizer & Moderator:**

**Claire Stanford:** Claire Stanford's debut novel, *Happy for You*, was published by Viking in Spring 2022 and was named a *New York Times* Editors' Choice. She lives in Reno, where she is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Nevada, Reno.

### **Event Participants:**

**Elaine Hsieh Chou:** Elaine Hsieh Chou is a Pushcart Award winning Taiwanese American writer from California. A Rona Jaffe Graduate Fellow at NYU and a NYFA Fellow, her debut novel *Disorientation* was published by Penguin Press and her speculative short story collection *Where Are You Really From* is forthcoming in 2024.

**Edgar Gomez:** Edgar Gomez (all pronouns) is a Florida-born writer with roots in Nicaragua and Puerto Rico. Their debut memoir, *High-Risk Homosexual*, was called a "breath of fresh air" by *The New York Times* and named a best book of 2022 by *Publisher's Weekly*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Electric Literature*. They live in New York and Puerto Rico.

**Chantal V. Johnson:** Chantal V. Johnson is a lawyer and writer. Her debut novel, *Post-Traumatic*, was long-listed for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. A graduate of Stanford Law School and a former Center for Fiction Emerging Writers Fellow, she lives in New York.

**Isle McElroy:** Isle McElroy's debut novel, *The Atmospherians*, was named a *New York Times* Editors' Choice. Their second novel, *People Collide*, is forthcoming in 2023. Other writing appears in *The New York Times*, *New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *The Cut*, *Vulture*, *GQ*, *Vogue*, *The Atlantic*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. They live in Brooklyn.

### **Opening Remarks:**

Hello! And thanks so much to all of you for being here on this Saturday afternoon for our panel, "Laughter in the Time of Suffering: Writing Humor from the Margins."

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, me, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Please treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Please be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities

I am so thrilled to be on this panel with these brilliant writers, all of whom are engaging with humor in such rich ways in their work, leveraging it to examine complex questions of race, gender, sexuality, trauma, and identity.

This panel came about because Elaine and I were supposed to be on a panel together last year at a different event – not AWP – that was just on humor, with no specifically political reading of that humor. We were talking about putting together a panel for AWP, and we were both really excited about the idea of bringing that political aspect into a discussion of humor – a lens that is so necessary. And – even though I'm the one giving the introduction, I just want to credit Elaine for this next part – we were thinking about the way that, historically, humor has been used to further attacks against people from marginalized identities. The way that the harm this causes is often written off with the excuse, "It's just a joke." But why is our humanity worth less than a punchline? In response and in opposition to majority disparagement humor that "punches down" on marginalized communities, we on this panel insist on "punching up" against the powerful. We affirm that humor is not simply about craft; it is always cultural and political.

First, I'll introduce myself and the panelists, then we'll go around and give a brief overview of our books and talk about what draws us to writing humor. Then, we'll have a conversation around questions focusing on humor as subversion, the risks of writing humor, and the craft of humor, and we'll end with some time for questions from the audience.

## Participant Initial Remarks:

Elaine: *Disorientation* follows a Taiwanese American PhD student who discovers that her research topic, a famous Chinese American poet, is a white man in yellowface. The discovery upturns her life, including her relationship with her Japan-obsessed fiancé. I'll talk about how humor for me has always seemed inseparable from writing about difficult or dark subjects. I have to make myself laugh or the writing process would just be unbearable. I have to find joy. I also think humor and satire lets the writer create some distance on the page so that you don't feel (as) traumatized revisiting something or spending time with characters you'd never want to spend time with in real life. And sometimes the darkest realities are the funniest because they are so inherently absurd.

Isle: I'll discuss a similar phenomenon to Elaine – I do think humor is necessary in my process. My first novel, *The Atmospherians*, is a satire about two best friends who start a cult to reform problematic men. It's not always a light read, and I am especially curious how humor is an access point to more difficult subjects. I've always been attracted to macabre, satirical humor, even as a kid, and I think there is a kind of truth in knowing that the most painful parts of life can also be sites of humor. A phrase I use all the time (taken from comedian Charlie Bardey): Funny's Funny. Essentially, used in place of *It is what it is*. It's shrug-funny to accept massive disappointments—especially those on an interpersonal micro/macro aggressive way—and find a way to keep moving.

Chantal: That quote by someone, 'comedy is tragedy plus time' really hits, for me, and that's the space where *Post-Traumatic* lives. *Post-Traumatic* is a darkly funny episodic character study about a psych ward lawyer who is coming to terms with childhood abuse and deciding whether to estrange from her family. I have a comedic orientation to life and everything just gets filtered through that, including the worst things that have happened to me. More than a defense mechanism, humor is a way to master experience. And I'm lucky to have amassed a crew of friends who were treated like garbage when they were little and make jokes about it now. I wanted to put that in a book, *our humor*, because I hadn't seen it. But even if I'm not writing like trauma stuff I am always writing to my best friends and thinking how specifically to make them laugh (and stealing their jokes)!

Edgar: I want to second that quote by Chantal. Comedy is tragedy plus time! Absolutely. A lot of the stories in my book, *High-Risk Homosexual*, which is about coming-of-age as a queer, Latinx person in a culture of machismo, were not funny when they happened, or even when I started writing about them. But when I thought about who I was writing for – queer kids who don't know where they fit in and may feel ashamed of who they are – I knew that I needed to find humor somehow, because I didn't want to depress them. I think of the humor in my book, especially in the more traumatic scenes, as a way for me to subliminally let readers know that no matter how intense whatever is happening is, I've reached a place where I can look back and laugh. It allows me to be honest about trauma but filter it through a hopeful lens.

Claire: I'm so interested in all of these answers and can't wait to talk more about all of these complementary angles on humor. For me, what really interests me is the absurd. My novel, *Happy for You*, follows a half-Asian, half-Jewish woman as she works at a tech company that is

developing an app that purports to objectively measure user happiness. I think I see a lot of the world through a lens of absurdity, and that's also the way my narrator, Evelyn, sees the world. And so much of the world – and her world – is absurd: tech, obviously, but also her experiences with academia, with micro-aggressions surrounding her biracial identity, with the pressures of living under late capitalism. So I think a lot of the humor in my book comes from Evelyn's dry take on the world, and the fact that she's able to maintain this sharp sense of humor about these systems she finds herself trapped in, even as she's pushing against them.

### **Questions:**

1. Why do you think some of the darkest subjects are often explored through humor? How is humor a way to reclaim autonomy over a subject? How can humor create transformative and generative spaces to explore otherwise painful and traumatic experiences? How can laughter act as a way to self-protect or to productively channel rage? How can writing with humor create subversion, healing, and even justice?
2. Is any of the humor in your work a reaction against other forms of humor you've observed in our culture?
3. How do you balance writing something scathing with pathos and vulnerability? How do you know when humor is adding to a scene or detracting from it? What is the role of humor on a rhythmic level? How can humor purposefully interrupt narrative momentum? How do you structure jokes – which often require inflection – on the page?
4. How do you think about risk when being funny about dark and/or political material? Is there anything you cannot/will not be funny about? Have you faced any consequences as a result of being funny about dark material?
5. What makes a humorous character and/or narrator? How do you go about crafting a funny character, narrator, and/or voice? Who are your favorite humorous characters and/or narrators and why?
6. Which writers or books inspire you in their use of humor?