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Capstone Prospectus

Whimsy can be seen as a method of self-preservation and political disruption. While resistance is often seen as overt, justice-oriented, and potentially aggressive, I argue that this view can be restructured using the politics of whimsy. Resistance is quiet and personal as much as it is collective and loud. It is just as important to maintain self-respect and personal meaning under oppressive conditions, especially if large-scale policy change isn't visible in the near future (Fakhoury). With a rise of significant protests in the United States as of 2025, I ask, how do we see whimsy physically appear in these protest spaces? There is a police order under strict binaries that are being held and pushed by the current and past administrations. There is a strong sense of either/or thinking as a form of social control (Faucette). These binaries limit the human potential we hold, and while there are thundering voices calling for the dismantling of these binaries, there is also a quieter, more personal resistance happening at the same time. This quiet resistance can be seen through elements that make people laugh in the face of tough situations, reading banned books, and/or malicious compliance. Humor and satire are some topics that will be heavily covered in the coming pages, and these forms are used to call attention and mock those in power while shielding themselves from prosecution through the laughter of others (Kingsmith).

But whimsy holds a different role; it holds joy and love over mockery. What makes the effects of whimsy so different from other forms of quiet resistance?

Resisting and Protesting Oppression

Resistance is necessary for this politics of whimsy, and resistance has two major values that relate to this object. The internal value, resistance and protesting, can help individuals, through maintaining their identities, feeling that they're making a change and therefore boosting their self-respect, and finding community (Boxill). When individuals are oppressed on an administrative level, it makes their own identity feel taboo to them. Resistance is a form of inner survival for those identities that are being silenced (Emery). Seeing group resistance or protests that not only validate those identities but also call for real change can call a person to join a movement and give them that mental boost that they're helping a cause that's important to them. Protesting changes remembering into a refusal to forget (Fakhoury). There is also the external social goal of resistance. What is most commonly associated with protests and resistance is the call for structural policy change and building a movement (Faucette). In the Portland protests we are currently seeing in 2025, there is a major call for the dismantling of the specific governmental agency of Immigration Control and Enforcement and political accountability from the administration that is funding that agency. And through these mass protests, we are beginning to see sprinkles of positive and active change.

Quiet resistance and micro politics lead to small-scale acts that disrupt the status quo and slowly lead to larger and more substantial change. The nature of quiet resistance is motivated by "reasons of love - reasons that arise from personal

attachments, to specific people, projects, or activities... rather than a primary commitment to universal justice” (Fakhoury 403). It is this quiet, personal resistance where we see whimsicality shine. Quiet resistance can be seen in small things such as art, activities, and performances. While this form of resistance is usually love-driven and personal, it does not come without risk. It is still resistance against a dominant culture and therefore invites potential backlash from those who do not support a different form of thinking. Micro-politics is similar but slightly different from this quiet resistance form. Micro-politics focuses on “fleeting, localized gestures that disrupt the ‘police order’” (Mann 65). Instead of maintaining personal identities like quiet resistance, micro-politics is concentrated on disruption. Micro-political acts are meant to be seen and noticed (Maddox). By being seen, these micro actions expose social norms and show how they can be changed, even subtly.

Collective action works as a tool to produce structural change, increase visibility, and assert visions of equality. Types of collective protest shift with the times and can include things such as sit-ins, rallies, and more frivolous things, such as mass bike rides, sledding competitions, and inflatable costumes to promote a cause that challenges established oppressive power (Hollander). These communal uprisings are usually a response to oppression or demands being ignored, and can be a collective expression of political rage. These expressions range from intentionally making the dominant culture uncomfortable to more passive things like workshops to build community and share experiences (Shah). While traditional protest leans on collective political rage, whimsy is used as a tool of tactical frivolity, “...a tactic, both to be self-expressive, to be beautiful or funny or silly, in order to attract more people to participate

in the demonstrations by making it honestly fun, but also to expose to the world and the media [overkill of counterprotesters]" (Thompson). Whimsical protest increases media visibility through the absurd actions they take, such as humorous protest signs or dancing flash mobs. It asserts visions of equality through this media coverage by showing the peacefulness of the protesters and the violent retaliation from those who disagree with their vision. And through this coverage and sharing of ideas, it lays the groundwork for permanent structural change.

Affect and Humor in Political Spaces

Affect and humor can serve as a powerful tool for resistance; they have the potential to influence how we judge reality, view identities, and break down or reinforce power structures (Kingsmith). Tactical frivolity, for example, uses humor, whimsy, and absurdity to disrupt established power dynamics and defuse tension (Thompson). By capturing feelings before there is time for 'dominant' or 'policed' logic to take over, it opens a new perspective on the predicted outcome (Thrift). Things such as the inflatable costumes seen at the Portland ICE protests trigger a "non-threatening affective response" which can diffuse tense situations simply by catching people off guard, and removing the immediate defensive emotions usually held in protest environments. With the dominant narrative of protests and protesters being seen as potentially dangerous and violent, these acts of frivolity will "'touch people' at a visceral level, making the message impossible to ignore" (Maddox). These sudden and intense feelings evoked from joyful absurdity allow people to imagine "other impossibilities"

regarding the values and potentials of political resistance. However, tactical frivolity is not the only form of humor and affect that we see in political spaces.

Satire is another form of peaceful and humorous social critique. “Satire entails an act of judgment based on an implicit or explicit (moral) value often made with an intent to reform or change the comic butt (target) of a ridiculing presentation” (Caron 156). We see satire mainly in major media sources such as late-night talk shows and satirical news media such as The Onion. Media sources like these critically reflect on public discourse and dominant ways of thinking, joking material is used to promote and perform real-world political reform (Rossing). Whether or not satire makes tangible change is still up for debate, but ideological change is noticed and praised through the lens of satire. Satire can work to ‘tear holes in reality’, producing new forms of thought in a comical way, and if the people who hold positions of power reach harshly, it just adds to the comic affect of the original joke (Kingsmith). Satire works as both a serious and non-serious medium, expanding thought processes through ridicule. While satire uses humor and criticism, it differs from political whimsy because it is not joyful.

While frivolity and whimsy can be used as peaceful ways of resistance, the start of resistance is not usually in a passive form. Rage functions as a catalyst for resistance “[Political rage] is a response to the repeated refusals to listen to demands for justice” (Dikec). Rage is object-directed; even in its violent or destructive form, there is always a target that is being called to change. Political rage is a type of bodily thinking; rage is invoked before logic has a chance to grasp what is happening. This political rage “shapes political attitudes through autonomic bodily intensities” (Thrift 71). A collective political rage allows oppressed groups to make the invisible visible, a number of

separate individual experiences of injustice finally gaining coverage and a call to action. While political rage is potentially destructive and a stark difference from the joyful whimsy this paper expands on, it is an important and necessary assertion to start these movements of resistance.

Challenging Identities and Binaries

Where do we see this rage and need for resistance stem from? With the current political climate in the United States, we see a strict structure of binary thinking. These binaries simplify the human complexity into either/or categories, and these categories structure how privilege is distributed through the political and cultural systems (Elbow). This rigid logic decides the 'normal', and anything or anyone that falls out of that fixed construct is therefore labeled as 'other' or even 'deviant' (Hawkesworth). The 'normal' that is currently set is white-cisgender-heterosexual and natural-born citizen male; anything that falls outside of that category is given extra obstacles. This social control is not biological, but it is taught from such an early age that many see it as true and unchangeable. By pushing an us vs them mentality from such a young age, it encourages state control over individuals and erases the middle ground that so many people fall under (Faucette). We see this social control through binaries today, looking at the Portland protests and how the governmental administration is responding to the media coverage. There are labels of citizen/criminal immigrant, violent protester/ICE agent protector, and Portland being labeled as a 'war zone' (Armstrong).

With these binaries being so ingrained, there has been discourse around the effectiveness of moving away from unified identities. When resistances are born, they usually call for a unified expression, or identity, to join the movement (Rudy). This

unified identity works to simplify the movement, making it easier to understand and the end goal clearer. When people are being so ridiculed by the state for who they are, finding a group of people who are facing similar issues can be validating, even if the oppression isn't as severe. But as early movements evolve, individuals begin to notice where middle-ground identities are being ignored. The umbrella terms that are being used to showcase a different binary still have the issues of privilege (Amin). The call for an overall unity erases the differences and fissures between different marginalized groups and their experiences.

Pushing past this simplified experience allows for a more robust and ethical civil existence. Encouraging diverse and combined identities allows individuals to exist as their 'whole selves' without leaving part of their identity and experience behind (Rudy). Multiplicity encourages tolerance, and with tolerance comes a more middle ground, gray area between binaries. This will therefore promote a more flexible resistance. With an intersectional thought process, resistance groups can adapt to new contexts and different political purposes.

The Role of Whimsy in Political Resistance

With binaries, political oppression, and protests, it is vital to hold on to hope to avoid despair and burnout. Without this imagination of a better future, the physical energy it takes to sustain a resistance would likely collapse (Moynan). Hope acts as a shield from despair, and it takes many forms. Creativity is a form that protects dignity and self-respect, nostalgia reanimates the positives of the past, pushing for the growth of good things in ways that have already started, and laughter and love are the foundation for happiness and movement. Hope overall acts as personal defiance; it is

motivated by love, not a need for radical justice (Fakhoury). Hope is vital, and whimsy can add to hope, but it is very different.

Whimsy is motivated by irrationality and playfulness, not a moral argument; it works as a disarming tactic rather than a confrontational desire (Mann). While some forms of quiet resistance like satire have elements of meanness, certain jabs at those in power, whimsy is naturally joyful; things can be humorous and not be joyful. Whimsy is spontaneous and affective; it stops your body in its tracks with a call to action, whether the action be a critique of power or just a means to pull you out of monotonous repetition (Mann). Whimsy is meant to disarm, not fight. It's hard to meet an inflatable frog with aggressive and unsanctioned violence. Whimsy is unable to be grasped; it is fleeting, it exists just enough to take you out of autopilot, and it disappears, leaving a sense of wonder behind.

Conclusion

Whimsy is a gentle weapon; it disarms and disrupts, it preserves a sense of self while also highlighting the problems within the binary social order. Whimsy makes life livable by allowing individuals to maintain their own personal values and creativity under oppressive conditions (Maddox). Whimsical moments allow vibrant contradictions to exist; one wouldn't immediately assume a sledding contest could act as a political protest, but whimsicality and the people of Minneapolis makes the two correlate. Whimsy runs on love, joy, and wonder, and these things are the foundation of what keeps resistance moving until the goal is reached (Fakhoury). Even if an action is fleeting, it reminds the oppressors that the resisters refuse to forget, and they will

continue to fight for a more hopeful and accepting future. Whimsy creates meaning through engagement; we feel and wonder our way to a better future.

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