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HOW MICHELLE WOLF BLASTED OPEN THE FICTIONS OF JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

By Masha Gessen April 30, 2018



Michelle Wolf's routine was only as obscene as the Presidency itself. Photograph by Cheriss May / NurPhoto via Getty

On Saturday, the comedian Michelle Wolf, performing at the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner, delivered the most consequential monologue so far of the Donald Trump era. Some of the attendees claimed to have walked out of the dinner in protest during the performance; others, like the President's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, have been lauded for remaining stoically in place in the face of scathing humor. The tension of it all might have been too much. The *Times*' White House correspondent Peter Baker lamented on Twitter, "I don't

think we advanced the cause of journalism tonight.” Commentators wondered—not for the first time—whether the White House Correspondents’ Association should discontinue the tradition of having comedians perform at the function.

Wolf’s monologue—sharp, unflinching, and pointedly unfunny in places—called bullshit on the role laughter has been performing in Trump’s America. Over the last year and a half, much of the culture has sought relief in humor in much the same way as citizens of extremely repressive countries. Back in the early nineties, in her book “How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed,” the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić described laughter as the ultimate personal triumph over the daily humiliations of life under Communist rule. In today’s Russia, people make jokes about the fear Vladimir Putin inspires (he opens the fridge and the jellied meat begins to quake, but he reassures it by saying he is getting the yogurt) or the suicidal nature of Russian foreign policy (we’ll retaliate against American sanctions by bombing the Russian city of Voronezh), the same way that they used to joke about Leonid Brezhnev’s inability to talk or stay awake during official functions. Jokes serve a transparent purpose: they reclaim the power to define—and inhabit—reality. They also reclaim the goodness of laughter, for regimes weaponize laughter to mock their opponents, creating what the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym called “totalitarian laughter.” Its opposite is anti-totalitarian laughter.

I recognize laughter in the age of Trump as though it were a cousin of anti-totalitarian laughter. It is the reaction to seeing act-based reality, as when “Saturday Night Live” essentially reënacts White House press conferences, or when late-night comedians offer up what amounts to straightforward reportage and analysis. The hunger for a reflection of reality is so desperate that, I have discovered repeatedly over the last year and a half, one can reliably get laughs simply by quoting Trump during a public talk.

Last month, Hillary Clinton got laughs and applause during her Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Lecture, which concluded PEN America’s annual World Voices Festival, by merely referring to Trump’s lie about the size of the crowd at his Inauguration (around the twenty-three-minute mark here). There was nothing funny about any of it: not about the President’s lies, nor about the grief that this had not been Clinton’s Inauguration, nor about the fact that, speaking a year and a half after her electoral loss, addressing the friendliest of all possible audiences, Clinton was as stilted,

scripted, and unapproachable as ever. She was still campaigning, still losing, and there was no reason to laugh.

Political satire in less troubled times exaggerates existing facts, pointing out the absurdities inherent in all ideologies, or playing up smaller disagreements and failures for bigger laughs. But Trump is hard to exaggerate—it is enough, it seems, merely to mirror him. But why does faithful portrayal of fact-based reality elicit laughter in a country that has a free press and a healthy public sphere in which, it seems, reality is robustly represented? What do late-night comedians reclaim from the *Times*?

Wolf's performance at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner suggests an answer. She called the President a racist, a truth as self-evident as it has proved difficult for mainstream journalists to state. Her humor was obscene: she joked about the President's affair with a porn star; about his "pulling out," as promised (of the Paris agreement); and about the G.O.P.'s former deputy finance chair Elliott Broidy's \$1.6 million payoff to a former mistress. She also made mincemeat of White House staff, House and Senate Republican leaders, the Democrats, and journalists on the right and left, in their presence or in that of their colleagues.

The White House Correspondents' Association dinner is a peculiar institution. It brings together White House correspondents, other members of the news media, and the people they cover: government employees and elected officials. (In years past, though not so much in the Trump era, it also attracted a gaggle of Hollywood celebrities.) What makes these dinners possible are fictions about civility and performance. There is a fiction that holds that journalists and their subjects can eat and socialize together and yet maintain the distance necessary to continue performing their professional roles. There is a fiction that they can laugh at one another and themselves and not take offense, that the divisions among guests are ultimately bridgeable, that all of them inhabit the same reality, and that both the humor and the objects of the humor are innocuous.

The same fiction continues to dominate our public sphere. In this story, Trump performs the role of President, albeit poorly, and those in the media maintain a strained civility in their coverage of him. In this story, the statement that the President is a racist is still controversial. In this story, the media can discuss his affair with a porn star, and even the question of whether he used a condom, without undermining respect for the

office. This is an essential pretense, because respect for the office of the President is indeed a value that should transcend the current Presidency. But it is this pretense, and these fictions, that cast a pall of unreality over most media coverage and make late-night comedy shows the better news outlets. And then there is the pretense that the late-night comedians exist in a parallel universe, separate even from the television channels that broadcast them.

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Wolf's routine burst the bubbles of civility and performance, and of the separation of media and comedy. It plunged the attendees into the reality that is, in the Trump era, the stuff of comedy. Through her obscene humor, Wolf exposed the obscenity of the fictions—and the fundamental unfunny of it all. Her last line, the most shocking of her entire monologue, bears repeating: Flint still doesn't have clean water.



Masha Gessen, a staff writer, has written several books, including, most recently, “The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia,” which won the National Book Award in 2017. [Read more »](#)

Video

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