Brian Bergen-Aurand

Bellevue College

Bellevue, Washington

brian.bergen-aurand@bellevuecollege.edu

**Jokes and Their Relation to the (Un)Apology**

Abstract

*“The persecuted one cannot defend himself by language, for the persecution is a disqualification of the apology.”*

*~Emmanuel Levinas,* Otherwise than Being

What does a joke do? What does an apology do? What is the relation between the two?

On 28 July 2017, President Donald Trump spoke before a crowd of police and seemed to remark that forms of detainee care should be dropped and police should do less to protect those they arrest. He appeared to be advocating for a heightened disregard for those taken into police custody. Two days later, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders responded to questions regarding the President’s implications by stating, “I believe he was making a joke at the time.” Earlier this year, comedian Kathy Griffin posed for a series of photographs in which she held aloft a decapitated and bloodied effigy of President Trump’s head. Immediately after the images were released, Griffin was excoriated for this public display, and within days she posted an apology via Instagram, stating, “I’m a comic…. I cross the line. I move the line, then I cross it. I went way too far…. I beg for your forgiveness.” In this paper, I compare these two incidents where offending, joking, apologizing, and caring intersect to highlight the exposure invoked by both joking and apologizing, the exposure Levinas links throughout *Otherwise than Being* to the “absolute passivity beneath the neutrality of things [that] takes on the form of incarnation, corporeality—susceptibility to pain, outrage, unhappiness. [That] bears in its susceptibility the trace of this *hither side* of things, as the responsibility…for the very persecution it suffers.” (197)

**Brian Bergen-Aurand** is the editor of *Comedy Begins with our Simplest Gestures: Levinas, Ethics, and Humor* (Duquesne, 2017), co-author (with Matthew Menachem Feuer) of *Stand-Up/Sit-Down: Ability, Disability, Vulnerability, Comedy* (in progress), and author of *Cinematic Provocation: Ethics, Justice, Embodiment, and Global Film* (Routledge, 2018). He is also co-editor (with Mary Mazzilli and Hee Wai Siam) of *Transnational Chinese Cinema, Corporeality, Desire, and the Ethics of Failure* (2014) and founding editor of the journal *Screen Bodies* (Berghahn). Currently, he teaches in the English Department at Bellevue College, where he specializes in film, ethics, and embodiment. He can be reached via email at [brian.bergen-aurand@bellevuecollege.edu](mailto:brian.bergen-aurand@bellevuecollege.edu) or cellphone at (206) 890-6785.