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Don Waisanen and Amy Becker

ABSTRACT

A growing force in children's literature, public figures' crossover picturebooks are designed to appeal to adults and children alike. This study takes a critical look at the crossover picturebooks of John Oliver and Stephen Colbert. As forms of parodic advocacy, their books use the doubled worlds of parody to invite audiences into corrective spaces, highlighting the influence at work in the seemingly persuasion free media of children's books, while simplifying and expanding the issues at stake through a multimodal form of activism. In particular, we add to the literature on political parody a focus on the potential for such discourses to function metanoically – alternating between original and parodied texts to engage in political revisions while forwarding moral visions on behalf of disadvantaged others. Parody and metanoia jointly invite engagement in the hope of doing something different and restoring political options through re-energized design.

KEYWORDS

Parody; advocacy; metanoia; narrative; recursion; children

Film and television actors, popular musicians, and even comedians have contributed to the world of children's literature. Indeed, "writing for children has become so trendy over the past fifteen years or so that celebrities from all walks of life have begun moonlighting as children's authors in extraordinary numbers" (Beckett, 2012, p. 273). Most of these efforts come in the form of picturebooks, and humorists have been some of the most prolific authors of these texts in recent years. From Jay Leno's *If Roast Beef Could Fly* to Whoopi Goldberg's *Whoopi's Big Book of Manners*, crossover picturebook publishing has become a prominent form of transmedia comedy.

All of these texts tend to attract a high volume of publicity and significant sales volume given the status of their authors, with many designed to attract adult readers first, rather than children. Broadly defined, crossover literature consists of "novels and short fiction that cross from child to adult or adult to child audiences" (Beckett, 2012, p. 1). Popularized by the rise of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, scholarship on crossover literature as a literary genre tends to focus on popular young adult novels like Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy and their mass following among adults and teenagers alike. Research on crossover picturebooks, with text and visuals aimed to appeal to young

children and adults simultaneously, is relatively limited, yet treasured classic picturebooks have been a mainstay in literary culture for decades.

Far from some niche form of rhetoric, some of the most successful crossover picturebooks employ “complex narrative strategies – hybrid genres, polyfocalization, metafictional discourse, intertextuality, parody, irony, and so forth,” and “are attracting an ever-increasing older audience of adolescents and adults to the genre” (Beckett, 2012, p. 2). There has been a rise in picturebooks written primarily for adults (e.g., *Go the Fuck to Sleep* by Adam Mansbach), and an increase in the number of parodies of classic picturebooks (e.g., *Goodnight iPad* by Ann Droyd) with humor aimed primarily at adult readers who have the capacity to process the comic incongruities in the written text and make connections with the original material (Becker, 2014; Young, 2008).

As developments adjacent to the genre of “advocacy satire” promoting public activism and engagement through political comedy more generally (Becker & Bode, 2018; Waisanen, 2018a), political comedians are now using children’s picturebooks as tools of parodic advocacy, as exemplified by John Oliver’s *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (Twiss, 2018) – an imitation of Vice President Mike Pence’s family picturebook and an attack on its anti-LGBTQ+ politics.

In comparing Pence’s book with his own, Oliver asked his audiences: “Do you want the regular Bundo book or the *better* Bundo book?” (Guild, 2018, para. 8, emphasis added), answering that he wanted to “be completely clear about this. This is actually a book for children. This is a real book for children . . . This isn’t some adult book telling Mike Pence to go f**k himself, although in buying it, that’s exactly what you would be doing.” Oliver made clear on his show that the book was meant as advocacy for public causes, since the proceeds from the Bundo book (also found at the normatively named www.betterbundobook.com) would be going to the Trevor Project that provides crisis services and suicide-prevention outreach to LGBTQ+ youth, and AIDS United, which seeks to end the AIDS epidemic in the U.S (John, 2018). Moving beyond forms of comedy simply forwarding ironic, distanced commentary, and different than purely satirical forms of advocacy critiquing and intervening into the substance of public events, parodic advocacy uses structurally imitative discourse to actively advocate on behalf of marginalized groups.

In this light, this study takes a close look at the crossover picturebooks of John Oliver and Stephen Colbert. As forms of parodic advocacy, these comedians’ books use the doubled worlds of parody to invite audiences into corrective spaces, highlighting the influence at work in the seemingly persuasion free media of children’s books, while simplifying and expanding the issues at stake through a multimodal form of activism. In particular, we add to the literature on political parody a focus on the potential for such discourses to function meta-narratively, alternating between original and parodied texts to engage in political revisions while forwarding moral visions on behalf of disadvantaged others. In the following sections, we’ll first discuss the relationship between parody and

metanoia, before turning to an analysis of Oliver's and Colbert's books. Last, positioned within a medium traditionally targeting children, we evaluate and discuss the possibilities of children's picturebooks and similar forms as parodic advocacy.

Parody and Metanoia

In its imitations of the formal aspects of texts, parody is a well-known technique of comedy. Parody is "an imitation that distorts a target text, author, or genre" (Trivigno, 2009, p. 30). More than just a matter of quotation or allusion, Hutcheon (1985) called parody "imitation with critical ironic distance," working iconically with an original work (pp. 37, 12; see also Waisanen, 2011). Where techniques such as irony possess a "patent refusal of semantic univocality," parody concerns a "refusal of structural unitextuality" (p. 54). It can reflect, refract, and create new political realities (Peifer, 2013), and although not always critical in its intent or effects, can be used to "counter idealization, mythic enchantment, and other forms of hegemony" (Hariman, 2008, p. 53). Overall, extant definitions generally cover parody's ability to copy, heighten, and interrogate by toggling back and forth between original and imitated works in a bitextual, humorous manner.

For many readers, the concept of metanoia is likely less familiar. Studies of metanoia underscore the recently revived status of this area of communication inquiry. Its more well-known twin, *kairos*, describes the opportune moment, while metanoia "resides in the wake of Opportunity, sowing regret and inspiring repentance in the missed moment," as an amplified, "reflective act in which a person returns to a past event in order to see it anew" (Myers, 2011, pp. 1, 8, 2016). In communication, "metanoia is a figure of speech that accomplishes some linguistic amendment or replacement," where a person "may 'take back' or modify an earlier statement in order to either enhance or limit the force of the claim" (Ellwanger, 2012, p. 311). Lanham (1991) writes that it's the "qualification of a statement by recalling it and expressing it in a *better* way, often by using a negative" (p. 100, emphasis added). Myers (2011) recasts metanoia through its "affective dimension" that can involve everything from dramatic conversions to minor changes in thinking or statements rephrased (pp. 2, 7). Ultimately, this opening allows people to transport to a new area of understanding (p. 15). All of these definitions concern a sense that life has gone awry, that corrections are needed, or that a previous event needs to be reformed with normative force.

The "meta" in "metanoia" indicates "after," "beyond," or "adjacent" (Judge, 2013, p. 3), aligning with parody's characteristic of working subsequent to and alongside the formal aspects of another work. Central to such articulations are notions of change, difference, and taking a critical stance against administrative and legal oppressions. Not content to wallow in criticality forever, however, one of the more important aspects of metanoia involves moving toward better

futures than the past. These moments play an important role in deconstructing master narratives and myths (Crosby, 2009, p. 277), inviting audiences to at least think again. Remarkably, for example, in the case of Oliver's book both Charlotte Pence (Mike Pence's daughter who coauthored the original book) and Regnery Publishing (which published the original book and was initially hostile to Oliver's version) eventually proclaimed their support for Oliver's book for its rising impact and charity advocacy (Moos, 2018; Sales, 2018; Stack, 2018).

In the children's crossover picturebooks of political comedians John Oliver, Stephen Colbert, and their respective staffs, we primarily find parodic forms of advocacy at work. To be clear, there are certainly elements within these books that could be characterized in terms of satire, irony, and more, but we find that their picturebook advocacy is first and foremost grounded in parodic acts. Secondarily, we also find that these parodies function as multimodal forms of metanoia. The picturebooks manifest metanoia by imitating the structures of what public figures have said and done to engage in an alternative, transmedia type of advocacy. They beg audience engagement through products advanced within yet working outside the openings of televisual political comedy. Most importantly, as a type of "comic counterfactual" (Waisanen, 2018b), parody and metanoia can reinforce one another. Where parody brings to metanoia a playful tenor (and the opportunities that register brings that's been absent from the concept to this point), metanoia brings to parody the weight of reflective, post hoc possibilities by juxtaposing original, narrowly conceived formal referents against a structure that expands concerns for peoples' lived interests and broader political realities.

As the Trump administration has arguably been one of the least likely presidencies in modern times to apologize or admit faults of any kind (Wolf, 2018), this form of parodic advocacy is especially well suited to such contexts and the circulations and amplifications afforded through digital media (see Waisanen & Becker, 2015). To show how this form of communication works and what it does, we turn to two approaches to parodic advocacy.

Children's picturebooks

Generally speaking, viewers turn to political comedy to be entertained. Learning about politics is secondary and often depends on whether viewers are primed to meet certain informational goals at the outset (Feldman, 2013; Young, 2013). In seeking out political comedy as a source of entertainment, viewers are also careful to select a host who aligns with their political beliefs and has the right balance of judgmental, aggressive criticism (e.g., juvenalian satire) or lighthearted, playful, and fun humor (e.g., horatian satire) (Becker, 2012; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011). In the Trump era, the demand for more aggressive and pointed political satire has increased as comedians like Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel are experiencing a ratings

boom, while more playful offerings from comedians like Jimmy Fallon and James Corden have become less popular with viewers (Garber, 2017; Itzkoff, 2017; Koblin, 2017b; Stelter, 2017).

In this environment, the use of children's picturebooks by Oliver and Colbert against key administration figures constitutes parodic advocacy. Like Oliver and Colbert's television shows, children's picturebooks can be characterized as playful domains for recontextualizing political developments. The theoretical difference between Oliver and Colbert's books is in the explicitly restoried (Oliver) and implicitly recursive (Colbert) forms of parodic advocacy advanced. They employ parody's imitations and *metanoia's* corrective approaches that sometimes "delivers her punishment aggressively with a whip, other times quietly from the shadows" (Myers, 2011, p. 17). Since comedy's modes of operating are often ironic and subtextual, pushing the burden of invention onto audiences to varying degrees (Waisanen, 2015), these differences partly reflect different strategies for how much involvement parodic advocacy requires.

Rather than having the parodies exaggerate their targets into the momentary realm of laughter, whose potential force always threatens to float off into the ether (see Waisanen, 2018b), the *metanoic* workings of these books ground possibilities for interventionist advocacy. As Myers (2016) also notes, "*Kairos* inevitably sharpens our attention and narrows our view, limiting what we see and value. In moments when *kairotic* opportunity cannot be seen or seized, a new view opens up, creating the opportunity to consider a different range of possibilities. In these moments, we have the opportunity to experience *metanoia*" (p. 386). Analyzing Oliver and Colbert's works through this lens shows how political comedy can function both as a type of advocacy and source of hope for inclusive citizenship.

Oliver's restoried form

John Oliver began hosting his own show on HBO in spring 2014. Staffed by comedians and seasoned journalists and now in its sixth season, each episode of *Last Week Tonight* presents a relatively lengthy (13–20 minutes) investigative report on a topical controversy or issue, uninterrupted by commercials (Bauder, 2014; Helmore, 2014). Oliver has tackled a range of issues including net neutrality, cybersecurity and surveillance, and prison reform during his six seasons on the air (Wickman, 2015). Oliver often asks his viewers to boycott a product or brand, comment online, or use a particular hashtag to generate discussion on social media (Bode & Becker, 2018; Hu, 2014). Related research has shown that Oliver's discussion of net neutrality was just as good as news content as a source for learning about the complicated policy issue (Becker & Bode, 2018), and that viewing *Last Week Tonight* had an effect on public support for net neutrality regulations (Brewer, Young, Lambe, Hoffman, & Collier, 2018).

For the first twenty minutes of his March 18, 2018 broadcast, Oliver offered an in-depth examination of Mike Pence's moral conservatism, his support for conversion therapy and the nonprofit organization Focus on the Family, and his generally known homophobic views. After about fourteen minutes, Oliver complements Pence for having a well-named pet bunny rabbit, Marlon Bundo. After talking about the bunny briefly, Oliver notes that the Pence family is set to release a children's picturebook about the bunny titled, *A Day in the Life of the Vice President*, written by Pence's daughter, Charlotte, and illustrated by his wife, Karen (Pence, 2018). In the last four minutes of the segment, Oliver offers his viewers an alternate way to read about the bunny with his own version of the children's book titled, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (Twiss, 2018). Rather than chronicle the Vice President's daily activities, Oliver's book features a gay bunny rabbit who falls in love with another bunny named Wesley. In two days, Oliver's parody of the Pence family picturebook sold more than 180,000 copies, requiring a second printing of the book to satisfy customer demand (Desta, 2018). The celebrity-voiced audiobook also quickly rose to the top of the Audible chart (Friedmann, 2018). Meanwhile, Oliver's book passed the Pence family's by rising to the top of Amazon's bestseller list (Waldman, 2018).

Through parodic advocacy, Oliver's book looks to the opportunity lost in the original for telling an actual story with a moral lesson for readers young and old. Compared to the static and spiritless settings, two-dimensional characters and agentless features, business-as-usual framings of government operations, and non-moral posturing of Pence's work, Oliver's text re-narrativizes the book with rhetorical force and ethical import. With its ties to advocacy on behalf of LGBTQ + causes and themes about difference, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* is an even larger indictment of the Trump administration's dehumanizing attacks and willful ignorance about the very three-dimensional lives of diverse people. Oliver sows regret for both the administration's policies and products like Pence's book that present an exclusionary or reductive picture of the world, offering in its place a corrective, more holistic version that sees people, politics, and possibilities anew.

To understand how Oliver's text functions, it's first worth highlighting the Pence text's idyllic constructions that formally position what Burke (1969) calls "scenes" above political agents, agency, acts, or purposes. The book opens with the picture of a serene residence and a cute aside from Bundo that, "As the official bunny in residence here, I help out whenever I can. So grampa [i.e. Mike Pence] and I get ready for the busy day we have planned" (p. 7). As they drive to the White House, with illusory figures cheering and waving their flags outside the car, most pages are devoid of whole people. The book instead focuses on the bunny in many grayishly-hued settings, with Pence (only ever represented by shoes, shoes and suit, or a partial headshot from the back) and Bundo staring at a painting of pristine Indiana (p. 12), for instance. Similarly,

toward the text's end we see the bottoms of some peoples' shoes, with Bundo proclaiming, "We meet people from across America. I wonder which states they are from. They come to share stories and questions and problems, and Grampa helps answer each one" (p. 25). Pence engages with nameless, faceless people, and answers their questions decisively.

In these selections, politics becomes a spectator sport. Without substantive mooring, the focus is almost entirely on the saccharine, stylized form of the book itself, raising the stakes for parody's bistructuralism and metanoia's betterment. The bunny sits by himself waiting for Pence's most important meeting with the president (who is never referred to by name in the book, further effacing its agents), stating: "I love the Oval Office with its fluffy carpet to walk on. And I nibble on a carrot, while Grampa and the president talk on" (Pence, 2018, p. 14). People and politics are abstracted out of the book, except for one scene where "Grampa presides over a Senate vote," a situation where the bunny merely stares at the Congressional building from the outside (pp. 16–17). The buildings and settings come to the fore, with all other political happenings positioned in the background. From the bunny's viewpoint, he simply exists in a world that's overwhelmingly present-oriented and institutional, as when he exclaims: "It's the Eisenhower Executive Office building, which is a lot of words to me. So for short you can call it what I do – The wonderful EEOB!" (p. 22). Bundo gets a special treat in the round-topped building (p. 30), reinforcing the focus on the rabbit and the external environment. The scenic emphasis also reinforces a complete absence of conflict (a guiding criterion for narratives [Hart, 2011]). At the end Pence, with only his hands and book shown, reads his Bible and says a prayer, with the bunny remarking, "And I remember how blessed I am to call this great nation my home" (p. 37). Overall, the bunny's day is a sentimental journey through state operations.

The text of both books shows that Oliver's version is a parody of the original, with both covers showing a bunny in front of a large estate. Within the first few pages of Oliver's text, an alternate narrative becomes clear, however. Where Bundo traveled with Pence to his work and spent a day adoring the Vice President, Oliver's version has Bundo deciding not to hang out with "boring" people (Twiss, 2018), opting instead to spend a day in the gardens of Pence's residence.

The most prominent feature of the parody and its metanoic turns is in terms of the book's coloring and characterizations. In contrast to the grayish and serene context established by Pence's book, the cover page of Oliver's shows Bundo standing in front of the Vice President's residence with a multi-colored bowtie and big smile (Twiss, 2018). The book has far more color in it, with pictures of different flowers, more sunshine-hues, and more images of full characters and humans' bodies. Pence's book looks like it was written in the dead of winter, while in Oliver's version, spring is in full bloom.

Through its stylings, the adjacent work brings affective weight to Bundo's new storyline. Bundo himself is a picture of exuberance and energy – hula hooping on the lawn in one of the book's first scenes – in comparison to the lifeless-looking bunny in the original. The words in Oliver's text reinforce this contrast: "I live with Mom, Grandma, and Grampa in an old, stuffy house in the grounds of U.S. Naval Observatory" (p. 3); "But this story isn't going to be about him, because he isn't very fun. This story is about me, because I'm very, very fun" (p. 4). The tonal and structural switches were noticeable to readers like Waldman (2018): "I feel sheepish knocking a kids' story about the least complicit member of the Second Family, but the self-satisfaction and mediocrity on display here are galling. Meanwhile, the Oliver parody is sincerely delightful – full of the attentive details and poetic grace notes that distinguish good children's books" (Waldman, 2018, para 7). From the outset, with the bitextual relationship between Pence's and Oliver's texts oscillating in the backdrop, readers are invited to experience *metanoia* less as past loss than hopeful, re-energized design.

What Pence's original book missed was an opportunity to tell a story with characters who have emotional needs. In the retelling, Oliver's parodic form works hand in hand with the before and after contrast of *metanoia*. As Myers writes, "*metanoia* helps us to reframe regret as an entry point that can lead to reorientation on both intellectual and emotional levels" (Myers, 2016, p. 387), especially in bringing "critical awareness to the affective realm" (p. 396). Pence's Bundo is an inert character, positioned with little will or feeling amid the vice president's daily routines. Oliver's Bundo not only feels deeply but is desiring of transformation in the face of mounting barriers. He wakes up one day and is all "alone," a term emphasized many times, so he goes into the garden to talk to his bug friends (Twiss, 2018, p. 6). In contrast to the Pence text, Oliver's is more about relational connections and disconnections – markers of narrative structure (Burroway, Stuckey-French, & Stuckey-French, 2019). Out of his isolation, Bundo sees another bunny, and "being near him made me feel like my heart was still hopping" (p. 7). The bunnies meet and Marlon explains to his new friend, Wesley, that he's called BOTUS [Bunny of the United States], but "It's a long story" (p. 9). By bringing comedy to this counterfactual vision (see Waisanen, 2018b), Oliver's parody summons sensory heft for the reorientation of both the original book and Bundo's story. The parodic form lays a foundation for narrative change.

In tandem, parody and *metanoia* work to dissociate the old from the new, at a maximum inviting conversion or, at a minimum, a doubled glance toward the issue advocacy. Just as jokes typically run two storylines together, with a latter storyline serving as a context shift that attempts to surprise and endear, *metanoia* pits Bundo's outer, forced life with the Pence's against his inner awakening upon meeting the new character. He and Wesley hop all over the gardens and then head inside where, "We hopped through Very Boring Meetings with Very

Boring People” (p. 13). In comparison, with Wesley “My old, stuffy house didn’t feel lonely anymore” (p. 15). Running the two storylines of Pence’s world and Bundo’s newly discovered world together amplifies the characterizations and raises the stakes for the message to come.

The parody heightens the need for a target, or source of antagonism against which a critique can be stated, and for what stands to be lost in this scenario. Fitzgerald and White (1983) write that metanoia “releases him [sic] from his misery and introduces him to another Opinion and Desire, who lead him to True Education, but at the same time also introduces him to yet others who lead to False Education” (Fitzgerald & White, 1983, p. 189). Where the original book had an otherworldly, de-narrativized quality in being cast with no sources of desire, no tensions or pressures, and no cognitive and affective dissonance to be dealt with, the Oliver book makes it clear that Bundo will have to struggle between others’ claims and his lived experience. Marlon and Wesley announce that they will be getting married to all their animal friends and everyone cheers them on, “Because that is what friends say” (Twiss, 2018, p. 18). Note the strong normative focus: the opportunity lost in the metanoic moment is also in the failure of Pence’s book to make more apparent a guiding moral or theme, a failure to lead readers young and old toward betterment.

The ultimate conflict arrives in the form of a character called “The Stink Bug” (who has an official looking lectern with a stink bug logo on it) shouting “You can’t get married” (p. 19). The Stink Bug is in charge, important, and makes the rules, so “all the animals listened to him even though he was – and this is true – very stinky” (p. 20). The analogy runs parallel to the vice president’s own stances on gay marriage, but the tone and demeanor of the character are anything but reserved (likely drawing more from Donald Trump’s loudmouth, blurting style): “I am the Stinkiest and I Am Important. I Am the Stinkiest and I Am in Charge. Boy Bunnies Marry Girl Bunnies. Girl Bunnies Marry Boy Bunnies. This Is the Way It Has Always Been. You. Are. Different. And Different is Bad” (p. 22). The capitalizations of these words carry a pronounced, authoritative effect, much like Pence’s original text where, due to his size, the bunny has to look up to the vice president, who would authoritatively answer any questions people would ask of him.

In essence, the parody works metanoically by inviting expansions, from the narrow focus on fateful scenes to a story in which agents act with widened agency and collective purpose (Burke, 1969). The book’s greatest expansion is to a larger, philosophical level, positioning authoritarianism against democracy. Compared to the bug’s assertions, the other animals step forward to talk about how they’re each different in their own way, such as the badger who eats his sandwiches crust first, and the hedgehog who reads the ends of books first. A dog stops and says “Wait a minute! We get to decide who is In Charge. We get to decide who is Important. We can vote” (p. 25)! The animals all vote the stink bug out of office, Marlon and Wesley get married, and readers are left

with the moral: “Because it doesn’t matter if you love a girl bunny or a boy bunny, or eat your sandwich backward or forward” (p. 32), and “Stink bugs are temporary. Love is Forever” (p. 33). In comparison to Pence’s vignette (or slice of life offering), Oliver’s metanoic work restories the original, using the medium for political advocacy.

Partly, Oliver’s book can also be seen as more true to the genre of older children’s books, threading a narrative structure through the characters’ lives. Where many young children’s books typically lack plotlines, conflicts, or moral points (focusing on simple images and scenes, for instance), older children’s books tend to use more quest-like structures that parallel the goals, obstacles, and barriers overcome in much of human development. True to the genre of comedy, too, the happy, storied ending for Bundo constitutes flaws overcome and lessons learned aimed at a metanoic journey of growth.

The positive response to the Oliver parody continued in the months that followed its release. The original *Last Week Tonight* segment has been viewed more than 16 million times on YouTube since its original broadcast (“Mike Pence: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” 2018). More broadly, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* has been noted as the latest contribution to the subgenre of media content that is seeking to reach out to LGBTQ youth. Shortly after the parody picturebook’s release, *Will & Grace* showrunner Max Mutchnick announced he would be donating a copy of the book to every elementary school in Indiana, Pence’s home state (Kilkenny, 2018).

Oliver’s text invites expanded democratic thought and action through parody and metanoia. Not only for varying possibilities, but for the showcasing of difference as fundamental to broadening its audiences’ views of the world. To build on these ideas, we turn next to a children’s picturebook that conducts its advocacy in a different key.

Colbert’s recursive form

Before Colbert wrote *Whose Boat is This Boat?* a children’s picturebook engaging in the type of parodic advocacy Oliver used, it’s relevant that he had some training in the genre through a previous book. As Colbert noted in a 2012 broadcast, his picturebook, *I Am A Pole (And So Can You!)*, was an attempt to conquer the world of children’s literature. To get help in his quest to publish a book, Colbert noted, “my fellow celebrities are cranking out the kids’ books to cash in, so last night I sat down with legendary author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak” (“The Colbert Report: Season 8, Episode 50,” 2012, January 25). When Colbert shows Sendak his initial sketches and text for his book about a pole looking to find a purpose and occupation, Sendak notes, “It’s so bad, it will make pots and pots of money” (“The Colbert Report: Season 8, Episode 49,” 2012, January 24; “The Colbert

Report: Season 8, Episode 50,” 2012, January 25). The text itself follows a patriotic theme, as the pole realizes that being an American flagpole is the best, echoing the ironic, overly nationalistic tone of *The Colbert Report*.

Since writing the first children’s book, Colbert transitioned from his largely in-character parody of a conservative talk show host on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* (which ran from 2005 to 2014), to the real life, out-of-character Stephen Colbert who now serves as host of CBS’ *Late Show*. As media critics have noted, it was not until Colbert returned to inserting partisan political mockery in his monologues that he found his footing on network television and, in turn, a sizable audience and dedicated following among 18–49 year olds (Koblin, 2017).

Relevant to parodic advocacy, research has shown that *The Colbert Report* encouraged viewers to learn about complicated political issues such as campaign finance reform (Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2014). At the same time, these same viewers were often confused by Colbert’s comic – yet not actual – support for conservative policies and politicians (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). In the context of Colbert’s newer show, where the host’s (out of character) positions are far more explicit, the targets of Colbert’s second children’s picturebook become clearer.

In *Whose Boat is This Boat? Comments that Don’t Help in the Aftermath of a Hurricane*. (The Staff, 2018), we find a subtler form of parody and metanoia than in Oliver’s text. Illustrated in cartoon form, the book only consists of quotations from Trump in his response to victims of Hurricane Florence in New Bern, North Carolina on September 19, 2018. Colbert and his writers found the president’s response to the devastation so ridiculous that the choice was made to simply repeat his aimless comments, albeit recast and amplified in the children’s picturebook genre. For example, one of the book’s opening pages has “Whose Book is This Book” at the top with a place to put one’s name in, as in many kid’s books (p. 2). Different than Oliver’s explicit restorying of Pence’s book, here the parodic replications and moral correction take an implicit, recursive form.

Recursion means “to run back,” based on an idea that “social life is recursive because it is repetitive,” since “our lives, both individually and collectively, are rather routinized; they consist of patterns of behavior that are repeated . . . with degrees of variation” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 481). Recursion involves repetition, which “allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production . . . imitation of the structure and language of an old text may help introduce radically new ideas” (Leff, 1997, pp. 201, 203; see also Waisanen, 2011 on “ironic iconicity,” where the content, form, and visuals can be tweaked slightly for effect). In this light, the back cover of the book clarifies how, “After Hurricane Florence hit, Donald Trump spotted a boat that had washed ashore. It was then that he unintentionally wrote *Whose Boat is this Boat?*, the first children’s book that demonstrates *what not to say after*

a natural disaster. It is an excellent teaching tool for readers of all ages who enjoy learning about empathy by process of elimination” (The Staff, 2018, emphasis added).

From this description, the book imitates the real life version of Trump’s comments in a more elementary format, not simply to reproduce but to teach. Whereas a news program may only report what the president did, putting the comments in the children’s book genre with its attendant expectations for moral guidance, the writers put forward some hope for salvaging a future of more appropriate responses amid the opportunity lost. In parodic and meta-noic wrappings, recursion isn’t just about new ideas, but brings normative weight into scenes where the status quo could easily become naturalized.

The capacity for politicians to focus on the wrong events and act in a tone deaf manner is exposed and chastised each step of the way. The book opens with an image of a big, angry hurricane cloud and Air Force One subsequently taking off for North Carolina. As an orange-faced Trump lands in the devastating circumstances, with floods and trees felled all around, he walks into the scene proudly with his arms in the air to a press corps looking forlorn (pp. 6–7). He walks over to a distressed couple standing next to a boat and says obtusely, “Is this your boat? Or . . . did it become your boat” (pp. 8–9)? He stands next to it with a group of diverse onlookers saying “That boat is wiped out . . . or not?” (10–11). Trump then imagines, “Wouldn’t want to cross the ocean in it,” with a thought bubble of himself in an armada-like outfit and dancers behind him on the boat (pp. 12–13). In both reality and the children’s book rendering, Trump’s attention misses the *kairos* all around him. The parodic version of Trump’s comments and news about the events in North Carolina invite readers to take a regretful look back at what might be properly characterized as cartoonish, unwordly actions.

Where just about any other response would have done – a kind word to a needy person, some empathy to news reporters about what had happened, a commitment to funding for those in distress, etc. – instead the recursion of the president’s actual words drums a sense of repeated loss. At the same time, audience involvement is invited by the text’s meta-noic workings; simply repeating Trump’s actual comments with the visual tweaks of the cartoon pictures asks the audience to position Trump both in the original context and in this new one, surfacing the need for revision. Unlike other children’s literature, picturebooks are also meant to be read and enjoyed aloud (Beram, 2018), offering an opportunity to engage in an interactive, multimodal exploration of the text’s parodic advocacy. In other words, an adult reading the text to a child itself creates a parodic and meta-noic doubled world, where the adult would need to both read the text in earnest while reading between the lines (likely laughing in the process), possibly inviting the child’s further involvement, conversation, and introduction to the doubled world through questions such as “why are you laughing” or “what does this mean?”

The book finishes quickly (imitating the rapidity with which Trump's comments took place and their disorienting effect on those receiving them). Trump says, "To see what we're seeing – this boat, I don't know what happened, but this boat just came here" and he imagines a boat with a woman's legs coming out of the bottom walking to his present location (pp. 14–15), adding to Trump's statements an implicit visual critique of the sexually synecdochic, objectifying gaze he has been known for using with women throughout his career. At the end, he says "at least you got a nice boat out of the deal" and throws sausages at the local citizens, leaving with "have a good time!" (pp. 16–17). On the final page of the book the airplane takes off, with everyone looking confused, and says, "The End. (There is no moral.)" (p. 19). While signaling that Trump's dazed and confused entrance and exit to the circumstances had no personal moral, the tongue-in-cheek comment belies the thoroughly moral and metanoic performance of the children's book itself – made clear on the back cover – that this should not have happened and that, when grownups fail to do so, even children can learn what not to say while acting empathetically in such situations.

Colbert and his staff make clear inside the back cover that they are engaging in parodic advocacy for a purpose. Since, "This is the first book he has written all by himself," they bring into view an alternate reality inviting readers to situate themselves metanoically relative to Trump's previous statements. From another perspective, Colbert and his staff may have seen an opportunity to contribute to the public discourse lost in Colbert's first children's picturebook. Where the first book highlights how much the text was put together as a lark, this second book underscores a pointed political critique. The second book is also much simpler and could actually be read to children, which is different than the very adult-directed content of Colbert's first children's book (where the pole considers becoming a stripper pole, for example). From multiple levels, then, the book uses parody to enact serious metanoic purposes. With this in mind, we turn to the implications of this research for communication study and practice.

Restoring opportunity

Achieving success in today's hybrid media environment means being able to reach audiences across multiple media platforms. Public figures can no longer exist solely in the world of film, television, or music alone. One increasingly popular way to extend a message is to publish a crossover picturebook, attracting adults fans and by extension, their children. As our analysis has shown, the parodic advocacy in these picturebooks can function to both explicitly restory and implicitly generate recursive moral themes relative to other works in public culture. Several implications follow from this analysis.

First, one of the most significant aspects of using dually-inflected parody and metanoia is in their post-hoc attempts to forward ethical arguments and

train for positive actions in the public sphere. Oliver and Colbert's children's picturebook examples aren't simply jokes for jokes sake, or nihilistic, resigned forms of skepticism that nothing better can be done in politics. They are parodic forms of advocacy functioning metanoically, which Myers (2011) underscores means "afterthought," or "a learning process, painful as it may be," through which a person "becomes better prepared for the next moment of opportunity" (pp. 10–11). If there's persuasion and, as Cialdini (2016) has termed, "pre-suasion" to be had, one of parody's most useful functions can be to provide post-suasion on unfolding public events. By inviting transmedia disruption, this post-suasion signals different paths than the status quo, but also trains for opportune moments in the future beyond. In Oliver's case, in particular, giving viewers and readers a call-to-action presents an alternative politics and a story about tolerance and inclusion, looking to get laughs and influence attitudes and, in turn, policy.

Second, the children's picturebooks in this analysis demonstrate parody's multi-modal, interactive capacity to engage the visual, physiological, and cognitive dimensions of metanoia. With the sad connotations metanoia has historically evoked, regretful but forward looking laughter can enlist the affective and physiological aspects of metanoia toward a more joyful space than has been recognized (see also Waisanen, 2018b). Parodic versions of metanoia teach us that actions can quickly be followed by playful corrections toward better ends. Sullivan (1992) says *kairos* is "supra-rational" and uses "a force that does more than address his or her intellect" (p. 327), often operating "during the opportune moment under inspiration to bring presence to a single vision" (p. 329). In service to democracy, parody can take a look back at *kairotic* public moments to offer a doubled-vision that can more fully capture the breadth and depth of elements at play in political situations, inviting audiences not to get trapped by the host of visual, physiological, and cognitive fundamentalisms of political actors seeking to define.

In the end, it takes a form of rhetoric as robust as that which was set in motion to meet this challenge post-hoc. It's a reminder that, as Alberto Brandolini put it, "The amount of energy necessary to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it" (Brandolini, 2019, para. 1). In a multimedia age, unraveling a single vision's presence necessitates fully storied and morally engaging works that can land a thump with auditors. Where an administration may focus audiences on scenes, as we observed in the Oliver text, parody and metanoia can together bring agents, acts, agency, and purpose into view (see Burke, 1969).

Third, from a larger perspective, these books can be seen as important entries into a longstanding war about children in public discourse. In particular, the political right in the U.S. has often invoked the special status of children in its language and appeals (Jelen, 2005). These books can thus be seen as attempts to take back some of the right's dominance in this realm and amplify, through parody, the childishness of prominent administrative figures.

Benign violation theory highlights a related idea in combining “existing humor theories to propose that humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously” (McGraw, 2015, para. 2). While there’s many different facets to this theory, what’s relevant in Oliver and Colbert’s texts is how the benign associations of children’s picturebooks, and the innocence of children themselves, are brought to bear on serious adult matters with impacts on children too. In both content and form, both Oliver and Colbert’s parodic children’s picturebooks simultaneously intensify both the Trump administration’s violations and the benign frames in which they are positioned to construct a whole greater than their parts: ultimately, the administration’s maneuvers are recontextualized as juvenile and as impeding political work that addresses broad human needs and interests.

Gillespie (1991) writes that metanoia is often connected to “a change of mind after reflection; a going beyond the present attitude, status, or outlook; or repentance, which is also its translation,” using Karl Barth’s notion of “metanoia as an inclusive movement in which ‘man [sic] moves steadily to continually new thoughts”” (p. 26). Myers (2011) says that metanoia can be a persuasive device, pedagogical tool, or personal learning process. To these extant definitions and re-articulations can be added metanoia as a parodic, dynamic veto to misguided policymaking and behaviors.

Future research should capture data from purchasers of these picturebooks to understand their motivations, attitudes, and preferences. Another source could be the text of consumer reviews on sites like Amazon. It may also be interesting to measure, via focus groups or in-depth interviews, the different ways that children process and interpret these crossover picturebooks in contrast with the reactions of adolescent and adult readers. In today’s political climate, late-night comedy has received a great deal of scrutiny and attention. Examining these books aids our understanding of parody’s reach and how the funny translates to public engagement, not just in the hope of doing something different, but in restorying and restoring opportunity.

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