



**Sketch Comedy in the Age of Trump, or,  
A Snowflake Does a Political Sketch Revue at His “Liberal” Arts College**

By Matt Fotis

Comedy has a long and complicated relationship with power, at times reinforcing it and at others tearing it down. Yet we seldom use comedy on college campuses to confront, challenge, and question the issues of the day. Many stand-up comics have sworn off performing on college campuses for fear of offending.<sup>1</sup> Improv and sketch comedy groups are regularly relegated to student-club status with little or no faculty involvement. In theatre departments across the country, we too often see comedy as the “light” slot in our seasons—something to cleanse the palate (and sell a lot of tickets). The real work of changing the world and intellectual debate is left to our dramatic pieces. Meanwhile, our students are increasingly engaging with the world through comedy and satire. Numerous studies have shown that young people get their news from social media or late-night television, such as *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight*, or by watching a clip of *The Daily Show* on social media.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, in the winter of 2015-16 I proposed writing and directing an original sketch comedy satirical revue for

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Flanagan, “That’s Not Funny! Today’s college students can’t seem to take a joke,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/>.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Mitchell et al., “The Modern News Consumer,” Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/young-adults/>.

Albright College’s next mainstage season, to open the weekend before the 2016 election and close on election eve. After several weeks of explaining what a sketch revue actually was, my colleagues greenlit the project even if some of them still weren’t quite sure what it was I was doing. Thus, *Make Democracy Great Again, or, The Most Important Election of Our Lifetime . . . That is Until the Next One* was born.

A funny thing happened on the way to the sketch comedy forum. Donald J. Trump—the sideshow, publicity-seeking “joke” candidate—started winning primaries. Then Donald J. Trump—the nationalistic, populist, shock-jock, conspiracy-theory candidate—became the presumptive Republican nominee. Then Donald J. Trump—the is-this-really-happening candidate—became the actual Republican nominee.<sup>3</sup> As the summer and fall of 2016 unfolded, suddenly I was working on a sketch comedy revue in the midst of an actual, real-life sketch comedy revue. Added to the traditional challenges one encounters when creating an original piece, we were faced with a series of challenges unique to the 2016 election cycle. How do we satirize the absurd? How do we take on the overt racism, sexism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia that was defining the campaign? How do we keep our material fresh and relevant when the news changes every twenty minutes? How do we present a fair and unique portrayal of each candidate when their public personas are already so clearly defined?<sup>4</sup> How do we challenge audiences without alienating or lecturing them? This article explores satire in the age of Donald J. Trump—where facts don’t matter and the truth is both right in front of us and so

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<sup>3</sup> And, low and behold (spoiler alert), Donald J. “grab ‘em by the pussy” Trump became the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

<sup>4</sup> The vice-presidential candidates, by contrast, were much easier to satirize as they were relatively blank slates. Our Mike Pence became defined by repression. His repressive and regressive policies were a result of his repressive persona—so repressive that he could not even laugh. Tim Kaine became our fanny-pack-wearing, affable stepdad, ready to break the tension and avoid conflict through dad jokes.

very hard to find—through the creative process of our sketch comedy revue *Make Democracy Great Again*.

### **What is Sketch Comedy?**

Though sometimes thought of as just a “bad play,” a comedy sketch is really a self-contained thirty-second to roughly ten-minute scene that is based on a single premise (traditional sketch) or a satiric point (political sketch), with little character or plot development in the traditional sense. Eric Weitz, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*, describes a sketch as a single *lazzi* bit that lasts as long as the bit can sustain laughter. [The Dead Parrot](#) sketch from Monty Python is a good example; John Cleese reaches for a string of euphemisms to describe the dead parrot he has been duped into buying, while the shopkeeper refuses to acknowledge the crooked sale. The *lazzi* is based on delay, protraction, and extension.<sup>5</sup> And just in case you are about to call a sketch a skit, as Annoyance Theatre founder and frequent Second City director Mick Napier notes, “skits would be what cub scouts do.”<sup>6</sup> A sketch can be silly and pointless, but a political sketch has a crystal-clear point of view that trumps (no pun intended) the other dramatic elements.

A collection of sketches is referred to as a sketch comedy revue. The form as we know it today developed in the 1960s at The Second City, which was building on the work of The Compass Players. According to Second City producer Bernie Sahlins, a revue is “a stage presentation that uses short scenes of varying lengths. Add music and songs and think of it as

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Leep, *Theatrical Improvisation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 89.

generally comical and topical by nature.”<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, a sketch revue is a collection of scenes, songs, and blackouts that combine to explore a larger theme. The comedy is based on irony and satire, taking pointed jabs at social, political, and cultural norms by turning mainstream ideas about religion, race, politics, and culture on their heads. Rather than a traditional narrative, the revue’s through line is based on its satiric point. For instance, a sketch revue might be thematically linked by our reliance on technology, with each sketch offering a different satiric point on the way technology influences our lives. There’s no main character or narrative arc; instead, the audience follows the connections between sketches as the thematic arc develops. Some characters may return throughout the revue, but generally characters live and die with one sketch, often existing without a fully developed inner life.<sup>8</sup>

Sketch comedy is heavily dependent on satire and parody. Satire’s exact definition has ebbed and flowed over the past few thousand years, but it is generally “a term reserved for a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their actions.”<sup>9</sup> Satire takes aim at a specific target, and, as is often the case in contemporary satire, it does so with the goal of exposing “truth.” As Andrew Stott notes in *Comedy: The New Critical Idiom*, “satire’s appeal has traditionally rested in its ability to speak truth to power and to effect the resistance implied by George Orwell’s proposition that ‘every joke is a tiny revolution.’”<sup>10</sup> According to George A. Test, satire contains four key elements:

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Sahlins, *Days and Nights at the Second City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 115.

<sup>8</sup> On the other side, a play is a play (feel free to quote me). A play explores big ideas through plot and/or character development. A play’s characters live within and beyond the world of the play—the characters and story may stay with us, whereas the satiric point is what stays with us in sketch comedy. Both forms deal with big ideas; they just approach them in different ways.

<sup>9</sup> David Marc, “Foreword,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: NYU Press, 2009), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 160.

aggression, judgment, play, and laughter.<sup>11</sup> Not all satire needs to be funny to be effective—the playful mixture of aggression and judgment is satire’s key characteristic. The combination is what makes satire effective. As Test writes, “whether the target is vice or folly, absurdity or enemies of the state, the satirist is concerned with passing judgment.”<sup>12</sup> In contemporary political satire, that judgment is tied to exposing truth in a world of spin and lies. As Alvin Kernan writes, “in the satirist’s vision of the world decency is forever in a precarious position near the edge of extinction and the world is about to pass into eternal darkness. Consequently, every effort is made to emphasize the destroying ugliness and power of vice.”<sup>13</sup> Satire must pass judgment—in the world of sketch comedy, this judgment is tied to the sketch’s satiric point. What is it that we are trying to say in this particular sketch? What are we critiquing or judging? With Trump, we satirize his ideas, behavior, corruption, hypocrisies, stunning ignorance of American history, and his policy inconsistencies. Satirists take aim both at his salesmanship and showmanship, and at his pandering and populism.

Parody, on the other hand, mimics something—a person, genre, etc.—to point out its foibles. Satire and parody often work hand in hand. As Elaine May once put it, parody is “friendly satire.”<sup>14</sup> Parody relies on exaggeration for humor, first mimicking and then exaggerating its target. Parody is frequently aimed at a particular person, writer, genre, or song, whereas satire tends to speak to larger issues and/or topics. Parody can be divided into two genres: parody and blank parody. Traditional parody mimics a form in a “friendly” way to point

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<sup>11</sup> George A. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Test, *Satire*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, eds., *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Sam Wasson, *Improv Nation: How We Made a Great American Art* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017), 99.

out foibles, whereas blank parody tends to focus exclusively on capturing the genre itself. Weird Al's [parody songs](#) are good examples of blank parody, as the humor simply resides in the similarity and subsequent exaggeration between the original song and its parody. There is no deeper meaning or critique. In sketch comedy, satire and parody can complement each other, such as with the 2016 *Saturday Night Live* sketch "[Black Jeopardy](#)." The parody in the sketch focuses on the game show Jeopardy—taking on the show the show's form—only it is, in this satiric world, intended only for Black people. The host is a Black version of Alex Trebek, and the categories are an intentional parody featuring exaggerated Black categories. In this sketch, a Trump supporter named Doug—played flawlessly by Tom Hanks—is one of the three contestants. The satire in the sketch focuses on the connections between two groups of people who seemingly are at odds. Rather than focus on what divides the two groups, as would be the easy laugh (and is often the case on other Black Jeopardy sketches), the sketch points out their similarities. As the sketch progresses, Doug answers several questions correctly and seems to be fitting in (as best he can). It is not until the final category—"Lives That Matter"—that we again see the stark difference between contestants, and the satiric point becomes apparent: race is used to divide people who seemingly have a lot of similar economic interests. In this sketch, parody is used to enhance satire.

We see parody of Trump when comedy centers on his hair, tiny hands, pursed mouth, orange complexion, mannerisms, or speech patterns. In political sketch comedy, it is almost impossible to satirize a presidential candidate without also parodying him or her. An audience won't respond to a non-orange Trump with normal hair who properly pronounces the word "China." Good luck if your Hillary Clinton is not wearing a pantsuit and a forced smile.

Audiences crave that entry point, without which there can be no satire. Too often, however, comedy about Trump leans too heavily on parody.<sup>15</sup> When this happens, there is no critique of Trump; instead, we are only presented with parody via mimicry and exaggeration. For example, in the October 14, 2017, "[Donald Trump Trucker Rally Cold Open](#)," jokes tend to avoid or step around the major issues of the week: Trump reigniting the NFL kneeling controversy, the details of the Republican tax plan, and the hurricane response in Puerto Rico. Instead, we get jokes about Senator Bob Corker being small, Trump mispronouncing things, and Trump guiding Mike Pence to leave various events that aren't "American" enough. The sketch is a parody of Trump—there are certainly funny moments, but with so much there to satirize and critique, most of the comedy focuses on Trump's mannerisms and personality or takes "friendly" jabs at his policies. The sketch jokes about Trump undoing Obama's policies on healthcare, Iran, and "ripping out all the vegetables in Michelle Obama's garden and planting McNuggets." The joke is an exaggeration (parody) of Trump's agenda to undo Obama's legacy, rather than a critique (satire) of what such an agenda actually means for the country.

While many have viewed satire as a corrective to Trump, some argue that satire is not effective in taking on Trump in part because the sketches tend to rely too heavily on parody. But there are other concerns that come with laughing at Trump. Harvey Young argues that "satire normalizes Trump's presidency . . . The more that he appears on SNL, the more familiar his presidency becomes. It's not that he's humanized by parody. He simply appears more

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<sup>15</sup> SNL's two most effective satirical pieces during the election and early Trump administration were "Black Jeopardy" and [Melissa McCarthy's Sean Spicer](#). In "Black Jeopardy" there was a clear satiric point: many of Trump's white voters who feel left behind and extremely suspicious of "the government," mirrors the experience of many African Americans. McCarthy's Spicer not only makes fun of his aggressive tone but satirizes the lengths to which he goes to spin the lies of the White House. The comedy is rooted not only in McCarthy's impersonation, but in the content of Spicer's actions.

recognizable as the president.”<sup>16</sup> Anne Libera argues that satire can actually be too much of a balm: “There are studies out there that suggest that people are less likely to try to affect change in a situation after being exposed to jokes about that situation. It may be that there is something in laughing at an injustice that gives us an intellectual distance rather than creating an emotional/empathic connection which could drive us to action.”<sup>17</sup> But as Libera points out, one of comedy’s greatest strengths is creating community: “When we laugh at something together, it bonds us. We know we are not alone in our thinking. And knowing that there are others out there who agree with us is a pretty big predictor of motivation for change.”<sup>18</sup> More importantly, as noted above, Libera and others argue that Trump-based comedy tips more toward parody than satire—there is no substantive judgment. So how do we satirize Trump? How do we balance the parody necessary to engage an audience with the satire necessary to be effective? To help contextualize this parody/satire continuum, let’s briefly look at the development of presidential satire within sketch comedy.

### **A Brief Overview of Presidential Sketch Comedy**

In a 1985 interview with *The New York Times Book Review*, famed *Washington Post* columnist Art Buchwald summed it up: “You can’t make up anything anymore. The world itself is a satire. All you’re doing is recording it.”<sup>19</sup> As long as there have been written records, there

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<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in James Warren, “Laughing at Trump,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/thomas-jefferson-street/articles/2017-03-15/what-to-make-of-alec-baldwins-saturday-night-live-skits-on-donald-trump>.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Warren, “Laughing at Trump.”

<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in Warren, “Laughing at Trump.”

<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Karl Ernest Meyer, *Pundits, Poets, and Wits: An Omnibus of American Newspaper Columns* (Replica Books, 1990), 308.



has been political satire. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks were fans of unflattering or parodic caricatures of leaders, with the Greek playwright Aristophanes bringing his political satire to the stage. From Horace to Dante to Voltaire to Jonathan Swift, there is a long and celebrated literary history of political satire. In America, a country founded on political revolution and a seemingly ingrained mistrust of government, there is a long and varied tradition of political humor—from Ben Franklin’s [“Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One”](#) to Alec Baldwin’s Trump.

American political humor has come in three main forms: literary, cartoon, and performance. Literary political humor dates back to the colonial period, most notably with the writings of Ben Franklin. An early favorite target of satirists’ pens were colonial governors, especially in Virginia (Francis Nicholson, Alexander Spotswood, and Robert Dinwiddie) and Massachusetts (Samuel Shute, Jonathan Belcher, and William Shirley).<sup>20</sup> The rise of the political cartoon in the nineteenth century brought a new form of political satire led by the father of the genre, Thomas Nast. In addition to creating the popular image of Santa Claus and the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey, his cartoons helped expose the corruption of “Boss” Tweed and New York’s Tammany Hall, causing Tweed to order his aides to “stop them damn pictures.”<sup>21</sup> Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and the aforementioned Art Buchwald continued America’s tradition of literary political humor.<sup>22</sup> In the later 1950s and 1960s, stand-up comics

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<sup>20</sup> Alison Gilbert Olson, “Political Humor, Deference, and the American Revolution,” *Early American Studies* 3 (2005): 363-382.

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in S. Robert Lichter, Jody C. Baumgartner, and Jonathan S. Morris, *Politics is a Joke!* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Twain: “Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.”

Rodgers: “I belong to no organized party. I’m a Democrat.”

Buchwald: “If President Nixon’s secretary, Rosemary Woods, had been Moses’ secretary, there would only be eight commandments.”

Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Dick Gregory brought current events to the stage through their socially charged stand-up. The many satirical films of the twentieth century, such as *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, brought political humor to the screen and a mass audience. *Mad* magazine and *National Lampoon* married literary and cartoon satire in their hugely influential humor magazines, with both bringing their trademark anarchic humor to various performance incarnations—from *Lemmings* to *Animal House* to *Mad TV*. The fake news of *The Onion*, the proliferation of satirical late-night television shows such as *The Colbert Report*, and the thriving contemporary satire #resistance demonstrates that American political humor is only growing more diverse and incisive.<sup>23</sup>

Political humor and sketch comedy in live performance can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the minstrel show. Reflecting racial tension in America, most minstrel performances asked audiences to laugh at stock characters based on negative racial stereotypes with many minstrel stereotypes of African Americans permeating into American culture. While minstrelsy's main purpose wasn't satire, it was politically charged, culturally influential, and socially divisive. As Frederick Douglass, who according to Trump is "[being recognized more and more](#)," said in *The North Star* in 1848, blackface performers were "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."<sup>24</sup> The minstrel show demonstrated that comic performance could be used as a way to control and shape the cultural and political narrative. Borrowing from minstrelsy, as well as variety show

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<sup>23</sup> Clearly, this is the definitive and exhaustive list of American political humor.

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Eric Lott, "The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (June 1991): 223.

and music hall performances of the nineteenth century, vaudeville made its mark as the most popular form of comedic performance in the early twentieth century. Much of the humor was based on ethnic stereotypes, working to both reinforce and dismantle the various stereotypes associated with the changing face of America's cities and communities. The comic duos, joke structure, and "bits" of vaudeville show the early origins of contemporary sketch comedy. With the rise of radio, television, and film (such as Charlie Chaplin's 1940 film [The Great Dictator](#)), vaudeville's popularity waned.

As the world took a new shape after World War II, comedy changed with it. By the early 1960s American satire began to sharpen, in part influenced by the "satire boom" in England. British productions such as *Beyond the Fringe*, which played in New York from 1962-64, and *That Was the Week That Was*, which spawned an American spin-off, led to a more combative and direct form of political satire. Stand-up comics such as [Lenny Bruce](#), [Mort Sahl](#), and [Dick Gregory](#) began using politics, current events, and race as the source of their comedy, starkly contrasting the apolitical joke-punchline style of many of the early Borscht Belt comics. With the birth of The Second City from the ashes of The Compass Players in Chicago in 1959, political sketch comedy onstage likewise became woven into the fabric of American political humor, with Mike Nichols and Elaine May leading the charge. Building on the success of *Your Show of Shows*, the 1960s also saw the evolution of television sketch comedy with *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Laugh-In*, and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. Much like the stand-up of Bruce, Sahl, and Gregory, these shows—*The Smothers Brothers* in particular—made current events and politics the subject of much of the humor, to the networks' and censors' dismay.

While presidents have been the target of satire for centuries, contemporary sketch-based satire is relatively young and has undergone a radical shift in the last fifty years. Beginning with Vaughn Meader's comedy album "[The First Family](#)," which was a parodic satire on JFK and the Kennedys, many of the earliest presidential sketch and performance satirists sought to illuminate the absurd within the real. Through the latter half of the twentieth century, presidential satirists mainly worked to amplify their targets, making them more extreme, more out of touch, more absurd. As G. K. Chesterton states, "the essence of satire is that it perceives some absurdity inherent in the logic of some position, and . . . draws the absurdity out and isolates it, so that all can see it."<sup>25</sup> The truth these satirists sought was not found in the real, but in the absurd amplification of the real. Chevy Chase's *SNL* impression of Gerald Ford is a prime example. As the [Gerald Ford on Christmas Eve](#) sketch demonstrates, Chase works to amplify Ford's clumsiness and general buffoonery—he starts his fireside address early, cuts ornaments off the tree, hangs stockings upside down, and, of course, falls over trying to put the star on the tree. From a simple trip caught on camera, Ford became "the first president to be defined by a pratfall."<sup>26</sup> As Ford himself notes in his autobiography, thanks to Chase's impression, anytime he "stumbled or bumped [his] head or fell in the snow, reporters zeroed in on that to the exclusion of almost everything else."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, *SNL*'s Phil Hartman portrays [Bill Clinton voraciously eating all the McDonald's he can get his hands on](#). His one-on-one charm and policy knowledge are on full display, as is his uncontrollable appetite

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<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Lichter, Baumgartner, and Morris, *Politics is a Joke!*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 289.

(and not just for food). Both of these examples push absurdity to reveal truths about the two men. After 9/11 and during George W. Bush's presidency, satire began to shift. The truth became harder to find, thanks in part to the secrecy of the Bush White House and the "patriotically correct" reporting of the media, who seemed tentative to question lest they be seen as unpatriotic.<sup>28</sup>

Cable news went all in, often sensationalizing the news rather than reporting it. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* stepped into this truth vacuum. The shows rose in popularity specifically because they were speaking a truth the media and others were not (albeit a truth leaning left). The shows called out the media for echoing not only the Bush White House, but also each other. *The Daily Show* especially gained traction as a media and "truth" watchdog. As the two shows became increasingly popular and influential, satire itself began to change. Stephen Colbert's turn as the right-wing commentator Stephen Colbert began as a traditional satiric amplification of the absurd, but over the course of the show it shifted into absurdity mirroring the real. Suddenly, satire didn't need to amplify the absurd; cable news was already doing that, so satire began pointing out the real in the absurd. Colbert's trademark "[truthiness](#)" embodied this change, satirizing the very real (and absurd) notion that truth was something to be felt rather than objectively known.

Sarah Palin's rapid ascent during the 2008 election and Tina Fey's portrayal catapulted the notion that satire's new role was to point out the real in the absurd. Fey simply repeated Palin's actual speeches and interviews—most notably in a sketch about [Palin's interview with](#)

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<sup>28</sup> Ira Glass, "599: Seriously?," *This American Life*, produced by WBEZ, NPR, October 21, 2016, audio, 63:37, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/599/seriously>.

[Katie Couric](#). Fey's request for a lifeline in the sketch is a prime example where the real (Palin's lack of preparation to be vice president) is found amongst the absurd. With the campaign of Donald J. Trump pushing all notions of normal to the wayside, satirists have attacked Trump in much the same way Tina Fey attacked Sarah Palin: by repeating Trump's own words. While *SNL* and others (most notably his Republican primary challengers and Hillary Clinton) have tried to use Trump's words against him to amplify the real behind the absurd, the strategy has proven largely ineffective—mainly because much of the political satire about Trump is actually parody focused on his mannerisms, speech pattern, and larger-than-life persona. While Fey's Palin seemed to be speaking to the truth of Palin's identity, much of Trump's satire has been poking fun at him rather than revealing any deeper truth.<sup>29</sup>

If empty parody does not work, what does work? Here I wish to make a case for what I call "satiric authenticity." Satiric authenticity has a clear satiric point that reveals truth from an honest and earnest point of view. We laugh at truth. The most successful late-night comics in the age of Trump are employing satiric authenticity. By authenticity I mean that the satire itself is grounded in truth and fact as well as in the earnest point of view of the performer. Good comedy and satire has always sought the truth, which is now harder to find than ever; but even more important than exposing the truth, satirically authentic jokes are defined by the comic's genuine investment in the satiric point of the joke. One reason Alec Baldwin's Trump has resonated with audiences is that we know Baldwin despises Trump (and that Trump despises Baldwin's impression). Baldwin's portrayal veers toward parody, which might explain why he

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<sup>29</sup> The breakneck speed of news, tweets, and scandal surrounding Trump also plays a role, as well as his willingness to lie and contradict himself.

feels that “people are growing, not so much weary of it, where they think it’s funny, but they don’t know if it’s achieving any practical purposes.”<sup>30</sup> It isn’t necessarily the content that people are responding to (many believe *SNL* is playing it too safe with Trump, in part because there is more parody than satire)—it is the satiric authenticity of his performance that makes it effective. Samantha Bee’s outrage on *Full Frontal* is personal; John Oliver’s weekly in-depth investigations on *Last Week Tonight* emerge from deep intellectual curiosity; and the “A Closer Look” segment on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* is so clearly the host’s earnest point of view that viewers, particularly liberal viewers, have given each show a ratings boost. The late-night jokes matter less with Trump than they ever have before. Authenticity is more important than the joke, which is why Jimmy Fallon’s Trump comedy falls flat (Fallon also has yet to recover fully from his infamous [hair tousling interview](#)). The Trump satire that resonates with people (and the president) is authentic first, funny second. Obviously, satiric authenticity raises issues of bias and calls into question the meaning of “the truth” that is beyond the scope of this article, but its implementation is resonating with people, especially with those opposed to Trump.

### **The *Make Democracy Great Again* Writers’ Room**

So how does this all relate to *Make Democracy Great Again*? First and foremost, I wanted the show to be satirically authentic. To do that, our revue needed to not only address Trump, it needed to dig deeper into our political system and ask: How did we get to a point where someone like Donald Trump was a candidate for president? In even broader terms, the

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<sup>30</sup> Qtd. in Bryan Alexander, “Alec Baldwin talks completely, 100% uncensored about Donald Trump,” *USA Today*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2017/03/09/alec-baldwin-uncensored-thoughts-about-president-donald-trump/98942406/>.

2016 election was framed as a “lesser of two evils.” So how did we get to the point where we had two highly unlikable candidates and a number of people were simply voting *against* Trump or Clinton rather than *for* one of them? How did we get to the point where it didn’t really feel like we had a democracy anymore? Yes, Trump and Clinton were going to be a big part of the show, but I didn’t want it to be solely about them. Among people on both sides, there was a sense of outrage at being left behind by a broken system that defined the 2016 election. This bubbling anger created the vacuum Trump stepped into and exploited, and it was the obstacle Clinton could never quite overcome. To simply parody the candidates was empty to me—we needed to satirize the system and figure out what it would take to literally make democracy great again.

There was also an overwhelming pressure to be fair.<sup>31</sup> Not only would we lose the audience if we weren’t, but I’d probably be in pretty hot water, professionally. However, “fair” is not the same as “equal.” In the current political climate—in large measure because of the rise of cable news and the conservative narrative of a “conspiracy of the liberal media elite”—fairness and equality are conflated. Every issue on CNN needs two (or thirty) talking heads, each of whom gets equal time and weight no matter what they’re arguing. The idea of a false equivalency between Clinton’s emails and ALL of Trump was something that I felt was a flaw in our system and ripe for satire. Therefore, in *Make Democracy Great Again*, we clearly took a side. At the same time, we were not nice to Clinton, who was very much an unsympathetic

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<sup>31</sup> In *Politics is a Joke!*, the authors studied late-night jokes told during the elections between 1992 and 2012, and they found that jokes focused on presidents and presidential candidates were heavily weighted toward Republicans, with “nearly twice as many jokes about Republicans as about Democrats” (Lichter et al. 2015, 86). To be fair, Bill Clinton was the overwhelming target leader in late-night jokes during this period. To be doubly fair, Barack Obama was the least targeted.



figure in our revue who couldn't communicate her message, misread situations, and seemed more concerned with being president than with conveying her message beyond "Trump's a train wreck. I'm not him." Our Clinton portrayal was based on her trying to camouflage her ambition, qualifications, and, of course, her emails. Her concealed ambition was certainly related to her gender, as women must deal with a slew of sexist stereotypes concerning women and power. Part of concealing her ambition was downplaying her qualifications and political experience (as well as her campaign's attempt to simultaneously distance itself and cozy up to President Obama). It was obvious how badly she wanted to win while being unable to bluntly say it in the same way Trump could. This created a catch-22 for our Clinton in that she couldn't baldly announce her ambition without facing centuries of sexism; yet, by not announcing her clear ambition she came across as untrustworthy and inauthentic, which in turn fed into the "untrustworthy" barbs hurled at her for nearly three decades by the Right. We tried to highlight this layered camouflage in her portrayal—some of it self-imposed (how did she not develop an answer for the emails or think to visit Wisconsin?) and some of it manufactured.

Our creative process for this piece started in a writers' room. It was important for me to have the entire production team—performers, writers, stage management, and crew—in the writers' room right from the start. Most importantly, everyone was expected to write sketches. I wanted to give the students an authentic sketch comedy experience. One of the reasons sketch is held in such low esteem in academia is because it can be done very lazily. From the outset, I made it clear that we were working on a serious piece of theatre and that everyone in the room needed to treat it with the same level of respect and passion as any other mainstage show. To emphasize the point, the first rule of the room was that things weren't going to be

equal. Not everyone was going to get a sketch into the show—the best combination of sketches was the goal. I wanted approximately 150 sketches to pull from for roughly twenty to twenty-five slots in the show. This worked to free the company—with so much volume there was less pressure on each sketch. One student noted in a post-show survey, “I actually found the number of sketches we had to write freeing. It became more about the ideas and less about writing a funny sketch.” By taking some pressure off of each individual sketch and removing the “be funny!” pressure, students were able to focus on what they wanted to say, even if they didn’t always know how to translate that into an effective sketch. I also told them that anything they wrote I would have the authority to rewrite, which I did. To quote Trump’s Republican National Convention speech, “I alone can fix it.”

To help the students figure out what they wanted to say, before and during the writing process we discussed the issues that were fundamental to the campaign. I did quizzes on current events, civics, and party platforms. We watched debates together. We brought in political science professors to educate us on the electoral process. I wanted the cast and crew to be policy wonks—you cannot satirize something if you don’t understand it or know anything about it—and at the beginning they knew shockingly little about how our government functions. These quizzes turned into a preshow bit for our Announcer, who, as folks found their seats, went through the audience asking basic civics questions and handing out American flag stickers. It became abundantly clear through our process that part of the problem with our system was how little we all knew about it. We wanted to bring that slight tinge of shame to

our audience without alienating them—everyone got a sticker, even if they didn’t know what the TPP is or what freedoms are protected by the First Amendment.<sup>32</sup>

As part of the writing process, I led some basic sketch-writing workshops with particular emphasis on clearly stating a satiric point—the thesis statement of political sketch comedy. During the early writing sessions, I let students write about whatever they wanted, and we got a lot of not-that-well-written “Trump is a dick” sketches. We needed to get those out of our system, and it was important to continue to reorient students to the idea of the show: the system is broken—how do we make democracy great again? After about two weeks, it became clear that we needed more direction to avoid the Trump tsunami, so I started giving students daily writing prompts. I asked for sketches about Clinton (both from a liberal and conservative bent), sketches about hypocritical liberals and Bernie Bros, pro-Trump sketches, sketches about the electoral process, sketches about voting, sketches about the third-party candidates, and sketches about being in college. I asked them to write a sketch that starred themselves and played to their performance strengths regardless of how it fit into a political world. I asked them to write a sketch highlighting another cast member. I asked for musical numbers and commercials. No matter the sketch, the first thing we discussed was its satiric authenticity, which was hugely beneficial. Often the writer couldn’t articulate it right away, but as the process went on the sketches became more pointed. Conversely, sometimes students had a clear satiric point but couldn’t put it into sketch form.<sup>33</sup> In that case, I would assign the satiric

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<sup>32</sup> Just in case you want to check your answer: The TPP is the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a highly controversial trade agreement. Trump and Bernie Sanders were against it. Clinton eventually pretended to be against it as well. The First Amendment guarantees the freedom of speech, religion, press, peaceable assembly, and your right to petition the government.

<sup>33</sup> Much like a Writing 101 course, we either had a paper with no thesis, or a strong thesis with no support.

point to a group of writers and/or (re)write the sketch myself. We started to home in on our satirical point about each candidate and the revue as a whole.

As we moved into staging rehearsals, the sketches themselves were in a constant state of revision. Putting a sketch on its feet rendered chunks of text redundant—the good old show-don't-tell rule. This was helpful for many reasons. Obviously, it made the show better. But it was also a great lesson in new play development, as students tend to think a new play goes from the playwright's head to the stage completely unchanged. The on-its-feet, nuts-and-bolts revising that happens in real time with sketch comedy was another new experience for students. Even if a sketch didn't need much revision, I'd ask the actors to improvise the scene or purposefully go on a tangent to further explore the sketch. One performer commented on "how uneasy" this made her initially, but ultimately "it was a profound creative experience." Some of the funniest moments in the revue came from bits added in by the actors during rehearsal.

### **Some Sample Sketches**

To help contextualize the show, I'd like to briefly look at several sketches that ended up in our revue. These selected sketches were written/created in a different manner from one another.

#### **"Swing State"**

*Satiric point:* The Electoral College turns a national election into one decided by a handful of counties in a handful of states.

*Premise:* An election-night party between three traditional blue states—California, Illinois, and Delaware—along with traditional red state North Dakota. The four states are celebrating the wonders of democracy and the coming changing of the guard, when Ohio crashes the party and gloats about his importance. He’s a giant asshole whom nobody likes, and after listening to him boasting about his importance and the likelihood that the election will come down “to a few measly votes in Ohio,” he ends up being stabbed by North Dakota. We got the state wrong (Ohio), but the point was clear . . . that’s right, we were satirizing the Electoral College before it was cool.

*Writing process:* This is a sketch I wrote that underwent very little major revision. During rehearsal, I gave the actor playing Ohio free reign to be as big of an asshole as he possibly could, so he certainly amplified the character, leading to a hilarious and repetitious rant of “You stabbed me” upon being stabbed. This is a good example of a sketch that takes aim at our system rather than at Trump or Clinton.

“Trump Land”

*Satiric point:* Trump is running a carnival campaign that is just another in a long line of get-rich-quick schemes bearing his name.

*Premise:* This sketch is a monologue given by Trump that parodies his many commercial endeavors (Trump Steaks, Trump University, Trump Vodka, etc.). He is building an amusement park with rides named after his policies and scandals: The Tax Evader, The Million Dollar Loan Super-Duper-Looper, The Pussy Grabber, The Daddy-Daughter Kissing Booth, Vladimir Putin,

Whack-a-Mexican . . . with a few trademark digs at Rosie O’Donnell (the park features The Rosie O’Donnell Petting Zoo, “filled with the finest fat pigs in New Jersey”).

*Writing process:* While discussing the traits that make up Trump, we collectively came up with the idea of him selling his scandals. We brainstormed the different rides and attractions that would comprise Trump Land, then I sat down and compiled them into the monologue. This type of sketch is also a good example of how we balanced staying timely with having some sort of set structure for our designers to work within. We could add in or take out a scandal ride at any time, including during the run of the show.

#### “Minority Voter”

*Satiric point:* Both parties and the media treat minorities as a monolith that votes as a single bloc.

*Premise:* This sketch is a monologue with quick interspersed monologues and scenes. A young African American woman sarcastically details how you don’t need to treat her as an individual or ask her opinion on any political matters simply because she’s black. This is layered with a rant from a white, food-stamps-dependent Washington Redskins fan about Colin Kaepernick and the way minorities just take from the government.

*Writing process:* This sketch was born out of a very serious monologue written by a cast member about being a voiceless minority. I reworked it and married it to another monologue given by a casually racist Trump supporter about how she’s not racist. In rehearsal, we then added in two other short moments that helped tie the sketch to the revue as a whole. Again,

this sketch became about more than Trump vs. Clinton, and it pointed to another flaw in our system.

“Best Buy”

*Satiric point:* Clinton’s inability to effectively communicate is her greatest weakness, highlighted by her failure to deal with the email issue.

*Premise:* Clinton calls Geek Squad at Best Buy for tech support to wipe her phones and server. It’s a comment on her perceived shadiness, but it’s also a commentary on her inability to effectively communicate—she doesn’t grasp the scope of the email issue and is likewise unable to clearly articulate what she means/needs to the Geek Squad customer service rep. It is shocking and a huge political mistake that she seemingly never came up with an answer for this question, even though it continued to dog her. While Trump embraced so many of his scandals or brushed them aside as “fake news,” Clinton was never able to effectively deal with the email issue.

*Writing process:* This sketch was originally written by a cast member, but the satiric point wasn’t clear; the original draft simply made fun of the email issue while ignoring Clinton’s mismanagement of the issue. From my perspective, her missing the point and seemingly ignoring the issue was the component most ripe for satirizing. It was not only a tactical mistake—it spoke to a larger critique that she was out of touch and unable to communicate her

message. The prompt was in response to a video of Clinton asking, “Why aren’t I 50 points ahead?”<sup>34</sup>

### “White Walkers”

*Satiric point:* Liberal righteousness is going to be the Left’s undoing.

*Premise:* Two Canadian Mounties are a part of the Night’s Watch, patrolling the wall from *Game of Thrones*, which happens to sit on the American-Canadian border. Their job is to keep out the White Walkers from the South—“the most liberal of the liberal.” The greatest threat to Canada is unchecked hypocritical American liberalism. The Mounties work to keep out “their self-assured righteousness, their lazy Facebook activism, their hipster flannel and fashion glasses—their do-gooder hypocrisy.” The White Walkers are fanatic zombie-like Bernie-or-Bust folks who can only be warded off by having free prescription drugs thrown at them.

*Writing process:* The idea of a wall on the Canadian border to protect against Trump’s America was put forth in a sketch by a cast member. The sketch itself didn’t quite work as there was no point behind it other than “this wall is a terrible idea.” We all liked the idea of a wall on America’s northern border that was protecting Canada from Americans. I took the idea and reframed it not only as a commentary on Trump’s wall, but as a commentary on the surging rage of the Bernie-or-Bust contingent of the left that saw themselves as the saviors of democracy when they were just as dangerously ideological as many of Trump’s most ardent

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<sup>34</sup> Ian Schwartz, “Hillary Clinton: ‘Why Aren’t I 50 Points Ahead?’,” *RealClear Politics*, September 22, 2016, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/09/22/hillary\\_clinton\\_why\\_arent\\_i\\_50\\_points\\_ahead.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/09/22/hillary_clinton_why_arent_i_50_points_ahead.html).



supporters. Again, this sketch worked to talk more about the system rather than Trump vs. Clinton—there was something for both sides to laugh at.

### “Chris Christie”

Chris Christie wasn't a singular sketch; he was a fundamental component of the show. In an effort to not make the show Trump vs. Clinton, I wanted another character to have a more traditional narrative arc through the revue to help tie together the various threads of the show. Enter Chris Christie, who actually had very little stage time. At the time, Christie was a bit of a laughingstock, having been publicly used and dumped by Trump. At a mid-Atlantic school with a large number of students from New Jersey, Christie was also a pretty recognizable figure to our audience. Our Christie appeared at two intervals in the revue to hollowly praise Trump on whatever was happening (and to remind us that Trump demands loyalty even though he rarely returns the favor). He also was carrying a turkey (if only we knew then that Trump made Christie order meatloaf when they went out to dinner), which Trump would order him to eat for no reason other than to shame Christie. The finale of the show then began with Christie returning for a third appearance, this time to stand up to Trump the bully (a not-so-subtle wink to Republicans that they must be the ones stand up to Trump . . . still waiting). Predictably and pathetically, Christie crumbles in the face of Trump's schoolyard swagger. Left broken and alone, Christie breaks down and finally eats the turkey, leading us into our penultimate sketch: to cheer up Christie, a song about Trump being a terrible human being.

We tried to humanize and empathize with Christie to shed light on the absurdity of the election. Rather than painting Trump or Clinton as democracy's hero, we made Christie the one

who ultimately realizes that we need to put country before party—both as political candidates and as American citizens. The cast onstage rallies around Christie, eschewing Clinton. He’s the one who vows to do better, rather than blindly follow the partisan line. This was also a way to keep the final confrontation from being between Trump and Clinton. Rather than putting an either/or choice in front of the audience at the end—the theoretical “lesser of two evils”—we wanted the end of the revue to put the onus on the audience to channel their inner Chris Christie and to take action, vote, and be the change they want.<sup>35</sup> Christie could be redeemed in a way that neither Clinton nor Trump could. The election of either was going to cause a deep political divide to worsen. Christie’s redemption was totally hypothetical within the world of our show, and therefore it was more palatable to everyone in the audience. Christie was such a “loser” at this point, that there was no real risk in portraying him as someone pulling himself up by his bootstraps to retake our democracy. Satire by nature is negative, homing in and often amplifying the worst aspects of a politician. Coupled with the 2016 election being such a depressing, fear-based, and dark affair, I felt the show needed a positive, hopeful message at the end to act as a catalyst for the audience to make democracy great again.

### **Some Challenges**

Our production brought with it a myriad of challenges, from the obvious “I don’t have tenure, but let’s sing that song about Trump committing sexual assault anyway” to clearly presenting our satiric point of view to an audience hungry for Trump parody. We faced

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<sup>35</sup> Tim Kaine played a similar role for Clinton. He was much more loveable. He was the dad joke king, the guy who seemed to be there because he wanted to do good. For all the thinly veiled ambition of Clinton, our Tim Kaine had virtually none.

everything from design and build challenges with an ever-changing script to more nuanced questions about giving the audience enough context to understand the jokes without preaching or lecturing them—after all, an Electoral College joke isn't funny if you don't know what the Electoral College is. As is often the case with satiric political comedy, our production team was mostly on the liberal side of the aisle, and a majority of our early sketches had a liberal bias. To capture the whole picture, I found myself watching more InfoWars, One America News Network, Tomi Lahren, and Fox News than is probably healthy. By keeping tabs on the other side, and by following my conservative friends more closely on social media (many of whom were less enthusiastic Trump supporters and more anti-Hillary advocates), I was able to glean the overall critiques coming from the right. While all these challenges were important, I'd like to focus mainly on the actors.

A political sketch comedy show on the eve of one of the most divisive and polarizing elections in memory automatically put the actors in a difficult situation.<sup>36</sup> The audience brought emotional baggage to this show. In improv and sketch comedy, audiences tend to closely associate the actor with the character or point of view being presented. This certainly happens in traditional scripted work as well, but it is more prevalent in sketch comedy in part because the actors *are* frequently playing a thinly veiled version of themselves. Our opening and closing sketches both presented the actors as themselves, so right from the start the audience was associating these young actors with the ideas being presented. In many ways, that was a good

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<sup>36</sup> I would be lying if I didn't admit that I'm fully aware that this show—and even this article—put me into the “liberal professor brainwashing his students to be liberal because higher education is a liberal conspiracy to brainwash students to be liberals because liberals are bad and like to brainwash people by making them read books by other liberals” right-wing critique. Never mind that I can't even get my students to do their regular readings and assignments.

thing—we wrote the show together, and most of the sketches were what the students thought and felt. But it's one thing to think Trump is a lying misogynist; it's another to play a character who calls him one onstage in front of some people who are going to vote for Trump the next day. Oh yeah, and somebody had to play Trump.

While we weren't kind to Clinton, the actor portraying her generally received the benefit of the doubt from the audience (which leaned left but had a Trump contingent every night, as the county where our college is located and our state both went for Trump). I certainly anticipated our Trump getting some boos and jeers, but I didn't anticipate quite the level of vitriol that would be aimed at a college student playing Trump. It became crystal clear to me a few days before we opened when Bill Clinton visited our campus for a campaign stop. I thought it would be a great publicity opportunity, so we brought our Hillary Clinton and Trump to the event. Obviously, these were Clinton supporters, but many in the crowd seemed to take great delight in yelling at and saying nasty things to our Trump, a twenty-one-year-old college student WHO OBVIOUSLY WASN'T DONALD TRUMP. The actor himself handled the event well, but it was clear that playing Trump took a toll on him as people during the run of the show and after the election felt they were allowed to direct their anger at him. He also had to find a way into Trump to play him honestly, so that his performance wasn't just a parody. In hindsight, I did not do nearly enough de-roling and decompressing with the cast, in part because I thought Clinton would win.

But she didn't. I'd be lying if I said that Trump winning the election wasn't one of our challenges. All of us came out very publicly saying we did not think this man was fit to be president, and now he was going to be president. Our comedy suddenly became a tragedy—

overnight the show became an emotional weight added to a tumultuous time. Cast and crew poured into my office the next morning shattered and terrified about what was going to happen next. Many of the students were members of the groups seemingly most at risk under the looming Trump presidency: minorities, children of immigrants, LGBTQ, and/or poor. The students were honestly also a bit broken because the system had let them down. We thought we had made a difference. We had poured our hearts and souls into the show. I told students that they needed to become active and engaged citizens, and that's what they did. But it didn't matter. Of course, it did matter, but in the immediate aftermath of the election, some of the students felt betrayed.

Then, in December 2016, we were invited to present the production in early January 2017 at our regional Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival as part of the Fringe Invited Productions.<sup>37</sup> We suddenly had to revisit sketches that were no longer funny. Students had to step back into roles that were painful. After a rather frank and open conversation about what the show now meant (and if we even wanted to remount it), we began to think about the show not as a lead-up to the election, but one that existed in a world where Trump was president-elect. We cut a few sketches and rewrote the ending to channel the audience's energy into standing up for what they believe is right. The most successful scene in the entire revue was a simple new scene that we felt reflected the new mood of the show: "A Walk in the Woods." Clinton was famously out walking in the woods after the election, so we had our Clinton walking in the woods, upset about the election. Lo and behold, who else is going for a walk in the woods but Trump. The two share a moment and then simultaneously say, "It wasn't

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<sup>37</sup> Note that sketch comedy cannot be invited to the KC/ACTF mainstage as a matter of course.

supposed to be this way!” After a brief pause, they then immediately embrace and sob before slowly breaking apart. This was the reality we saw: Trump did not want to actually be president. The moment was cathartic for the audience, provoking a mixture of laugh-crying that captured the essence of what so many (liberals) were feeling in early January 2017.

## Conclusion

So what did we learn? First: satire matters. It can create community, it can question authority, and it can make people think. Because of this, students saw firsthand that theatre can spark debate and dialogue. The theatre can be a place where people actually want to go. Students experienced the power of their voices, as well as various ways to express themselves. Days after the election, when the results seemed to divide our nation even more deeply, Second City President Kelly Leonard asserted improvisational theatre’s power of ensemble: “Despite our many differences, we are an ensemble. And in a true ensemble, all of us are always better than one of us.”<sup>38</sup>

The growing sense of community united in a quest for truth is one of the satirist’s greatest weapons. Satire can be effective with Trump because, as Carlos Maza notes, “political satirists have demonstrated an extremely low tolerance for bullshit.”<sup>39</sup> Satirists are not inherently anti-Trump, but because Trump has been so anti-truth, satirists have taken aim. The more absurd his lies or the circumstances surrounding the lies (from Russia to wiretapping to

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<sup>38</sup> Kelly Leonard, “We Need the Unifying Power of Comedy Now More Than Ever,” *Huffington Post*, November 10, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/we-need-the-unifying-power-of-comedy-now-more-than\\_us\\_582486cae4b0334571e0a7cb](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/we-need-the-unifying-power-of-comedy-now-more-than_us_582486cae4b0334571e0a7cb).

<sup>39</sup> Carlos Maza, “Comedians have figured out the trick to covering Trump,” *Vox*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.vox.com/2017/4/3/15163170/strikethrough-comedians-satire-trump-misinformation>.

Frederick Douglass to The Bowling Green Massacre to Sean Spicer hiding in the bushes to Stormy Daniels to whatever happened ten minutes ago), the funnier the truth becomes. When we see the lengths to which Trump goes to distort the truth, truth itself becomes, in the satirist's hands, both incredibly powerful and often very funny. Mainstream news, especially cable news, is not so great at cutting through bullshit, often being purveyors themselves. Satire is especially suited to this presidency because satirists are not concerned with anything other than the truth . . . if that even exists anymore. While Trump plays fast and loose with the truth, I'm comforted that a generation of students is up to the challenge of making democracy great again.

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